

ON THE ‘CHRISTIAN TURN’ IN FOUCAULT’S THOUGHT: APROPOS OF *FOUCAULT, LES PÈRES, LE SEXE*¹

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Abstract. The recently published volume *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe* brings together sixteen papers delivered at a conference held in 2018 to mark the launch of *Les aveux de la chair*, the posthumous fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*. This review essay focuses on the contribution of the Foucault Archives to research on the philosopher’s thought; on critical reactions by patrologists to Foucault’s venture into study of the Church Fathers; and, finally, on the significance of the ‘Christian turn’ in the late Foucault’s lectures and writings.

I.

For the edition of his complete works, the *Gesamtausgabe*, Heidegger chose the motto *Wege, nicht Werke*, ‘paths, not works’. More than that, the title of one of his essay collections indicates that some of these paths turned out to be *Holzwege*, ‘wood paths’ made in the forest to allow access to the forester but petering out without reaching any specific destination. It is no wonder that Heidegger did not attempt to build a system in the Hegelian vein, for he believed that philosophy had reached its ‘end’, and after this end was to be replaced by the ‘task of thinking’. This task, Heidegger further suggested, takes its point of departure in listening attentively to the language of the poets, rather than in the impulse to craft comprehensive conceptual edifices.

Why this pessimism—if this is the correct term—about the future of philosophy? Has Heidegger, have the Heideggerians, has post-Heideggerian philosophy given up on the quest for truth? The answer to this question is not that the serious representatives of postmodern thought—to be distinguished from acolytes who congeal the little they have understood of the masters into facile ideologies—have plunged into a chaotic relativism of ‘anything goes’. The answer is, rather, that Nietzsche’s fundamental critique of Western metaphysics,

1. Review of *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe. Autour des ‘Aveux de la chair’*, ed. by Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo, and Arianna Sforzini, *La philosophie à l’œuvre*, 28 (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2021), 285 pp., ISBN 979-10-351-0640-9, 22€.

culminating in his declaration that ‘God is dead’, has set Western philosophy onto an unprecedented backward course: despairing over the overwhelming challenges of our age, we look to the past less for the truths that it may hold than for explanations as to why so much has gone wrong. In this respect, the deconstruction practised by serious philosophy in the wake of Nietzsche (and Husserl, who too spoke of the need to engage in an *Abbau*, a destruction, of ‘sedimentations’ in order to avert a ‘crisis of the European sciences’) shares at least an impulse with the instinct to topple statues and cancel those associated, rightly or wrongly, with the dark sides of our past.

Foucault was very much a thinker in this deconstructionist current. Having learnt genealogy from Nietzsche and ‘destruction’ from Heidegger, he set out to shed light upon the historical origins of contemporary structures that hold us back, impeding agency by imposing the ‘tutelage’ which for Kant was a hallmark of the unenlightened. Foucault’s goal, in each of his works, was to show that we must not take for granted the ways in which we live and think: that modern rationality is not reason *tout court*; that modern systems of dealing with madness, crime, or illness are not natural but the result of a series of historical transformations and ruptures; that the way in which we live our sexuality as key to our identity is not without alternative; that the manner in which modern ‘governmentality’ operates is not simply the result of the triumphal progress of liberal democracy. In thus demonstrating the historical contingency of prevailing discourses and practices, Foucault aimed to liberate us. The problem is that he did so without being able to indicate towards *what* precisely we were to be liberated—and this despite the fact that Foucault’s works are animated by a sincere and burning passion for truth. The inability to make ultimate commitments is the weakest point of Foucault’s thought, and indeed of the postmodern philosophical movement as a whole.

