Making Sense of the Confinement of the Poor

A Close Reading of the Speech Given at the Opening of the General Hospital in Paris

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This chapter revisits an important socio-historical event, the foundation of the general hospital – l'Hôpital Général – in Paris in 1656. The event has later been associated with the famous phenomenon described by Foucault as the Great Confinement. Much has been written about this event and Foucault's analysis has been subject to considerable discussion.[1] It is, however, not this event itself which is my main interest here, but rather a discursive representation of it. I will conduct a close reading of the official opening speech given by Bishop Antoine Godeau and printed one year after the opening.

The man, chosen for this honourable mission, was the bishop of Vence and Grace, a productive writer and one of the first official members of the French Academy. Although Godeau's speech is used as a source in studies of hospital politics, it has been given almost no attention as a discursive or sense-making practice. Instead of focusing on the events reflected in Godeau's text, I will explore the text's construction of meaning: how does Godeau go about making sense of the confinement of the poor? What kind of cultural project does he carry out through his text?

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1   See for instance GUTTON, 1970; FAIRCHILDS, 1976; JONES, 1999; NORBERG, 1985.

The Great Confinement and the Classical Episteme

My theoretical basis is Foucault's thesis of the General Hospital as a sign of the Classical episteme. According to Foucault, Classical thought excludes resemblance as the primary form of knowledge, denouncing it as a confused mixture that must be analysed in terms of identity, difference, measurement and order. He claims that the fundamental task of Classical discourse is to ascribe a name to things, and in that name their being.[2]

In the *History of Madness* Foucault claims that an important part of the hospitalization project consisted in naming and creating order. Foucault states that "the institutions were an attempt to demonstrate that good order could coincide with virtue" and that "the house of confinement of the classical age was the most intensely charged symbol of that form of 'police' and considered itself the civic equivalent of religion for the construction of a perfect city."[3] The hospital offered assistance through classification. The poor were segregated from each other according to type and the different groups received different kinds of help and instruction. In line with the ideas of the Classical episteme, the act of classifying was in itself an important part of this assistance, creating order and virtue by calling the poor by their right name.

Although Foucault is associated with the analysis of discourse, he is strikingly disinterested in the Great Confinement as a textual practice. It is the event "outside the text" that occupies him, not its textual expressions. The texts upon which he bases his analysis are considered as sources rather than historical events on their own terms. The practice of creating order and offering assistance through classification appears in the *History of Madness* primarily as an institutional practice. Foucault explores the development of new administrative routines, the construction of new buildings, new methods of segregation, new forms of instruction and punishment. The texts he analyses mirror and give access to these different practices but they are not considered to be *part of* the practices he studies. The texts have a secondary status.

Although I draw on Foucault's thesis of the Great Confinement as an expression of the classical episteme, I will shift the focus from institutional to textual practices. My interest is one important discursive practice connected to the confinement, namely Godeau's speech, and I understand this text as a practice which impacts on the creation of reality through performance.[4] According to

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2   Foucault, 2012, p. 132.

3   Foucault, 2007, p. 76.

4   Law, 1999, p. 1-15; Law/Mol, 2002, p. 1-23.

Law and Mol, texts are performative in the sense that they are "part of a practice of handling, intervening in, the world and thereby of enacting one of its versions – up to bringing it into being".[5] By focusing on Godeau's text, and not the event it reflects, I shall explore and describe its performative qualities. This also raises a more theoretical question concerning Foucault's approach: are there important aspects missing from Foucault's thesis because he does not treat the texts as practices on the same terms as the institutional ones?

Godeau's Speech

The written version of Godeau's speech has 108 pages and is divided into three parts. Godeau's argument is based on the well-known Christian topos that poverty is a particularly valued condition within Christianity, and he claims that the dignity of this condition is threatened and disgraced by the beggars and unworthy needy in the Paris of his time. The aim of the hospital is, according to Godeau, to restore poverty to its original dignity by creating an ideal Christian society behind the hospital walls. On this basis, he refutes criticism concerning use of force and deprivation of freedom, claiming that only when liberated from sin can man be truly free. Finally, he argues that the rich are obliged to support the institution in order not to offend God and to contribute to their own salvation. The text is partly religious, partly social in its purpose, while it primarily draws its arguments from ecclesiastical history.

It is explicitly stated in Godeau's text that it is written on behalf of the directors of the General Hospital: "The directors of the General Hospital have asked me to offer this assistance."[6] The functioning of the hospital was largely based on charity, since the allocations from the king were small. This made the institution vulnerable and it was several times threatened with closure in the period between the opening and the Revolution.[7] Godeau's text must be read against this background – as an appeal to support the institution through almsgiving.

