A Foucault Primer

Discourse, power and the subject

Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace

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Preface

This book is intended as a brief introduction to the work of the philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault (1926–84). It is directed at undergraduates and others who are beginning to read his work and may be in need of a conceptual overview. The book comes out of a much larger project on Foucault's work. So what we present here is very much a cut-down version of our writing on the topic. It began when we were working as lecturer and student in a course on discourse analysis at Murdoch University, and continued via Wendy Grace's honours thesis (1992) on Foucault's feminist reception. It is very much a collaborative project between teacher and student, working in as collegial a way as that institutional arrangement can allow.

In this book we have very few axes to grind, and we have deliberately omitted—for reasons of available space—many of our misgivings about both Foucault's work and, more especially, other people's commentaries on it. Our aim here is exegetical rather than critical. This said, however, a few basic assumptions underlie our attempt to describe Foucault's work for beginners.

First, for complex reasons which we have no space to elaborate on here, we do not believe that Foucault provides a definitive theory of *anything* in the sense of a set of unambiguous answers to time-worn questions. In this respect, there is little benefit to be gained from asking what, for example, is Foucault's theory of power? Nevertheless, his work clearly involves various types

of theoris*ation*. This is because we regard Foucault as first and foremost a philosopher who does philosophy as an interrogative *practice* rather than as a search for essentials. His investigations are conceptual, and the main concepts he approaches in his work—discourse, power and the subject (among others)—seem to us to be geared towards what he called an 'ontology of the present'. That is, Foucault is asking a very basic philosophical question: who are we? Or perhaps: who are we *today?*

Secondly, Foucault, like many continental European thinkers, does not separate philosophy from history in the way that many English-speaking philosophers do. The question of the ontology of the present (who are we today?) entails for him the question of the *emergence* of the modern human subject along a number of conceptual fronts. If, that is, we want to know who we are in terms of either the disciplines (or forms of knowledge) we have of ourselves, or the political forces which make us what we are, or our 'internal' relations to ourselves, we are necessarily faced (according to Foucault) with historical forms of enquiry. But at the same time Foucault is no historical determinist. Things, he insists throughout his work, could easily have been different. What we are now is not what we must *necessarily* be by virtue of any iron laws of history. History is as fragile as it seems, in retrospect, to be fixed. But, for Foucault, history is never simply in retrospect, never simply 'the past'. It is also the medium in which life today is conducted. In a brief phrase: Foucault is the philosopher and historian of 'otherwise'.

Thirdly, it is common nowadays to treat Foucault's work in terms of relatively fixed 'periods'. According to some commentators, his work divides into three phases: the first concentrates on the description of discourses or disciplines of knowledge (particularly the human sciences); the second turns to political questions of power, and the control of populations through disciplinary (for example, penal) practices; and the third involves some apparently new discovery of a 'theory of the self. More alarmingly, some commentators have tied these radical shifts to changes in Foucault's personal biography (J. Miller, 1993). By contrast, we want to say both 'yes' and 'no' to this periodisation of Foucault's work. On the one hand there are clearly differences of focus

and intensity as his work alters and develops. On the other, the general question of the ontology of the present remains. Not surprisingly, Foucault's own work is a matter of both continuity and discontinuity.

Foucault's early work (from *Madness and Civilisation* to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) pays a great deal of attention to epistemic questions, or questions of knowledge. The 'units' of knowledge, at this time, are called 'discourses'. But political questions and questions about the subject are never far from the surface. Likewise, in the supposedly 'middle phase' of his work (marked mostly clearly by *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*), Foucault is often presumed to have taken on the more overtly political questions of control, management, surveillance and policing, and shifted his attention from discourse and knowledge to the body and its politicisation. Yet *Discipline and Punish,* to take only one example, openly declares itself to be 'a correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge' (1977a:23). It is easy to remember the power and the judgement but to forget the question of the subject ('the soul')—and indeed to forget the fact that the famous powers of judgement are exercised in, as, and through, disciplines or discourses. Then in the last works (especially the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*), it is common enough to find that 'the subject' has suddenly burst on to the scene—at the expense, as it were, of the discursive and the political (McNay, 1992). Yet 'the subject' is in evidence throughout Foucault's work—albeit under different aspects, tensions and methods of analysis. This supposedly new 'ethical' questioning of the subject (in terms of the relations one has with oneself) is just as political a question, however, as that of 'external' surveillance or the coercion of the confessional. Perhaps it is true that in ancient Greece and Rome (the periods Foucault studies in these last volumes) there was less disciplinary (scientific) or political-legal control over human conduct. But it *was* controlled—perhaps, for some, almost entirely by oneself. And this, too, is a political question.

