MICHEL FOUCAULT (1926-1984)

Michel Foucault studied philosophy and psychology at the École Normale Supérieure
where he studied for a time with Merleau-Ponty
in 1948 he formed a friendship with the Marxist Louis Althusser
but his primary source of philosophical influence was Nietzsche
his masters thesis was on Hegel
his doctoral dissertation focused on madness in the classical period
this dissertation became his first book Madness and Civilization (1961)
Foucault was influenced by historians of culture and science
developing the Hegelian insight that no idea can be understood outside of its historical context
in 1969 when he was elected chair at the College de France
he chose the title 'Professor of the History of Systems of Thought'
in the 1970's he was very active politically
helping to form a group to support prisoners
and participating in protests on behalf of marginalized groups
in 1983 he took a position at the University of California, Berkeley
but then died the following years of AIDS

Works
Madness and Civilization (1961): on the birth of the asylum, offered an archaeology of how the exchange between madness and reason was silenced

The Birth of the Clinic (1963): 'An Archaeology of the Medical Gaze

The Order of Things (1966): 'An Archaeology of the Human Sciences'

The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969): Foucault redefined archaeology as the set of discourses that constitute 'the archive'.

'The Discourse on Language' (1971): his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, was a transitional text in which he subordinated archaeology to the critical analysis of forms of exclusion and to the genealogical study of the formation of discourse.

Discipline and Punish (1975): out of concern for prison reform, Foucault returned to the history of practices with a study of the birth of the nineteenth-century prison.

The Will to Knowledge (1976): the first volume of a projected six-volume History of Sexuality, further developed an account of the interaction of knowledge and power

"Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971) an essay in which Foucault explains his conception of genealogy, demonstrating his indebtedness to Nietzsche

one of the unifying themes of Foucault's diverse works is the aim of showing
how diverse concepts and practices that might be taken as necessities
are in fact historically contingent
no idea can be understood outside of its historical context

Foucault applies this claim to the concept of human nature
this leads to perhaps his best known quote:
"Man is an invention of recent date. And perhaps one nearing its end"
the figure of man is thus destined to disappear
"like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea."1

For Foucault, then, there is no fixed human nature
what is understood as human nature is merely a product of theories
embedded in a historical context

this view separates Foucault from philosophers who work out of assumptions
firmly rooted in the history of modern philosophy
philosophers like Rawls and Nozick
and, for example, Noam Chomsky, with whom he otherwise shares a
radical, progressive point of view
as Paul Rabinow remarks in his introduction to the Foucault Reader:
"Although both men are highly critical of the current social and political order, their fundamental
assumptions about the nature of human beings, about power and justice, and about how to
understand such matters differ radically."2

for Chomsky, there is a human nature
Chomsky assumes that unless there is some form of relatively fixed human nature
then scientific understanding is impossible
Foucault's starting point is rather the "postmodern" standpoint
which can be traced to Nietzsche
which is highly suspicious of any claim to universal truth
where there is no external position of certainty
no universal understanding that is beyond history and society
one of the hallmarks of Western political philosophy, according to Foucault
has been the devotion to abstractions, first principles, utopias
Foucault proceeds in a manner which attempts
to shift the terrain of political philosophical

Foucault called his early books "archaeologies"
and with these books he "invented a new practice of philosophy"3
this new practice would be an attempt to engage in a "critical history of thought" (Patton, 537)

these works such as *Madness and Civilization* and *The Birth of the Clinic*
appear to be concerned with origins
with sifting through the past record of thought
however Foucault insisted that he was concerned with diagnosing the present

drawing upon Nietzsche's genealogical approach to morality
just as Nietzsche sought not to provide a foundation for morality
or to determine which view of good and evil is correct
but rather to trace the development of the notions of good and evil
to ask instead where does this particular view of good and evil come from
who wants this particular view of good and evil
Foucault sought to uncover the hidden or implicit knowledge
that underlay and made possible specific practices, institutions, and theories

in these early works Foucault attempts to sift through the underlying ground
to "trace the emergence of some of the concepts, institutions, and techniques of government
which delineate the peculiar shape of modern European culture" (Patton, 537)

his books "include a history of madness, an account of the birth of clinical medicine at the end of
the eighteenth century, an archaeology of the modern sciences of language, life, and labor, a
genealogy of the modern form of punishment, and fragments of a history of sexuality" (Patton,
537)