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5   LAW/MOL, 2002, p. 19.

6   GODEAU, 1657, p. 5.

7   DESRANGES, 1959, p. 15.

A Rhetoric of Examples

In the introduction, Godeau states three claims that the first part of the speech aims to demonstrate: "I will show that the foundation of the General Hospital is necessary; 1 for the glory of God, 2 for the salvation of the poor, 3 for the public commodity."[8] When we continue reading we soon understand, however, that the three claims do not structure the chapter in the sense that it does not treat the three claims in the order enumerated. The chapter starts with a description of the privileged role of the poor within Christianity (p. 7-18), it continues with a description of the situation of the poor in Paris of the period (p. 18-21) and it ends with a portrayal of various forms of assistance from ecclesiastical history which are considered predecessors of the General Hospital (p. 21-26). Furthermore, the chapter does not present evidence or arguments for the three claims. The description of the poor within Christianity, the actual situation and the predecessors of the hospital are not used as proofs to support the three claims. The arguments are not syllogistically connected to the claims. Statements such as "poverty is a state that by its nature is more related to Christian life" may be interpreted as evidence for the first claim.[9] However, claim and evidence are not explicitly connected. The validity of the claim seems to be implicitly accepted and placed above all, methodological doubt. The three claims are not tested against reason as Descartes suggested in his methodology some years earlier. The relation between claims and arguments is based on a different logic. The aim of the speech is thus – as it seems to me – not to convince the reader of certain truths through arguments. Godeau stresses that his speech is not rhetorical: "I will not use rhetorical figures to bring them to fulfil this duty."[10] The speech's mission is something else. But what?

The main points of the chapter should, in my opinion, not be read as arguments or proofs, but rather as examples.[11] The speech presents examples of predecessors of the general hospital, examples of good poor from the Ancient Church and examples of dissolutions caused by poverty in the modern period. The predecessors of the general hospital are for instance iterated in the following way:

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8   GODEAU, 1657, p. 5.

9   IBID., p. 12.

10   IBID., p. 6.

11   For a more theoretical discussion of Godeau's use of examples see ENGEBRETSEN, 2011.

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> We learn from Joseph, that Hircam was the first to establish a Hospital in Jerusalem, where he gathered the poor, who were scattered in different quarters of the city, to prevent them from begging […] Pope Pelagius converted his house into a hospital for the elderly where they were enclosed and received all kinds of care.[12]

Godeau's examples do not seek to bring the reader to new or forgotten insights, but admonishes, as he affirms explicitly, truths that "everyone knows in their hearts". Godeau also states this attitude by introducing the series of examples through expressions such as car il n'y point de doute / for there is no doubt, car chacun scait / because everyone knows, chacun peut s'assurer / everyone can be sure etc. This rhetoric is for instance reflected in Godeau's distinction between the poor and beggars:

> For there is no doubt that there were poor [...] but there should not be any begging because it offended the fraternal charity that was to reign among the people of God. […] The laws of Charlemagne did not allow for beggars to wander through the fields and around the cities, and they ordered that each town should feed their poor, and if they did not want to work they should not be given anything.[13]

Godeau's reasoning differs here from the syllogism in that it does not intend to prove, but rather illustrate and pinpoint an assertion that is assumed true, car il n'y point de doute / for there is no doubt. The examples that follow the statement confirm and illustrate something that there is no doubt about.

Also the description of the role of poverty within Christianity is based on the logic of examples:

> The choice of the Son of God to live in poverty raises it to a dignity that is extremely holy, and the poor are also in the spirit of the Gospel, considered the flowers of Christianity [...]. All the Saints give them beautiful names, and the great Chrysostome does not hesitate to call them altars that God envies as much as those on which the body of His Son is sacrificed, and that must be equally honoured by the faithful.[14]

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12 GODEAU, 1657, p. 21.

