

**The discontinuities of Foucault:
Reading *The Archaeology of Knowledge*¹**

Michel Foucault's *L'Archéologie du savoir*, translated into English as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (*AK*) is largely responsible for his unwanted and problematic title of "philosopher of discontinuity." This enigmatic, self-reflexive methodological reflection, which Foucault presents as both an account of "tools that [previous] studies have used or forged for themselves in the course of their work" and a tentative, experimental "method of analysis purged of all anthropologism" (16), provides most of the source material for those who wish to label Foucault in this manner. The circumstances of publication (written during the May 1968 student uprising, and published shortly thereafter), the book's oft-discussed relationship to Foucault's other works, and the book's admittedly convoluted style all seem to validate the identification of Foucault with "theories of discontinuity."

However, as this essay shall argue, the title is undeserved. While both the form and content of *AK* seem to point toward discontinuity more than any other concept, Foucault's position is never one of advocacy or polemic. Rather, he merely seeks to restore discontinuity from the historical rubbish bin in which it has been repeatedly and resoundingly tossed by historians obsessed with finding continuity to the position of methodological utility which he believes it should rightly occupy. To be sure, the argument undertaken here shall not cover

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untrodden ground. But the large amount of Foucault scholarship which stands against the argument of this essay and *AK* itself justify its production.

The philosopher of discontinuity?

Foucault wishes to offer a methodology in which discontinuity is liberated from the inevitable erasure it faces in traditional historical scholarship. As he states with seeming clarity in the introduction, “It is as if it was particularly difficult, in the history in which men retrace their own ideas and their own knowledge, to formulate a general theory of discontinuity ... we felt a particular repugnance to conceiving of difference, to describing separations and dispersions, to dissociating the reassuring form of the identical” (12). Both history and the history of ideas prefer the ready-made continuities of tradition, influence, development, and evolution, among others, to the discontinuities, ruptures, thresholds, limits, series and transformations. They attempt to “preserve, against all decenterings, the sovereignty of the subject, and the twin figures of anthropology and humanism” (12). Consequently, the discourses of history and philosophy are distorted by this teleological reliance on continuities:

One is therefore led to anthropologize Marx, to make him a historian of totalities, and to rediscover in him the message of humanism; one is led therefore to interpret Nietzsche in the terms of transcendental philosophy, and to reduce his genealogy to the level of a search for origins; lastly, one is led to leave to one side, as if it had never arisen, that whole field of methodological problems that the new history is now presenting. (12)

This distortion is what *AK* seeks to expose and act against. Foucault’s goal is not the violent and permanent removal of all continuities, nor the erasure of all humanism and anthropology, nor the denial of the use of these concepts and

their ready-mades in certain contexts (this last point will be examined in detail in a few moments). Rather, he seeks a more balanced form of analysis in which continuities are controlled and prevented from dominating and distorting history. Continuities and ready-mades “must not be rejected definitively of course, but the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed” (25).

Likewise, the comfortable subjectivity and blasé methodology of the historians who write in this manner must be challenged. Questioning the methodologies of hundreds of historians—“advancing beyond familiar territory, far from the certainties to which one is accustomed” (39)—and proposing a radically different system of historical subjectivity—grounded in discourse, and separate and distinct from both history and the history of ideas (136)—is not likely to be very popular. Foucault notes and accepts these difficulties and his own uncertainty about the project at hand (most notably in the introduction, 135-138, and in the conclusion, but at many other times in the text).

The consistent presence of discontinuity in *AK* is as carefully regulated and mediated as its self-reflexive methodological signposting. However, that has not prevented some Foucault scholars from disconnecting Foucault’s repeated moderations of continuity and discontinuity in both direct attacks and friendly analysis. Before analyzing certain relations of continuity, discontinuity, and the history of ideas, as outlined in *AK*, a few selections of Foucault scholarship will be examined.

The discontinuities of scholarship

While some critics, notably Eve Tabor Bannet, represent Foucault’s reliance on discontinuity in *AK* rather accurately, many consider evangelism for discontinuity and difference the sole goal of that text and perhaps Foucault’s

work in general. In a quite polemical essay which argues for deconstruction against archaeology, Foucault's own term for the method of analysis he proposes in *AK*, E. M. Henning names discontinuity as the "second theme" of archaeology (interestingly enough, he considers rule-making the first), and argues that *AK* establishes difference and discontinuity as the norm of discourse (249). Henning claims that "Foucault has gone to the extreme of simply reversing a past imbalance" and eschews categorization for its "hostility to all forms of difference and discontinuity" (258).