thus Foucault seeks to trace the development of the way madness has been perceived
for example, madness was treated as an illness requiring confinement
only after the creation of a centralizing state
in earlier periods madness was not hidden
mad people were permitted to roam freely
in these early works Foucault takes up a critical history of the origins of psychiatry
and seeks to trace the history of the political circumstances
that led to changes in our perception of madness

one of the main ambitions of his early works is to reveal
how the concept of madness
like claims to knowledge in general
are a function of political practices and concerns
within an established network of power
Foucault thus undermines the rationalist and positivist idea of inquiry
as a politically neutral search for universal truth
Foucault thus seeks to reveal the power structures of society
it is not that Foucault completely rejects the notion of truth
it is rather that he develops the basically Nietzschean insight
that what passes for truth
and the very criteria for establishing truth
are never independent of both political and historical context

his work is part of a devastating postmodern critique of the Enlightenment
of the notion that knowledge leads to the establishment of rational foundations
for society and society's institutions
and that knowledge, in general, leads to progress

this conception of philosophy as a critical history of thought
is indebted to Kant's notion of philosophy as critique
which for Kant was the analysis of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge
but for Foucault there is no assumptions of universal a priori conditions for knowledge
there are only particular historical a priori conditions for knowledge
Foucault's notion of critique "assumes only the fact that certain statements are made and that
these function as knowledge within a given period" (Patton, 537)
thus his aim in this archaeological project is simply to uncover and examine these particular
conditions for what passed for knowledge during a given period

thus Foucault's works suggest that institutions such as asylums, hospitals, and prisons are
society's devices for exclusion
and that by surveying social attitudes in relation to these institutions one can examine the
development and uses of power

in *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*
Foucault turns to the history of epistemology
The Order of Things focuses on the history of the modern period
from roughly 1600 to 1800
Foucault aims to show how the common epistemological assumptions of a given period
what Foucault refers to as the "structural episteme" of a given period
radically shift over time
the history of thought is thus not a smooth development of progress
but often quite discontinuous, marked by sharp breaks in the structural episteme
for example, at the end of the 18th century
the language of anatomy replaced the language of humors
or another example, as mentioned above, the concept of 'man'
the notion of 'man' as the 'individual' is a product of the Enlightenment
and this notion of 'man' provides the very basis for the development
of the human sciences in the 19th century

in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault aims to advance
his archeaological approach to knowledge
by contrasting it with other approaches to the history of ideas
here Foucault develops the notion of 'discourse' or 'discourse practice'
a discourse is a particular system of speech and thought that develops historically
there is, for example, the religious discourse regarding sexual behavior
the mercantile discourse on wealth
the clinical discourse of modern psychiatry

Foucault's work in the 1970's develops Nietzsche's concept of genealogy
genealogy involves revealing historically how knowledge claims
are linked to dominant power structures in a society
Foucault thus seeks to explain how the unconscious rules that govern a discourse
come to be accepted within a given society

following Nietzsche, Foucault develops the notion of knowledge as power
it is not the "will to truth" that drives knowledge, but the "will to power"
Foucault's develops this insight that knowledge always served particular interests

Foucault is mainly concerned in these works with documenting
power relations and the strategies for the exercise of power
for Foucault the exercise of power is an inescapable feature of all societies
hence, liberation from all power relations is not even possible
furthermore, not all power relations are necessarily bad
the aim of Foucault genealogical approach is to
reveal how power is exercised
and to show how the techniques of power are particular to specific historical conditions
Foucault develops this approach in *Discipline and Punish*
here he narrates the birth of the modern prison system as an instrument of social control
this work inspired left-wing activism in France aimed at closing maximum-security prisons

Foucault claims that during the 19th century
power relations became more intense as a result of industrialization and population growth
this resulted in an increase in certain techniques for managing large groups of people
Foucault calls this process "normalization"
people are described and measured according to certain developmental norms
any variation from these norms is treated as deviancy
and subject to punishment

Foucault's last works were two of what were to be four volumes of the History of Sexuality
the first, *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure* came out in 1976
the second, *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self*
was published in 1984, the same month he died of AIDS

Foucault identified his work as a development within a tradition that extends
from Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and the poststructuralist theorists who do not
"look for universal or timeless structures of knowledge, language, or moral action, but for ways
of characterizing the present as a particular moment in history and for paths beyond it" (Patton,
538).