In this way, then, we find a similar question being asked— who are we now?—through a variety of different means and thematised concepts: discourse, power and the subject. Indeed,

Foucault himself offered strikingly similar descriptions of the seminal works from each of his supposed periods. *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* he writes, is not about (the then fashionable) question of structure; rather, 'like those that preceded it…[it] belongs to that field in which the questions of the human being, consciousness, origin, and the subject emerge, intersect, mingle and separate off' (1972:16). Similarly, *Discipline and Punish* offers an analysis—albeit with a different focus—of a similar set of questions about who we are. It is 'a genealogy…of the modern "soul"' and, moreover:

> It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power. (1977a:29)

Then, having detailed this 'theoretical shift' of focus from discursive practices to studies of power, in the introduction to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* Foucault goes on to describe his second 'shift' as follows: 'It seemed appropriate to look for the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject' (1986a:6). In these shifts of concentrations from discourse to power and the subject, something is therefore retained: the broad philosophical question about who we are, constituted historically in terms of both what has been and its fragility.

In this book, therefore, we treat each of these concepts as a separate but related aspect of Foucault's ontology of the present. His approaches to these aspects of ourselves today can be framed as a set of questions:

- who are we in terms of our knowledges of ourselves?
- who are we in terms of the ways we are produced in political processes?
- who are we in terms of our relations with ourselves and the ethical forms we generate for governing these?

These amount to separate questions, respectively, about discourse, power and the subject. But their proximity to one another, and the historical fragility of each of them, cannot be ignored.

Our ways of approaching the concepts of discourse, power and subjection in Foucault are not identical in each case. In Chapter 1 we offer a general overview of Foucault's disciplinary area—the history of ideas—and his critical interventions into this field. The approach we take, however, is not a particularly 'Foucauldian' or 'genealogical' one at this stage. Rather it is, in itself, more like a traditional history of ideas. But, for this reason, we hope it is more accessible for the beginner. Chapter 2 consists, again, of a general discussion of Foucault's concept of discourse and puts particular stress on his own reflections on this concept rather than looking at how it works in actual analyses such as *Madness and Civilisation* or *The Birth of the Clinic*. In Chapter 3, we change direction somewhat. Although this chapter gives a general introduction to Foucault's ideas on power, and gives examples of his use of the concept, it also goes somewhat further than this and queries some of the secondary interpretive work in the area. The final chapter attempts to introduce Foucault's work on the subject and subjection via a detailed exegesis of the contents of his last works on sexuality. But in addition, at the end, it looks at how this work has been read by (particularly feminist) critics and suggests that there remain problems with their criticisms. To this extent, we end by arguing that Foucault's work has not yet been fully exploited for its possible contributions to contemporary debates on questions of gender and sexuality.

Acknowledgements

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Foucault's Counter-history of Ideas

General background: discourse, power and knowledge

Of the three main Foucauldian concepts introduced in this book—discourse, power and the subject—the last is probably the most complex. As an orientation to Foucault's overall rethinking of his field—the history of ideas, or 'the history of systems of thought', as he preferred to call it—we will concentrate in this chapter only on the first two: discourse and power. But we must add to this a more direct consideration of the history of ideas itself and its own central concept, knowledge.

For the sake of exposition, we can say that Foucault's contribution to the history of ideas involves a rethinking of three central concepts: *discourse* (which had traditionally been the province of *structural linguistics*); *power* (particularly as it was analysed in *Marxist* philosophy in France); and *knowledge* (as the main focal point of *the history of ideas*). This multi-conceptual rethinking can be summarised by turning to Dreyfus and Rabinow's (1982) description of Foucault's overall project: to go 'beyond structuralism and hermeneutics', which were arguably the dominant methods of Foucault's own times.

Structuralism, for example in the work of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, attempted to find the 'deep' or 'hidden' structures (taxonomies and hierarchies) at the very base of myths

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(such as the Oedipus myth). It tried to discover, by means of a *reductive* analysis, the objective and universal constituents of all human thought. In a structuralist analysis, there is no room for local or distinctive interpretations of a myth. The particular mythic text, collected 'in the field' by the anthropologist, is useful only as 'data' to confirm or disconfirm the supposedly underlying mythic *structure.*

Hermeneutics, by contrast, used a more interpretive method derived from phenomenology. Phenomenologists believe that the objective world described and analysed by structuralists is in fact a product of human consciousness and its interpretive processes. Therefore hermeneutics (named after Hermes, the messenger of the gods) allowed for differences of interpretations. In place of structuralism's objective structures, it turned instead to those acts of consciousness which produce local, and often highly specific, readings of texts.