If Henning's argument, which could be called the left critique of Foucault, is a misreading, it is certainly egregious—there are simply too many methodological reflections in *AK* for any careful reader to misunderstand this part of Foucault's argument. More likely, Henning's critique is closer to that of the antagonist Foucault constructs in the conclusion of *AK* (199-211), or the "sagacious commentators" he mentions earlier in the text (48). Henning's critique is anticipated by Foucault, who addresses the question of inversion directly.

It is you who devalue the continuous by the use that you make of it.... you are merely neutralizing it, driving it out to the outer limit of time, towards an original passivity. Archaeology proposes to invert this arrangement, or rather (for our aim is not to accord to the discontinuous the role formerly accorded to the continuous) to play one off against the other... (174).

Indeed, nothing about the inversion Foucault proposes for continuity and discontinuity seems as simple as Henning would have us believe.

Mark Poster is more generous than Henning, but still wavers on the subject, acknowledging Foucault's repeated moderations of discontinuity in *AK*. Unlike Henning, Poster does not choose to dismiss Foucault's desire to simultaneously enable discontinuity and privilege discontinuity. Instead, he recognizes the

attempt, but seems ultimately unable to decide if Foucault is successful in this regard (Poster 147, 151-2).

In his book *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight : Toward an Ethics for Thought*, a study of Foucault which has a tendency to overstate the philosopher's project, James Bernauer expresses neither ambiguity toward nor disliking for *AK*. His reading, which is a charitable version of Henning's erasure of continuity, elevates discontinuity to the highest level possible. Bernauer considers discontinuity (here appearing as "dissonance," based on Foucault's fondness for contemporary French classical music, and "difference") as the only goal and the ontological condition of archaeology:

In place of the smooth concord that is imposed on a multiplicity of separate occurrences by the desire for sameness, [Foucault] wishes to place before the mind a constantly sounding dissonance. His earlier work has cleared the way for this dissonant thinking, which will become the inspiration of the "philosophy of event" emerging in this period as the horizon for archaeology. (Bernauer 90-91)

According to Bernauer, archaeological thinking aims to make it possible to think difference; it wishes to establish that "we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks." (Bernauer 91). Unfortunately, in his zeal to put Foucault's methodological texts into practice, Bernauer overstates the case. Again, there is direct address of this subject in Foucault. Bernauer is correct: Foucault is trying to enable us to think difference, but as previously argued, that difference is always moderated, and never included to the exclusion of all other things.

In a slightly different and actually more common vein, Richard Rorty calls *AK* Foucault's "stufiest, most obscure, and worst book," and advises that "*Power/Knowledge (P/K)* is a much better attempt at methodology which cancels

and replaces *AK*” (Rorty 130). This critique encapsulates both versions of a second undesirable possibility for reading *AK* as discontinuity. The first reading foregrounds the difficult, convoluted form of *AK*, which is unlike any of his other long studies, and seeks to separate it from Foucault’s other work for this reason; the second reading sees the text as a historical break or disjuncture in Foucault’s *oeuvre*. Both readings construct *AK* as discontinuity, and both are unsatisfactory.

Rorty’s accusations of stuffiness and obscurity are very hard to argue with. *AK* is an admittedly difficult text which follows a distinctly non-linear path, and relies upon the process established by that path for a considerable portion of its argument. The book encapsulates Foucault’s “notology”—his long lists of what he is *not* arguing, or what consequences certain arguments do *not* have—at its height. However, despite the accuracy of his claims, and Rorty’s considerable prestige, one wonders about the wisdom of striking *AK* from Foucault’s *oeuvre*—like the exclusionary moves of St. Jerome which Foucault dissects in “What is an author?” (127-9), Rorty’s suggestion seems an arbitrary imposition of external values onto Foucault’s work.

Regarding the second case Rorty’s quote highlights, it is extremely ironic to employ the concept of *oeuvre* in critique of *AK*, considering the *oeuvre*’s place as one of the infamous unities which restrain the effectiveness of history. “The *oeuvre*,” writes Foucault, “can be regarded neither as an immediate unity, nor as a homogeneous unity” (24).

AK further resists the separation into the traditional units of “book” and *oeuvre* by looking backward and forward a great deal. Numerous indirect and direct allusions to Foucault’s past and future work point toward Foucault’s desire to show the analytical unsuitability of both concepts. Footnotes on page 47 and 54 are the best examples of this tendency, noting *AK*’s direct conflict with the earlier

works *Madness and Civilization* and *Naissance de la Clinique* respectively. Other examples appear extensively in the introduction and on 64-65.