In the first part of his intellectual career, Foucault was content to limit his genealogies of the present to the modern age, with particular emphasis on the significance of what the French term *l’âge classique*, that is to say, the period from the end of the sixteenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century. The premodern world served as a mere backdrop for his analyses. Thus, for example, in *The Order of Things* Foucault prefaced his discussion of classical rationality and its subsequent transformations with a chapter on the Renaissance, entitled ‘The Prose of the World’. In this chapter, he offered a brilliant sketch of the premodern approach to the world as a text in which everything signifies, and all significations are connected, so that the whole world ‘speaks’—yet he failed to investigate the ontological and religious roots of this *episteme*. For, ultimately, the world can be ‘prose’ only if it has a Creator who is himself Word, *Logos*.²

2. For a more detailed discussion of this chapter, one may consult my book *Understanding Scholastic Thought with Foucault*, *The New Middle Ages* (New York: St Martin’s Press; London: Macmillan, 1999), Study 4: ‘The Prose of the World’, esp. pp. 108–11.

It was in the 1970s and with his work on the *History of Sexuality* that the historical scope of Foucault's research broadened to include the ancient world and, finally, Christian antiquity. The reader catches a glimpse of this intellectual development already in volume one, from 1976, in which Foucault advanced the claim that Western man had become a 'confessing animal';³ in other words, that the modern trend to link identity and sexuality in frankly, exhaustively, and endlessly articulating one's 'sexual identity' was somehow tied, genealogically, to the Christian practice of confession. This hunch was to lead Foucault, in volume four of the *History of Sexuality*, to detailed analyses of the Church Fathers—though in the process of his research, his project took on quite a different shape than expected.⁴

II.

This fourth volume appeared in 2018, thirty-four years after its author's death and—delicately—against his express prohibition of posthumous publication: *pas de publication posthume*, Foucault had stipulated, unambiguously, in his will. The volume is entitled, *Les aveux de la chair*, which the English translation renders as *Confessions of the Flesh*.⁵ *Traduttore, traditore* . . . a not insignificant aspect of the argument hinges on the difference between an *aveu*, an act of 'avowing', and a *confession*, an act of 'confession', which in both French and English can be a confession of sins just as much as a confession of faith.

To mark the launch of the French edition, the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* and the *Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne* held an international conference in the first days of February 2018. The papers delivered at that conference have now been published in the volume which is the object of this review.

What is remarkable, first of all, is that this volume speaks explicitly of a 'Christian turn' (*tournant chrétien*) in Foucault's thought (p. 8, in the editors' introduction). This turn is evident not only in the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*, but in a whole series of lectures and publications from the years between 1976 and Foucault's passing in 1984—lectures and publications in which Foucault devoted himself to study of the Fathers of the Church and most of which, like the fourth volume, have become available only posthumously. Now

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3. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 59.
 4. The transformations that the project of the *History of Sexuality* underwent in the years between 1977 and 1984 are the subject of Philippe Chevallier's article in this issue of the *Maynooth Philosophical Papers*.
 5. Michel Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair (Histoire de la sexualité 4)*, ed. by Frédéric Gros, Bibliothèque des histoires (Paris: Gallimard, 2018); *Confessions of the Flesh (The History of Sexuality, vol. 4)*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Random House, 2021).

Foucault scholars have long noted what one could call a Christian subcurrent in Foucault's writings: occasional references, often in surprising contexts and strategic places—like a reference to Dionysian mysticism in the 1966 essay, 'La pensée du dehors'.⁶ These were all short texts, however, written in passing and therefore in no way comparable to the in-depth treatment of Christian themes after the 'turn'.

Foucault, les Pères, le sexe opens with a brief chapter, by Laurence Le Bras of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, which is devoted to the Foucault Archives. Foucault's partner, Daniel Defert, sold this significant collection—110 boxes—to the *Bibliothèque nationale* in 2013, where it is held under the shelf-mark NAF 28730.⁷ This purchase added to the library's earlier acquisition of the first draft of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and various redactions of the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality* (NAF 28284); later, in 2015, Foucault's nephew, Henri-Paul Fruchaud, donated fifteen boxes of Foucauldiana from the 1940s and 1950s (NAF 28803). These acquisitions have made possible not only the publication of *Les aveux de la chair*, but also a new critical edition of Foucault's writings,⁸ along with comprehensive research on the development of Foucault's thought and the methods he employed in his studies. So, for example, several chapters in *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe* refer to his *fichiers de lecture*, reading notes in which Foucault copied and classified extracts from his vast readings.⁹ The fact that Foucault compiled his quotations from these reading notes explains, among other things, why occasionally parts of quotations are missing that would have been important in the contexts in which they ended up being deployed: the author was not able to foresee the exact contexts where his excerpts would eventually figure.