Unlike the structuralists, Foucault does not hold that any essential or 'real' structure underpins particular 'events' or historical materials (such as myths and texts). The local and the particular, he argues, are always inserting their differences. But this insistence on the singularity of events is not the same as that which we find in hermeneutics. Foucault does not rush from structuralism to the phenomenological extreme and argue that 'reality' is constructed out of human consciousness and its ability to perform interpretations. In this way he avoids the seriously 'apolitical' defects of both traditions of thought. For Foucault, 'ideas' are neither mere effects of 'real' structures nor the 'baseline' from which reality is constructed.

Going 'beyond' structuralism and hermeneutics, Foucault rejects phenomenology outright. In the Foreword to the English edition of *The Order of Things* (1970:xiv), he suggests that whereas the genesis of structuralism is something his counter-history must at least account for (rather than rely on), at the same time, 'if there is one approach that I do reject…it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing subject'.

In traditional philosophical terms, Foucault steers away from— rather than between—the Scylla of (structuralist) realism and the Charybdis of (phenomenological) idealism.

How then does Foucault 'go outside' these forms of thinking, which could be said to have dominated his times? One way to answer this question is to look at the emergence of his rethinking of power, knowledge and discourse. And this means examining the central disciplines in which these three concepts were traditionally thought, namely Marxism, traditional history of ideas and structural linguistics, respectively. In the 1960s and 1970s, severe problems were emerging in all three of these critical discourses. Internal as well as external, these problems could be called, though the term is too dramatic, a 'crisis'. But if, by 'crisis', we mean a gradual and uneven splitting of the complex network of ideas formed by these critical disciplines, then the term will suffice. Foucault's work can then be read as an exploitation of the 'crisis', a moment in which to shift the very terrain of social and political critique itself. Rather than repair the breaks and tears opened up by the crisis (by providing continuity to the flows of Marxism, history of ideas and structuralism) Foucault sought new ways of thinking outside them.

For, by the mid-1960s, the very notion of continuous progress in both the human and the natural sciences, and between scientific 'stages', was itself in jeopardy. Furthermore, scientific change was no longer thought of as something brought about by a special creative subject or scientific 'hero' (an Einstein or a Freud, for example) who could be called upon to effect a theoretical revolution. The very notions of 'creative subject' and 'historical agent' were themselves 'in crisis'. Because they were part of the gap to be dealt with, they could not be enlisted as part of the solution.

Consequently, Foucault's counter-history of ideas had to be worked out so as to avoid giving primacy to the ideas of 'the individual' and of 'subjectivity'. Instead, Foucault thought of the human subject itself as an effect of, to some extent, subjection. 'Subjection' refers to particular, historically located, disciplinary processes and concepts which enable us to consider ourselves as individual subjects and which constrain us from thinking otherwise. These processes and concepts (or 'techniques') are what *allow* the subject to 'tell the truth about itself' (Foucault, 1990:38). Therefore they come before any views we might have

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about 'what we are'. In a phrase: changes of public ideas precede changes in private individuals, not vice versa.

In response to a further condition that the 'crisis' demanded, Foucault's counter-history also had to conceive of bodies of knowledge (discourses) as potentially *dis*continuous across history rather than necessarily progressive and cumulative. This is a major theme in Foucault's work generally, and has often led him to be called a (or even 'the') philosopher of discontinuity. Foucault's analysis of scientific change as discontinuous shows that it is not seamless and rational; that it does not progress from stage to stage, getting closer and closer to the truth; that it is not guided by any underlying principle which remains essential and fixed while all around it changes. This 'thesis' of discontinuity is indeed a key element in his analysis and critique of 'official' or 'dominant' knowledges. It also enters into his investigations of those forms of knowledge which are much less official, such as the knowledges which medical and psychiatric patients, criminals and sexual perverts, for example, have of themselves. But it is only one element among others. As we show in Chapter 2, Foucault's idea of 'discontinuity' is far from being just another essential principle behind all historical change.

The discourses of Marxism, history of ideas and structural linguistics (and, perhaps to a lesser extent, literary studies and psychoanalysis) were the main 'broken strands' in the network of ideas which faced Foucault in the mid to late 1960s. His first main theoretical texts—*The Order of Things* (1970) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972)—attempted to account for their emergence under the general rubric of 'the human sciences'. In what follows, we will take each strand separately, although parallels and congruences between all three disciplinary areas will be evident.