13 IBID., p. 6.

14 IBID., p. 16f.

The text is here built around examples in two different ways.[15] On the one hand the people and situations that are mentioned are examples in the sense that they are *exemplary*, i.e. they represent universal ideals. The holy nature of poverty is expressed through reference to exemplary sources that are organised according to rank: first there is Jesus Christ himself, below him there is the Gospel, and then follow the Saints (Chrysostome). On the other hand, the text is built on examples in the sense of repetitions or copies; the text mentions several *exemplars* of the same phenomenon, i.e. expressions of the natural dignity of poverty. Examples in the first sense can be said to be platonic because they refer vertically to transcendent ideals. In the second sense they are Aristotelian, referring horizontally to other representatives of the same series.[16]

These two different uses of examples were, according to John Lyons, well known to 17th century thinking. He draws on a definition from Dictionnaire de l'Académie from 1694 which claims that an example is "that which is worthy of being put forth to be imitated or to be avoided."[17] Here it is the unique aspect of the example, the exemplary function that is emphasised. However, the definition continues: "You say that *that* was done in the past; I maintain that it is new, that there are not, that there never have been examples."[18] The example is therefore also characterised as being repeatable or recurrent ("that was done in the past."). This dual definition corresponds to the use of examples in the paragraph from Godeau's speech cited above. The combination of uniqueness and repeatability forms the examples and makes them convincing.

The two functions of the example – as exemplary and exemplar – are united in a common understanding of the receiver: instead of trying to convince the reader of something that is not yet known to him, the examples are based on the idea of unity between sender and receiver. The example presupposes that the receiver recognises it both as exemplary and as exemplar. The examples used in the paragraph cited above can only "work" if the reader recognises the ideal (the example of Christ, of the Saints etc.). However, the examples also have to be perceived as recurrent, as only a few in a long series. This is explicitly reflected in the text: "*All* the Saints" have the same attitude to poverty; Chrysostome is only one of many.

The rhetoric of exemplarity is equally reflected in Godeau's description of the poor of his period:

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15   Lyons, 1989, p. 15.

16   Gelley, 1995, p.1-4.

17   Lyons, 1989, p. 15.

18   Ibid.

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Many were not baptized, and yet they didn't hesitate to call themselves Christians. They didn't leave the churches, and not only did they never pray to God, but they kept others from praying. They lived in general ignorance of all the truths of religion. They didn't take the Sacraments, and, although they lived in all sorts of abominations, they neglected to seek the remedy of penitence. They had many children, and few of them were married. The mating of the beasts in the fountains of Africa is no more monstrous than theirs. Dirty words, insults, curses and blasphemies were always in their mouths. [...] They stole from children they met, and cut off their members to earn their living this way. They treated their own children in the same way and any sentiment of natural pity for these little creatures was smothered by greed. They often served as thieves to enter houses where they by charity had been given cover. [...] Everyone knows that there were places in Paris where every night these poor performed strange miracles on themselves, without magic and without holiness. The blind could see, the deaf could hear, the paralyzed could dance, the mute could sing, the scabby had clean head and the dying committed debauchery and finally they passed the entire night feasting, and in all kinds of dissolutions.[19]

This series of examples is based on the same dual logic I have described above: the examples of the poor's behaviour are extraordinary, but they are also cyphers representing basic human sins. In addition, the examples are hyperbolic; they out-bid each other in repulsive and bizarre expressions. However, it is important to note that the hyperbolic examples do not help to expand the reader's understanding by allowing for new insights. The examples exceed each other, not by bringing new insights, but rather in dramatic effect. They increase in strength. The aim of the text is to intensify the truth experience rather than to reveal truths that are hidden or unknown. Through examples the text articulates eternal, ontological principles. In line with the Catholic notion of Tradition, the Truth never changes but is gradually enriched by appearing in various deposits.[20]

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19   GODEAU, 1657, p. 19-21.

20   Cf. SULLIVAN, 1983.

The Public Commodity

This rhetoric of exemplarity must be understood in the context of what Habermas has called a representative public sphere.[21] In contrast to the civil public sphere characteristic of modern society, bishops, princes and other profane and religious leaders in pre-modern society did not engage with their public as active interlocutors whom they were going to convince, but as passive receivers before whom the ruler displayed his power through ceremonies, carnivals and other cultural manifestations. In this way, Godeau also displays his examples before the reader as representations of an unquestioned authority. Habermas, however, says little about the logic behind the representative publicity, partly because his interest is directed towards its successor, the civil public sphere.