But still *AK* is considered a break. The otherwise insightful Eve Tabor Bannet does a fairly good job of avoiding this trap. Though she protests the imposition of a “break or discontinuity” between *AK* and *Discipline and Punish*, and claims, “Foucault never revamped his ‘instruments of analysis.’ He refined and elaborated them,” she also opines, “After 1968, for reasons which will be explored below, discontinuity, differentiation and dispersion also take on a more concrete political and strategic significance” (97, 106).

This characterization mistakenly isolates *AK* from the rest of Foucault’s work. The most common form of this isolation is hinge-like, as evidenced by the popular online index for humanities research, the Voice of the Shuttle (VoS). VoS and many of the Foucault resources linked from its “contemporary theory” section divide Foucault’s work into an “archaeological” period concluding with *AK*, and a genealogical period beginning with *DP*. While this division works on some levels, considering *AK* as a discontinuity or “break” in Foucault’s *oeuvre* could give an undesirable theoretical weight to erasure of “genealogical” characteristics present in “archaeological” work, and vice versa.

As Bannet argues, Foucault admitted that his work included corrections, self-criticisms, and a good deal more focus on power after 1968. However, these changes should not be given the negative status of a break which Foucault repeatedly shows in *AK*. While most scholarship which has followed Bannet relates Foucault’s position on discontinuity generally well, the danger of willful or accidental misreading *AK* still exists. Direct analysis of the position of discontinuity *AK* is still necessary. This essay shall now examine the relationship between discontinuity, continuity, and the history of ideas as outlined in *AK*.

Continuity, history, and the history of ideas

But even if we concede that *AK* is more concerned with upsetting continuity than imposing a discontinuous methodology, several questions are still left unanswered. Is the target of the book a fresh methodological ground for the history of ideas? Both history and the history of ideas come under vicious attack in the book's introduction, in its opening chapters, and again in its last thirty pages. Are these institutions and their accompanying methodological frameworks the book's primary target?

In fact, Foucault claims that his primary target is not, as it indeed seems to be, the cowardly, anthropology-producing historians who grasp their comfortable teleologies and curl into a fetal position before his onslaught (for even less charitable descriptions, see *AK* 14). Instead, Foucault states that he has turned inward, and with *AK* is seeking to clear up discontinuities in his own methods:

[R]ather than trying to reduce others to silence, by claiming that what they say is worthless, I have tried to define this blank space from which I speak, and which is slowly taking shape in a discourse I still feel to be so precarious and unsure. (17)

This and similar retrospective movements are frequent in *AK*. More than any other one thing, *AK* is an attempt to rectify methodological questions raised (if not in public, at least in Foucault's mind, to himself) by Foucault's earlier work. However, this very prominent placement of self-as-primary-target does not indicate that Foucault operates without exterior targets. In addition to the uncertainties of method which have provoked Foucault to write, he wavers about his relationship to the disciplines which for some time appear as targets: history and the history of ideas. The division between these disciplines, and the division between them—if indeed one exists—is not well-defined.

The introduction to *AK* seems to leave no doubt that *historians* are to blame for the removal of continuities from history. Seemingly separate from these historians' propensity toward continuity is a shift toward discontinuity in the history of ideas, whose practitioners have managed to "evade very largely the work and methods of the historian" (4). For a brief moment, these "historical disciplines" are united by their "questioning of the document" (6). However, discussion of the tendency toward discontinuity in history of ideas is quietly dropped as the continuities of "history proper" (7) emerge as the more disturbing of the two movements.

The lack of precision in the terminology presents some challenges to the reader here. Should the history of ideas be considered separately from "history proper?" At times there is clear delineation between these two fields; but in many cases, "history" seems to cover both forms of historical analysis. Does the tendency toward discontinuity evidenced by Bachelard, Canguilhem, et. al. carry similar consequences as the tendency toward continuity of history proper? Consequences for continuities in history are well-discussed; for the history of ideas, they are almost totally absent.

The first clue is Foucault's desire to separate himself from "these various methods and forms of history," and establish a "blank space" from which to rectify his methodological problems (17). In the context of this chapter, that "blank space" would seem to exclude all forms of history mentioned in it.