There is a certain irony to the Foucault Archives and the type of scholarly research which they foster. Foucault, after all, was an author who did not want to be an 'author'. Foucault did not write to create an 'oeuvre' the precise genesis and coherence of which he would have considered to be an important object of study—indeed, to be important at all. We remember the famous final paragraph from the introduction to the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, where Foucault declared, defiantly: 'I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have

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6. I have commented on this passage in *Charred Root of Meaning: Continuity, Transgression, and the Other in Christian Tradition*, Interventions (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), p. 17. The most comprehensive study of the Christian dimension of Foucault's works (before the 'Christian turn' and the publication of *Les aveux de la chair*) is Philippe Chevallier's book, *Foucault et le christianisme* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2011).
 7. 'NAF' stands for 'nouvelles acquisitions françaises'.
 8. Michel Foucault, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Frédéric Gros, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 607 & 608 (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 2 vols.
 9. The *fichiers de lecture* are now available online, under <https://eman-archives.org/Foucault-fiches/>.

no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order.'¹⁰ Rather than aiming at being an important 'author' and timeless authority, Foucault endeavoured to contribute to the particular intellectual constellation out of which and for which he wrote, encouraging his readers to use his ideas as a 'tool-box' for their own enquiries.¹¹ This having been said, it may sometimes be necessary to learn more about Foucault the 'author', precisely in order to be able to use his conceptual tools more effectively. For that, the Archives are a precious resource.

III.

The contributions in *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe* are all sympathetic to Foucault and respectful of his intellectual accomplishments. This does not mean, however, that they are uncritical. In particular, the patrologists who have contributed all note limitations to Foucault's scholarship. So, for example, in examining Foucault's treatment of Tertullian, Paul Mattei—a noted expert on ancient Christianity and member of the *Pontificia Academia Latinitatis*—found that the author of *Les aveux de la chair*¹² quotes from the *Patrologia latina* without any attention to the fact that these texts have been superseded by more reliable critical editions. Likewise, Foucault has recourse to translations that Antoine Eugène Genoud, the *abbé de Genoude*, prepared in the 1840s. Neither does he appear interested in the abundant secondary literature. Mattei is generous as he tries to see strengths in Foucault's method: 'at least this way of proceeding allows him, in theory, to approach Tertullian with fresh eyes' (p. 113).

But there are further criticisms. First, Mattei adverts to problems in Foucault's treatment of some technical terms, in particular *publicatio* and *metus*. Tertullian uses *publicatio* only once in the *De paenitentia*, yet Foucault places great emphasis upon this 'publishing' of one's sins. He may not have seen, Mattei suspects, the subtle connotations which this term carries in Tertullian's Latin, connotations suggesting less a dramatic revelation than the humble submission of the penitent to the judgement, and pardon, of his fellow Christians and of God. On *metus*, Mattei observes that Foucault seems to understand fear too much in relation to self rather than to God.

10. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 17. The last sentence is difficult to translate into English: '... c'est une morale d'état civil; elle régit nos papiers' (*L'archéologie du savoir* [Paris: Gallimard, 1969], p. 28).

11. The notion of the 'tool-box' appears, in English, in the essay, "Prisons et asiles dans le mécanisme du pouvoir," in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, ed. by Daniel Defert and François Ewald with the collaboration of Jacques Lagrange, Quarto (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), # 136, pp. 1389–93 (at p. 1391).

12. In addition to *Les aveux de la chair*, Mattei also consulted *On the Government of the Living*, the course which Foucault delivered at the *Collège de France* in the academic year 1979–80.