This is where I suggest returning to Foucault and his Classical episteme. We remember that Foucault claimed that creating order and virtue through naming and categorisation was an important part of the confinement. Exemplifying is, in Godeau's case, an act of naming. Through examples, Godeau is naming the hospital, naming the poor, and naming the situation in contemporary Paris. Through examples, he is allocating events to their proper category. To Godeau, however, the order of things had a profound religious significance. This religious dimension of the naming activity is not highlighted by Foucault.[22]

To understand the religious significance of this naming activity we must take a closer look at one of Godeau's central terms, 'public commodity'. The term is frequently used in Godeau's speech: "[…] the poor that have been enclosed for their commodity",[23] "[...] that one is accustomed to the commodity of not being bothered by their screaming",[24] "[...] for the commodity of the habitants of Paris",[25] "[w]ouldn't you take most of the public commodity?",[26] etc. What type of commodity does the public enjoy thanks to the confinement of the poor?

Godeau writes that the General Hospital should address "the general ruin which has struck everyone".[27] The General Hospital is not presented as a tool to solve separately the problems of civilian life such as war, plague, begging, crime or economic crisis: "It is not only the war because it was done before with the

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21   Cf. HABERMAS, 1991.

22   Cf. GUTTON, 1970; cf. JONES, 1999.

23   GODEAU, 1657, p. 38.

24   IBID., p. 40.

25   IBID., p. 76.

26   IBID., p. 87.

27   IBID., p. 88.

same or even greater fury."[28] The public commodity, which is the ultimate goal of the hospital, is more than the erasure of these individual social problems. Instead of seeking to solve social problems separately, one has to turn to the heart of the matter: "One has to search for another cause. And what could that be other than the ill-use of goods that almost all kinds of persons are guilty of?"[29]

"Commodity" is here contrasted with "ill-use". "Use" is on several occasions contrasted with the renunciation of worldly goods in Godeau's text: "But how could they imagine that they were allowed to use creation for their pleasure or vanity."[30] To use creation in accordance with one's own desires or vanity was associated with a rebellion, an attempt to put "oneself above others" and in the place of God.[31] This assertiveness and arrogance which drives man to make himself master of creation is, according to Godeau, "the master crime of humanity".[32] Only God has the right to use creation. By using creation, man transcends his place in universe. He betrays the category attributed to him, his proper name.

Godeau finds one of the major causes of this human arrogance in earthly wealth. "Treasure is like a loadstone which attracts the heart."[33] And with wealth there are many other kinds of self-love that follow: "How can the rich not put themselves above others when they live with all the flattery that strengthens their faults, excuses their vices and exaggerates all the smallest quality of their spirit?"[34] Wealth corrupts and explains, according to Godeau, why it is easier for "a large cable to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of Heaven."[35]

However, not only the rich but also the poor have betrayed their place in the universe and the name attributed to them. Originally, poverty is a holy state reflecting the example of Christ: "The choice of the Son of God to live in poverty raises it to a dignity that is extremely holy."[36] Yet this is a state that the poor of Godeau's period have betrayed: "However, is it not true that nothing was so profane, or so terrible as the poor in the city of Paris."[37] The poor of Godeau's peri-

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28   Ibid.

29   Ibid.

30   Ibid., p. 8.

31   Ibid., p. 10.

32   Ibid., p. 9.

33   Ibid. p. 10.

34   Ibid.

35   Ibid., p. 12.

36   Ibid., p. 16.

37   Ibid., p. 18.

od do not live as poor. They seek in various ways to rise above their state. They betray their condition by working towards earthly wealth through begging and theft rather than suffering in humility and craving the richness of heaven. These poor are not real poor but imposters: "The blind could see, the deaf could hear, the paralysed could dance, the mute could sing, the scabby had clean heads and the dying committed debauchery and finally they passed the entire night feasting, and all kinds of dissolutions."[38] At the deepest level, the major violation of the poor is that they do not value their state. The poor are unworthy because they do not want to be poor, because they do not "honour the holiness of their condition."[39] For Godeau the problem of poverty is thus not primarily associated with the poor's extreme distress, but with the fact that they try to avoid it.

Both rich and poor have an obligation to live according to their right status or category, to fulfil their cosmic roles. Poor should be poor and rich should be rich – in the right way. By betraying their cosmic roles as rich or poor, Godeau's contemporaries have invoked the wrath of God and this is what causes "general ruin". The only way to placate the wrath of God and thereby obtain public commodity is through reinstating these cosmic categories.

Thus by speaking of the "public commodity", Godeau refers not only to the protection of civil society but of a cosmic order. In *Thresor de la langue francoyse* (1661) the word commode is defined as "approprié" or "convenable". The words "appropriate" and "suitable" point to order and harmony, to something that is appropriate or suitable according to certain rules. Something qualifies as "commode" when it fits into a pattern, into a categorical system. Commode is that which has a name.