The second is more certain: the use of discontinuities creates theoretical problems for "all historical analysis," not only for history proper (21). The history of ideas is the methodological focus, the "particular field" Foucault seeks to examine. Though he delays the examination of this field, Foucault remains

concerned with other historical discourses, and a more general sense of the word “history” seems to follow the more polemical introduction to the text.

The resolution of the delayed examination also dispels—or makes irrelevant—the ambiguity of the introduction. Foucault wishes to be as apparently distinct, “cut off” from the history of ideas as he does from history proper, for their themes and tools are identical. “Genesis, continuity, totalization: these are the great themes of the history of ideas, and that by which it is attached to a certain, now traditional, form of historical analysis” (136).

The problems created by the epistemological mutation of history may affect one historical discipline more than others, but they are the concern of all general historical thought. This multivalent viewpoint is emphasized one final time in the closing pages of the text, when Foucault notes the possibility of “other archaeologies” (194-196). Foucault’s target is not historians (of ideas), but historical analysis which collapses difference by the erasure of continuities and the enabling of continuities, whatever its source.

Enabling discontinuity

To reduce the number and power of the continuities coloring history, a methodology must privilege neither discontinuity nor continuity. The first task concerns the typical continuities of the historical disciplines: book, *oeuvre*, text; likewise tradition, influence, development, evolution, and spirit must all be regulated and controlled. Under no circumstances is this movement a simple one. Foucault recognizes two things: first, there is no need to erase all forms of continuity from the historical disciplines. Second, even if such an erasure were desirable, it would be impossible.

The removal of continuities from the immediate field of possibility is the first priority. “We must rid ourselves,” Foucault writes, “of a whole mass of notions, each of which, in its own way, diversifies the theme of continuity” (21). These unities are “not intrinsic, autochthonous, and universally recognizable characteristics,” (22) but exterior entities imposed upon analysis by other unquestioned and cloudy unities: tradition, economic value, etcetera. Clear analysis of “the dispersion of history” cannot be possible if these unities are allowed to prefigure the form and content of the analytical work. However, Foucault soon makes the moderated and controlled pace he intends for this movement clear:

These pre-existing forms ... must not be rejected definitively, of course ... we must define in what conditions and in view of which analyses certain of them are legitimate; and we must indicate which of them can never be accepted in any circumstances. (25-26)

Not surprisingly, Foucault refuses to make the very movement he is acting against. He refuses to appeal to a higher unity (“All unities are bad”) blindly, without careful analysis; he recognizes the interconnectedness of the discourses he is investigating, and fashions his method in that light. Somewhat maddeningly, but understandingly and necessarily, Foucault shifts his project slightly here:

What we must do, in fact, is to tear [the traditional continuities] away from their virtual self-evidence, and to free the problems that they pose ... I, in turn will do no more than this: of course, I shall take as my starting-point whatever unities are already given... I shall make use of them long enough to ask myself what unities they form ... I shall accept the groupings that history suggests only to subject them at once to interrogation; to break them up and then to see whether they can be legitimately reformed; or whether other groupings shall be made. (26)

A temporary space is created between the traditional forms of history Foucault is writing against and the archaeology of knowledge which is his goal. That space is the book itself. For *The archaeology of knowledge* to produce a usable archaeology of knowledge, Foucault must suspend rejection of the traditional continuities of history in his own work until analysis of their operation is complete. If continuities were blindly tossed aside immediately after the identification of their constrictive action, actually useful unities could be needlessly purged from historical disciplines. Note also that this noun appears in the plural: since the unities of discourse are interconnected in ways not yet clearly understood, setting them aside could diminish the lucidity of the connections between them which are in fact the target of the immediate analysis (26-27; 31-37).

Consider the unities “book” and *oeuvre*—without a doubt the most infamous of Foucault’s targets in *AK* (23-25). If “book” was removed from our conceptual field, the effect on the unity *oeuvre* would be immediate. Would the archaeologist be able to adequately gauge the operations of *oeuvre* if its component unity “book” were not considered? To prevent such impact from crippling the analysis, unities (and the discontinuities they suppress, for that matter) must be considered in their interconnected state.