The problems do not end with the ‘philological fragility’ (p. 119) of Foucault’s interpretations; there are doctrinal issues as well. Mattei draws attention to the fact that Foucault leaves unresolved a tension in his reading of Tertullian: for he emphasizes, on the one hand, the absolute impossibility for the sinner to effect his or her own salvation, which is entirely a matter of grace; yet on the other hand, Foucault highlights the ethical consequences of the renunciation of the world which, he discovers, Tertullian demands in equal measure of the religious and the lay person. Foucault did not realize that this tension between grace and ‘works’ is resolved, in Tertullian, by the notion that the efforts of the believer in search of salvation are in response to God’s prevenient promise of grace, ‘which acts as final cause, or as lover, by attraction’ (p. 119). Here is Mattei’s summary of his doctrinal critique:

Once Tertullian is replaced within his own logic—on the very basis of what Foucault discovered without going to the bottom of his intuition (due, perhaps, to a lack of interest in dogmatics: it is not my task to speculate about whatever psychological or existential reason there may have been for this choice)—he indicates what salvation is: a grace which exceeds, calls, and de-centres the subject. (p. 120)

Mattei’s final verdict is that, despite the limitations of his interpretation, Foucault managed to bring out some of the principal themes of Tertullian’s thought, and hence of ancient Christianity. The latter was indeed a ‘religion of avowal’, a ‘religion of the flesh’, and a ‘religion of salvation within a state of imperfection’ characterized by a ‘regime of truth’. Nonetheless, Foucault did not follow Tertullian’s theological logic to the end, which is eschatological: the subject is called to a world, and a state, beyond its own possibilities.

Mattei’s assessment is echoed by several other contributors. Sébastien Morlet finds similar strengths and weaknesses in Foucault’s interpretation of Chrysostom: a refreshingly new perspective on an important Greek Father leading to valid insights, coupled however with a lack of attention to the Greek text and the secondary literature. The consequence, according to Morlet, is ‘a certain tendency towards overinterpretation’ (p. 157). Furthermore, Foucault tends to read Chrysostom more in relation to his ancient Greek, pagan predecessors than against the background of the biblical text upon which the Father was commenting. Johannes Zachhuber goes beyond this criticism as he diagnoses a total absence of primitive Christianity from Foucault’s work (p. 55).

Absent, as well, from Foucault’s interpretations of Christian texts after his ‘Christian turn’ is the towering figure of Augustine—who only makes an appearance towards the very end of Foucault’s life and intellectual career, in *Les aveux de la chair*. As Philippe Chevallier explains, this absence is in keeping with Foucault’s methodology: he did not seek to practise a traditional history of dogma, in which the most authoritative, classical, and canonical texts would take pride of place. Rather, Foucault aimed at describing forms of rationality

'without thinking subject' (p. 73)—in other words, *epistemes* in which 'doctrinal quarrels are mere surface effects located above deeper and more durable connections between discourses and devices of power' (p. 73). It is logical, then, that the late Foucault's interest 'in the effects of baptism or the doctrine of original sin' did not extend to 'the very foundations of Christian speech, from its apologetic form to the more systematic one which followed it' (p. 67). Hence, one looks in vain in Foucault's writings for references to works like the *De Trinitate*, the *City of God*, or even the *Confessions* (and this despite the great relevance of especially the last title in the context of Foucault's research).

Given Foucault's long-standing methodological commitments, it is remarkable that, in *Les aveux de la chair*, he did devote about a fifth of the volume to Augustine. But there is more, as Chevallier emphasizes:

The great innovation of *Les aveux de la chair* is, in the end, not so much the return to Augustine, the fundamental Father, as the introduction into the analysis of what Foucault, following the tradition, calls the 'spiritual sense' of types of conduct [. . .]. (p. 78)

In other words, the late Foucault discovers the spiritual motivations which ultimately drive Christian discussions of types of 'government of the self' like spiritual direction, confession, penitence, and renunciation.