In his final interview he acknowledged his debt to Nietzsche:
"I am simply a Nietzschean, and try as far as possible, on a certain number of issues, to see with
the help of Nietzsche's texts" (Patton, 539)

in Human, All Too Human Nietzsche had suggested the greatest triumph of historical philosophy
would be "a history of the genesis of thought"4
Foucault's work was an attempt to contribute to this project

his work has had a considerable influence in the areas of social and political theory and
philosophy

his theories of discourse analysis were highly influential in subsequent literary theory and criticism

there are at least four ways in which Foucault's writings have had an important influence
1) his work on knowledge and power has drawn attention
to the way knowledge claims can reflect power relations
other writers have developed Foucault's approach in order to reveal
how social practices oppress and marginalize certain minority groups

2)Foucault's challenge to the traditional notion of modern philosophy
that current philosophical theories present ahistorical necessities
that operate in a historical vacuum
Foucault's challenge has influenced many thinkers to become more aware
how their own theories are historically and culturally located
there is thus a greater suspicion of grand political theories
such as is found in Marxism, conservatism and liberalism
Foucault abandons this task in favor of the more modest task
of documenting how power relations function in particular historical contexts

3) Foucault's rejection of the Enlightenment notion of a universal history
a single narrative that describes the development of humankind
has influenced philosophers to be more aware of the specifics of each period
many philosophers are thus more historically conscious of how theory
is embedded in particular cultural and social contexts

4) because of each of the above points, Foucault's work has been seen as presenting a
forceful challenge to the idea of the objectivity of knowledge
where 'objectivity' means being roughly independent of any cultural and historical perspective
Foucault's work undermines the idea that inquiry can be politically neutral
that philosophy should be a value-free search for universal truth
Foucault has thus been regarded as a figurehead for the view
that the notion of objectivity should be replaced by
the idea of an irreducible variety of perspectives within changing social systems
with no overarching single perspective that encompasses and explains all

following Foucault postmodern thought treats with suspicion
any general theory that lays a claim to universal truth
and instead emphasizes the nature of particular claims
and their changing relation to the social context

Foucault's influence thus extends beyond philosophy
influencing political theorists and sociologists, as well as literary theory

* * *

Power/Knowledge
Lecture One

the opening paragraph from our selection expresses Foucault's critique
to the traditional philosophical goal of revealing some universal ahistorical truth
. . . .[W]hat has emerged in the course of the last ten or fifteen years is a sense of the increasing
vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourses. A certain fragility has been
discovered in the very bedrock of existence—even, and perhaps, above all, in those aspects of it
that are most familiar, most solid and most intimately related to our bodies and to our everyday
behavior. But together with this sense of instability and this amazing efficacy of discontinuous,
particular and local criticism, one in fact also discovers something that perhaps was not initially
forseen, something one might describe as precisely the inhibiting effect of global, totalitarian
theories. (511)

Foucault contrast these totalitarian theories with his genealogical approach
What emerges out of this is something one might call a genealogy, or rather a multiplicity of
genealogical researches, a painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memory of
their conflicts. . . . Let us give the term genealogy to the union of erudite knowledge and local
memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of
this knowledge tactically today. This then will be a provisional definition of the genealogies
which I have attempted to compile with you over the last few years. (512)

he goes on to explicitly distinguish this genealogical approach
from an empiricism or positivism that aims to be an exact science

Genealogies are therefore not positivistic returns to a more careful or exact form of science. They
are precisely anti-sciences. Not that they vindicate a lyrical right to ignorance or non-knowledge:
it is not that they are concerned to deny knowledge or that they esteem the virtues of direct
cognition and base their practice upon an immediate experience that escapes encapsulation in
knowledge. (512-513)

Foucault sees his genealogical approach as a challenge to the unquestioned order of science
By comparison, then, and in contrast to the various projects which aim to inscribe knowledge in
the hierarchical order of power associated with science, a genealogy should be seen as a kind of
attempt to emancipate historical knowledge from that subjection. (513)

he does not seek some first principles, some neutral standpoint
which could be used to establish a means of objectively settling all disputes