Marxism

By the late 1960s, the stock-in-trade concepts of mainstream Marxist political economy were increasingly seen as too mechanistic and deterministic to account for the plurality, diversity and fragmentation of late capitalism. Two such concepts were those of 'economic base' and 'ideological superstructure'. In classical

Marxism, the 'real' economic conditions in a given period (especially the means of producing commodities and the question of which social classes own them) were known as the 'base'. This 'base' was believed to 'give off' the less tangible aspects of society: its laws, its beliefs, its ideology, its culture and so on. Hence a base-superstructure model is one in which material conditions (economic 'realities') determine ideas (types of consciousness).

This base-superstructure model and the economic determinism it implied were at risk in a number of respects. Science and technology had changed so much that the continued material existence of the world was itself in jeopardy. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962, for example, revealed the dependence of 'economic' factors on even more basic technological phenomena. Yet at the same time there was a growing awareness that nuclear technologies were themselves the product of scientific *ideas*. It began to look as if the domain of ideas (the superstructure) was not quite so irrelevant to an understanding of the most crucial foundations and uncertainties of twentieth-century life as earlier Marxists had thought.

Furthermore, the classical Marxist model seemed unable to cope with the new kinds of struggle emerging in so-called post-industrial societies. These struggles centred as much on race, gender and ecology as on purely economic considerations such as class (ownership or non-ownership of the means of production). The 'classical' class struggle of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries became diversified, and not just because of an increasingly complex division of labour and a breakdown in strict class identifications. Class-based struggles were now related to 'other' struggles, such as those of blacks, women, environmental groups and gays.

In addition, the industrial 'base' of capitalism itself was beginning to shift away from its traditional sector, the 'heavy' industries, and towards ideas- or knowledge-based forms of production (such as computing, education, cinema, and information systems). The 'mode of production' was thus under threat from the 'mode of information' as the prevailing form of social existence (Poster, 1984). What was to count as industrial base (production) and what as superstructure (ideas, information) was now much

less clear than it had been even a generation earlier (Smart, 1983; Williams, 1973). Moreover, Marxist analysts continued to argue that, despite such vast and sweeping changes, 'bourgeois domination' appeared to be surviving. There was no sign of that impending 'degeneracy' which had been predicted by the classical model. In fact, capitalism became arguably stronger and more entrenched as the critical discourses suffered their own various crises. Capital itself never really seemed to suffer from the so-called 'crisis of capitalism'. To this extent, it was now quite obvious that the forms of critical analysis which had suited nineteenth-century entrepreneurial capitalist formations had no place in either advanced industrial or post-industrial society. No less important to this political fragmentation were the failures of 'official' bureaucratic Marxism: the gulag, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and so on.

Looking back from a vantage point of some fifteen years on the late 1960s (and particularly the student movements formed around the events of 1968), Foucault saw the situation like this:

> It is a case of movements which, very often, have endowed themselves with a strong reference to Marxism and which, at the same time, have insisted on a violent critique *vis-à-vis* the dogmatic Marxism of parties and institutions. Indeed, the range of interplay between a certain kind of non-Marxist thinking and these Marxist references was the space in which the student movements developed—movements that sometimes carried revolutionary Marxist discourse to the height of exaggeration, but which were often inspired at the same time by an anti-dogmatic violence that ran counter to this type of discourse. (1990:19)

The paradoxes of this situation ('exasperated dogmatism') are evident enough. A new type of critical analysis was needed which could account not only for new kinds of social fragmentation (different social types or 'subject positions') but also the absence of both a singular and unique basis of social existence (the production of material commodities) and a single central contradiction in society (class struggle). This form of critique would have to be sensitive to diverse, local and specific—even marginal or 'deviant'—practices and their effects. While critical social theory had to

retain something equivalent to a theory of domination, it had to jettison Marxism's supposedly *necessary* connection between 'power' and economy. Even the much more flexible idea of determination in the last instance' (Althusser, 1970) had to be dropped as an explanatory necessity.

In addition, the necessary centrality of a particular class (classically, the proletariat) to the struggle against 'domination' had to be critically rethought. A class could no longer be seen to act as a 'subject in history'—and yet neither could it be a purely determined economic effect. To this extent the stress on class analysis itself had to be dropped or at least restricted or supplemented. It needed to be replaced by a theory of constraint (or 'structure') and enablement (or 'agency'), locked into a broader conception of society than economistic models had allowed. Such a theory would need to think of the 'wielders' of power as being just as inextricably caught in its webs as the supposedly powerless. It would have to see power in terms of *relations* built consistently into the flows and practices of everyday life, rather than as some *thing* imposed from the top down. In short, the predicament of Marxism showed the limitations of mechanistic determinism, and the need for a more subtly historical and detailed analysis of the local and specific effects of power. This, among other things, is what Foucault was to provide.