Despite this major step, other contributors to *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe* note weaknesses in Foucault's approach to Augustine similar to those encountered in his treatment of Tertullian and Chrysostom. Although in *Les aveux de la chair* Foucault seems to be practising, most surprisingly, a 'classical history of doctrines and dogmas' inspired by mostly Catholic perspectives, as Michel-Yves Perrin points out (p. 228),¹³ and although he cites reliable primary texts taken from the *Bibliothèque augustinienne*, 'references to secondary literature are extremely rare' (p. 224). Due to this idiosyncratic approach that ignores much of the scholarship, Foucault's interpretations of Augustine tend to lack balance. Along these lines, Elizabeth Clark notes that Foucault's reading of *De bono coniugali*—Augustine's treatise on marriage which figures prominently in *Les aveux de la chair*—suggests a degree of enthusiasm for marriage on the part of the Bishop of Hippo that does not stand up to closer scrutiny (p. 241).

IV.

Foucault turned to the study of the Church Fathers in order to uncover the roots of our strange contemporary identification of sexuality with the deepest truth of the self; to uncover, moreover, our desire to 'confess' that sexual identity; to uncover, finally, the logic of modern ways of governing 'biopolitically', through 'a power whose highest function [is] perhaps no longer to kill, but to invest life

13. Chevallier speaks of a *retour à un classicisme méthodologique*, a return which makes the Foucault of *Les aveux de la chair* 'a simple historian of religious thought' (p. 68).

through and through.¹⁴ The patrologists' voices that we heard in the previous section suggest, in the words of Johannes Zachhuber, that 'Foucault discovered what he expected to discover' (p. 62): his readings of the Fathers were influenced by the questions with which he approached them; other aspects he excluded.

But there is a risk to every serious reading which is more than ideology: the risk to discover what one wasn't looking for. In the case of Foucault, the unexpected and unsought aspects of Christianity which the philosopher discovered in the wake of his 'Christian turn' are so fundamental that, in Philippe Büttgen's opinion, his investigations 'find their coherence in the very element that they endeavoured to exclude' (p. 107)—namely, doctrinal commitments. In the life of the Christian, the avowing of sins and temptations of the flesh—*les aveux de la chair*—is embedded within a confession of faith, that is to say, it is an act of truth-telling which takes its orientation from a positive norm. Put differently, I cannot speak the truth about myself in avowing my sins without faith in the Word; authentic words of avowal are shaped by confession of the truth of the Word. In *Les aveux de la chair*, Foucault articulates this logic with great clarity as he writes:

Truth-telling and believing, speaking the truth about oneself and faith in the Word are, or should be, indissociable. The duty of truth, as belief and as avowal, is at the centre of Christianity. The two traditional meanings of the word 'confession' cover these two aspects. 'Confession' is generally the recognition of the duty of truth. (Quoted by Büttgen on p. 103.)

This is why, according to Büttgen, the author of *Les aveux de la chair* exhibits 'an unprecedented preoccupation with the act of believing which opens Foucault's reflection to new horizons' (p. 103). Here, Büttgen's findings confirm Chevallier's point about the late Foucault's openness to the spiritual dimension of Christian practices.

There is still more. In 1976, Foucault set out to identify the Christian antecedents of modern techniques of 'men's subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word'.¹⁵ He did find these antecedents of modern strategies of power, but along with something much more exciting and subversive: Christ's original conception, and practice, of power as weakness, service, and, indeed, 'anti-power' (to use a term from Michel Senellart's contribution, p. 138). For, in the course of his readings, Foucault came to understand that the pastoral relationship

is [. . .] not [organized] around a technique of direction. It is [organized] around a sacrificial substitution, that is to say, around a Christic model. It is insofar as St John is Christ in relation to that young man, and it is insofar as he makes the same kind of sacrifice as Christ in relation to humanity, that the

14. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, p. 139.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

salvation of the other is able to be effected by the one who guides him [. . .].
 (Quoted by Senellart on p. 135, from *On the Government of the Living*.¹⁶)

Given the trajectory of Foucault's thought after his 'Christian turn', one wonders to what extent an authentically conceived Christian subject could be the answer to Foucault's philosophical quest as a whole. Arianna Sforzini—noted Foucault expert and collaborator of the Archives—asks this question in her remarkable contribution.