[I]t will be no part of our concern to provide a valid and homogeneous theoretical terrain for all
these dispersed genealogies, nor to descend upon them from on high with some kind of halo of
theory that would unite them. Our task, on the contrary, will be to expose and specify the issue at
stake in this opposition, this struggle, this insurrection of knowledge against the institutions and
against effects of the knowledge and power that invests scientific discourse. (513)

Foucault draws a contrast between the classical liberal, 'juridical,' conception of power

in which power is something possessed by individuals
which can be transferred through the social contract
with the Freudian-Marxist conceptualization of power
in terms of conflict, struggle, domination, and repression

nevertheless, Foucault finds a point in common between these two conceptions of power
"I would call this common point an economism in the theory of power" (513)

Foucault acknowledges that in his earlier works he took the Freudian-Marxist conception
that power is to be understood in terms of conflict and struggle
that it is "war continued by other means"

he suggests at the end of this lecture that he seeks another approach
a non-economic analysis of power

Lecture Two
Foucault begins by pointing out that his previous work was primarily focused on
the how of power
I have tried, that is, to relate its mechanisms to two points of reference, two limits: on the one
hand, to the rules of right that provide a formal delimitation of power; on the other, to the effects
of truth that this power produces and transmits, and which in their turn reproduce this power.
Hence we have a triangle: power, right, truth. (516)

Foucault formulates the traditional question of political philosophy:
how is the discourse of truth, or quite simply, philosophy as that discourse which par excellence
is concerned with truth, able to fix limits to the rights of power? (516)

Foucault then contrasts his approach as being more down to earth and concrete:
what rules of right are implemented by the relations of power in the production of discourses of
truth? Or alternatively, what type of power is susceptible of producing discourses of truth that in
a society such as ours are endowed with such potent effects? (516)

or as he further describes his approach:
My general project over the past few years has been, in essence, to reverse the mode of analysis
followed by the entire discourse of right from the time of the Middle Ages. My aim, therefore,
was to invert it, to give due weight, that is, to the fact of domination, to expose both its latent
nature and its brutality. (517)

Foucault then sets out a number of 'methodological precautions' in his approach
1) his new mode of approach will focus not on the central power of the sovereign
(Hobbes's Leviathan is the paradigmatic example)
but with "power at the extremities . . . that is, in its more regional and local forms and
institutions" (518)
To give an example: rather than try to discover where and how the right of punishment is
founded on sovereignty, how it is presented in the theory of monarchical right or in that of
democratic right, I have tried to see in what ways punishment and the power of punishment are

effectively embodied in a certain number of local, regional, material institutions, which are concerned with torture or imprisonment, and to place these in the climate—at once institutional and physical, regulated and violent—of the effective apparatuses of punishment. In other words, one should try to locate power at the extreme points of its exercise, where it is always less legal in character. (518)

2) rather than asking the ultimately unanswerable question "who has power and what does he have in mind?" Foucault will focus on the effect of power
Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors etc. (518)

3) power, for Foucault, is not to be regarded as some concrete thing, like a commodity that is possessed by an individual
rather is rather to be seen as a complex system through which the individual is determined
Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. (519)

the individual is not the agent of power but one of the prime effects of power
The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. (519)

4) Foucault says his approach does not attempt some kind of deduction of power
instead of starting from the center or origin of power and working downward and outward
Foucault's approach will work in the opposite direction:
One must rather conduct an ascending analysis of power, starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been—and continue to be—invested, colonised, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, and extended, etc. by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination. (519)

he cites as an example his approach to the history of madness

5) Foucault acknowledges that the major mechanisms of power might have been accompanied by ideological productions, but he will not reduce his analysis to an analysis of ideology

in summarizing his five methodological precautions Foucault
distances his approach from the model of the Leviathan
he will focus not on some abstraction–the state of nature
to arrive at some first principles that would determine rights

he will instead focus on "the study of the techniques and tactics of domination" (521)

at the end Foucault summarizes his aim:
If one wants to look for a non-disciplinary form of power, or rather, to struggle against disciplines and disciplinary power, it is not towards the ancient right of sovereignty that one should turn, but towards the possibility of a new form of right, one which must be anti-disciplinarian, but at the same time liberated from the principle of sovereignty. (524)