When the General Hospital as well as Godeau's speech serve the public commodity, it is because they are practices that contribute to the realization of God's rules or plan for society and humanity. The public commodity, which Godeau finds threatened and wants to restore, is a state of general order and harmony, a cosmic balance. Naming or relating events to their appropriate or suitable categories is a way of restoring public commodity. This gives a profound religious significance to the Classical episteme that is often overlooked by Foucault. This religious significance also makes Godeau's speech not only a reflection of a social practice but a social practice in itself. This aim of restoring public commodity is not only sought to be obtained by the foundation of the hospital which Godeau defends in his speech, but also by the speech itself.

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38   Ibid., p. 21.

39   Ibid., p. 60.

Corpus Mysticum

Hélène Merlin has developed Habermas' theory of the representative publicity further, claiming that the public to whom the king represents his power is ontologically equal to the king himself. She draws this conclusion based on the notion of the *Corpus Mysticum* composed of the King (the head) and the three orders of the people (its members). This understanding implies that what is "harmful" to the people is equally harmful to the state because the state's welfare is identical to the "public good". The *Corpus Mysticum* cannot "suffer in one part without the rest of the body suffering as well."[40] What is public good is necessarily also good for each individual, but the public good is at the same time more than the sum of individual interests. The public as an organic whole cannot be reduced to its parts because it is a "surplus" that makes it into an organism. God is the name of this surplus and it is this surplus that makes the corpus mystic.

This idea of the "public" endows traditional social hierarchies with fundamental religious significance because all other relationships were based on the relationship to God. In line with this understanding Godeau sees the public not as synonymous with a secular society but as a community beyond the temporal. The relationship to God is the centre of this community. The public whose commodity the hospital and Godeau's speech shall provide is not the historical society Godeau lives in, but humanity as an original state created in the image of God. To serve the public commodity is ultimately to serve God.

This cosmological order is what Godeau finds to be threatened in his period. The public body was suffering. The division of the universal church and the wars that followed had challenged the idea that the entire people belonged to the same body. A major project for the French Counter-Reformation was to reinstate the concept of a divine social order by insisting that Christ was present in all relationships and that any breach of social order represented a separation of Christ's limbs. The traditional concept of "the public" as a divine organism had to be defended.

The idea of the *Corpus Mysticum* also makes the act of addressing a public a ceremonial matter, because the one addressing and the one addressed are fundamentally the same. They share the same interest and mission, being parts of the same mystical body. What is at stake in a public speech is therefore an addresser and an addressee sharing a ritual which is absolutely predictable to both parties. They are acting in a play in which the roles are cosmologically predefined. What goes on when Godeau speaks in public is therefore not primarily

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40   MERLIN, 1994, p. 49.

the communication of a message but the enactment of the *Corpus Mysticum* and thereby the confirmation of its existence. Naming is to inscribe something into its cosmological whole. It is to heal Christ's earthly body. Through his examples Godeau attributes the hospital, the poor and recent events their proper cosmological category and place. He thereby contributes to restore public commodity and cosmic order.

Based on this line of thinking, Godeau's speech can be considered a social practice on the same terms as the hospital it defends. Both offer assistance through classification. Social assistance is to work on the public commodity and the cosmic order. The particular conception of the public defended by Godeau makes a speech and a hospital into related actions. Both contribute to restoring the order of things through naming and classification. They are not primarily actions directed towards someone else, someone that should be treated, punished or instructed. The hospital is not punishing or helping someone else, as the speech is not addressing or convincing someone else. The subject and the object, the helper and the helped, the sender and the receiver are one. More than actions in which someone is addressing someone else, both the hospital and Godeau's speech must be understood as acts of summoning. The final objective is to summon and to contribute to the resurrection of Christ's earthly body. Both the hospital and the speech must be interpreted as mystical, more than practical-political actions.

Conclusion

Through the performance of examples, Godeau's speech contributes to the re-enactment of the *Corpus Mysticum* and thereby to the public commodity. Like the hospital it defends, the speech itself is a measure against the general ruin that characterised the period, caused by all kinds of dissolution that had provoked God's wrath. Both the hospitals and the speech are acts of naming and classification that aim to recreate cosmic order. This act of naming referred to by Foucault as the Classical episteme has a profound religious significance. However, by neglecting the religious aspect of the Classical episteme, Foucault fails to see the significance of discursive practices such as Godeau's speech as an integral part of the Great Confinement. The aim of the hospital and Godeau's speech are fundamentally the same: to make God present in all things.

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