Again, on the one hand, Foucault undertook a genealogy of the modern state, whose strategies of government he traced back, through multiple transformations, to the government of souls as practised and conceptualized in Christian antiquity. Yet on the other hand, the Christian subject as it emerged from his research turned out to be much more complex than expected (no doubt, one might add, because Christianity itself developed in a complex tradition which preserved the divine irruption of its origins just as much as it obscured and foreclosed it¹⁷). This subject is 'not only an obedient subject, dedicated to seeking indefinitely in the folds of the self the truth of itself: it is also a vector of alterity and alteration, a subject that brings about rupture' (p. 35). For it is a 'split subject that is forced to discover within itself the depth of an abyss which it does not, nor will ever, completely master, and which nonetheless defines its proper identity' (ibid.). This split, and this abyss—Sforzini submits—stem from the temptations of the flesh, which signifies the presence of the demonic other within the human self. It is therefore only in a movement of self-detachment, of becoming other than itself, that the self is able to find its proper identity.

Such a complex identity—an identity that is the negation of any 'identity' in the sense of a stable resting of the self in itself—is at the opposite pole of the subject of modern biopolitics. The latter is a subject whose alterity has been 'normalized'—that is, brought under norms—by 'the deployment of "sexuality"' (and of race, though Foucault's indications on the latter remain frustratingly vague).¹⁸ No wonder, then, that the Christian subject, 'called to become other, to "detach itself" from itself' (p. 36), exerted a significant attraction on the late Foucault. The 'madness' of this subject, by the standards of the 'world', could not but appeal to the author of the *History of Madness*.

This is the topic that Jean Reynard explores in his chapter, which is devoted to 'Reflections on the question of madness in ancient Christianity in the light of works by Foucault'. This title already indicates that Reynard's chapter is less philologically oriented than many of the others; indeed, Reynard uses Foucault's ideas precisely as a kind of 'tool-box' in thinking about the role of madness in the Christian tradition. This role turns out to be ambiguous. For on

16. Senellart indicates (p. 135 n. 51) a parallel passage in *Les aveux de la chair*.

17. This is the argument that I presented in *Charred Root of Meaning*, cited in n. 6 above.

18. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, p. 119.

the one hand, madness can be considered nothing less than ‘a self-definition’ of Christianity (p. 190). Reynaud cites the famous pericope from the Letter to the Corinthians where St Paul contrasts the ‘foolishness of the Cross’ with the ‘wisdom of the world’ (1 Cor. 18–30). On the other hand, in the Old Testament the fool frequently appears in far more negative contexts. For instance, in Psalm 14:1, it is the fool who says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ The New Testament itself takes up this tradition in Matthew 5:22, where Jesus declares that anyone who calls another ‘fool’ stands in danger of hellfire.

This ambiguity, Reynaud shows, manifests itself throughout the Christian tradition, which in some contexts castigates heretics for their madness, only to associate foolishness with God’s own supereminent wisdom in others. Foucault had a hunch of this situation when, in his *History of Madness*, he declared that ‘Christian reason has for a long time been closely connected with madness’ (quoted on p. 207).¹⁹ Bearing in mind Foucault’s Nietzschean fascination with madness, one senses a tone of admiration in this statement. Could the post-modern deconstruction of Christianity lead to—what? Christian madness? The foolishness of the Cross?²⁰

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19. Foucault’s original French is more intriguing than this English translation, which fails to convey the connotations of the idiom that Foucault employs: ‘La raison chrétienne a longtemps fait corps avec la folie’—Christian reason has for a long time ‘formed one body’ with madness. As Reynard remarks, Foucault here associates Christianity, the body, and madness.

20. I would like to thank Philippe Chevallier for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.