History of ideas

In the field known as 'history of ideas', the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a growing series of problems at least equal to those in Marxism. Indeed Marxism itself had been a main contributor to the history of ideas wherever a critical reading was required. Naturally enough, it had tended to argue that ideas were merely 'superstructural' effects of 'real' economic forces: as modes of production had progressed from feudalism through capitalism to socialism, so too had the various 'knowledges' which went with them. Marxism always appeared to provide a critical alternative to 'mainstream' approaches. What were these?

In France, the field called 'history of ideas' has always been very diverse, and has taken on a number of different titles: history

of reason, history of science, history of knowledge(s), history of rationalities, and—with Foucault—history of systems of thought. But prior to Foucault, the two mainstream philosophies derived by and large from Hegel and Husserl respectively. The Hegelian tradition entered France in the 1930s via the ideas of Jean Wahl, Henri Lefebvre, Alexandre Koyré and especially Jean Hippolyte (Foucault's teacher and, later, colleague). Indeed, Hegelian philosophy was well established by the time Foucault came to study the subject in high school (Eribon, 1992:15–23). Its basic tenet was that a form of universal reason existed behind the 'surface' forms of human knowledge. Thus the 'progress of reason' could be discerned working its way through history as an immaterial but ever-present *Geist* or spirit. It was therefore profoundly *continuist:* each 'stage' of history was marked for its continuity in terms of the progress of universal reason, rather than for its distinctiveness and difference. Hegelianism was therefore a major theoretical influence on Marxist thinking at this time, since it provided the basis of dialectical thought: a general principle of historical change, which postulated that any form of thought would eventually transform, not into its negation, but into a synthesis of itself *with* its negation.

While Hegel's position is sometimes referred to as 'phenomenological' (largely because his *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807] had most impact on French philosophy), it should not be easily confused with the phenomenological tradition which stems from the work of Husserl. The uptake of Husserl, in France, was largely the province of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and of the existentialists, especially Jean-Paul Sartre. According to the existential interpretation of Husserl, the basic principle underlying historical change and transformation was not an abstract spirit but the irremediable freedom of individuals to create anew out of the 'raw material' from which they had been created. On this (idealist) interpretation, human thought or consciousness is supreme, and capable of transcending any apparently fixed, given or determining conditions. In analysing the history of thought, the phenomenological/ existentialist school sought evidence of the human imagination triumphing over fixed traditions. Needless to say, existentialism tended to think of *itself* as being in this category. Yet existentialism also

had an impact on Marxism, especially the so-called 'humanistic' or 'cultural' Marxisms of the 1970s. Sartre, for example, argued in the preface to his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1963, 1982) that fundamental existential freedom is compatible with a Marxist analysis of prevailing economic conditions.

However, the work of Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem and others was beginning to suggest—in different ways—that progressivist and continuist views of science—whether based in an abstract spirit or in fundamental liberty—were problematic. In particular, Canguilhem's (1968) meticulously detailed research on the history of biology showed that it could not easily be made subject to a universal theory of historical or 'ideological' change. With Canguilhem in mind, Foucault documents the shift away from continuism, saying that it 'was a question of isolating the form of rationality presented as dominant, and endowed with the status of the one-and-only reason, in order to show that it is only *one* possible form among others' (1990:27).

Since they are Foucault's main stalking-horses when it comes to theories of history, we should now unpack these notions of 'continuism' and 'progressivism'. After Canguilhem, it was no longer possible to hold unequivocally to the view that scientific theories change according to regular and universal patterns which, despite superficial changes, remain continuous through the history of science. Wherever Canguilhem had looked, it seemed that scientific changes were piecemeal, local and quite *ad hoc* affairs. They seemed to obey more a wild and Nietzschean than an orderly and Hegelian view of history. Eventually the very idea of there being a single rationale—a wider scheme of reference—for each and every scientific change, no matter how minute, could not be supported.

Along with continuism fell its close relative, the progressivist theory of scientific change: the view that a superior theory always replaces an inferior one, so that the 'same' science gets 'better and better' in moving closer and closer to the ultimate truth. Indeed, the new philosophies of science began to doubt the very grounds on which one theory could be called 'superior' to another simply because it came later in the day. The idea of *difference* between theories began to replace the idea of superiority versus

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