Foucault’s recognition of the complexity and difficulty of this task, and his failure to act as the prophet of discontinuity, should now be apparent. The shift away from continuity is not made blindly or abruptly, as scholars like Henning argue, but with a great degree of care. Maintenance of the traditional continuities in history is maintained not only so their destruction can be most effectively completed; rather, as the analysis continues, Foucault makes it clear that uses outside of his current project certainly exist and could be the object of future studies:

Of course, these questions [of shared ideas] would be legitimate (some of them, at least). But none of them would be relevant to the level of archaeology. ... Not that I wish to deny their existence, or deny that they could ever be the object of a description. But rather that I have tried to step back from them, to shift the level of attack of the analysis. (160-161)

In circumstances Foucault does not specify, moderated and careful, educated use of continuities is a legitimate scholarly activity. But such use is clearly not archaeology, and not a project Foucault is interested in, though he refuses to dismiss it as illegitimate.

Besides, to shift to much larger questions, is it even possible to consider history or analysis or language in a field from which all continuities are banned? Throughout the text, the impossibility of erasing continuities are indicated by several chapter titles (notably, "The unities of discourse"). Certainly, why would Foucault even *bother* to propose archaeological constructions such as the statement, the archive, and the discursive formation if he rejected all forms of continuity? *AK* is not about rejecting continuity; it is about carefully establishing and rigorously testing a method for its control.

The essential regulation of continuity is reinforced by the second form of enabling discontinuity, the more direct, empowering gestures made possible by the methodological particularities of the discursive formation. This second form of enabling discontinuity is an incredibly generative gesture in and of itself, with very productive repercussions for the analytical field. "Once these immediate forms of continuity are suspended," Foucault observes, "an entire field is set free. A vast field ... the totality of all effective statements" (26-27).

Indeed, the greatest impact of enabling discontinuities is for the statement. The suspension of traditional continuities enables archaeology to provide, in

analysis of statements, “exact specificity of occurrence,” as well as conditions of existence, fixed limits, and correlations with other statements (28). Without recognition of discontinuity, this first unity which Foucault proposes for archaeology is relegated to the field of language. Until the traditional apparatus is questioned, and its lack of specificity which obfuscates the statement challenged, there can be no archaeology—just another form of the history of ideas with a new name and pretty terminology.

Foucault is quick to replace the unities he questions with *archaeological* unities—such as the discursive formation, the statement, and the archive—and carefully constructed these entities to be free of the negative effects carried by the traditional unities of continuity operant in the field of history. But he makes no effort to disguise their ontological status as “unities,” or to mask the fact that he is replacing one unity with another. “One is able to describe other unities,” he continues, “but this time by means of a group of controlled decisions” (29).

This is the most critical difference: where before random and unexamined effects reigned, *AK* proposes control. Where untheorized continuities once were the limits of discourse, Foucault provides a theory for their description.

That is not to say that *AK*'s central project is another manifestation of “sad theory,” a gloomy chart of yet another set of things to consider before we bring pen to paper.² Indeed, quite the reverse is true: an experimental sensibility is simultaneously enabled by discontinuity and necessary for its survival. As he concludes “The unities of discourse,” Foucault asks, “How can be sure of avoiding such divisions ... unless we adopt sufficiently broad fields and scales that are chronologically vast enough?” The answer is to be found in the generative,

² Kudos to Mr Justin Wyble for this wonderful construction.

experimentative nature of the unique space between the fields of “the sciences of man” and archaeology:

Two facts must be constantly borne in mind: that the analysis of discursive events is in no way limited to such a field; and that the division of this field itself cannot be regarded either as definitive or as absolutely valid; it is no more than an initial approximation that must allow relations to appear that may erase the limits of this initial outline. (30)

As Rorty opines, on one level, *AK* is a very stuffy, obscure, terrible book. However, the experimentation which it continually demands injects a level of promise into the text certainly lacking from tomes such as *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. A little of this sort of stuffiness would do Rorty some good.

In a considerably different sort of generative movement, the enabling of discontinuity forces some changes in the status of the historian and the History s/he writes. No longer able to rely on old continuities, the historian must *create*. Rather than “providing a basis for what already exists” and “going over with bold strokes lines that have already been sketched,” the historian shall “advance beyond familiar territory” and create new forms of thought outside of the standardized rationalities and teleologies of history (38-39). Repeatedly, Foucault makes it clear that *he* is aware of, and willing to accept, the risk of this forced creativity, at times mocking historians for their timidity and refusal to do anything new. Will historians will take up his challenge? That question goes unanswered.

Similarly, the “loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things” (49) follows the recognition of the legitimacy of the dispersion of the discursive formation, and forces return to a state which is neither language (*langue*), nor speech, nor some other version of “the history of the referent” (47). The researcher is compelled to find new territory which can define both figure

and ground without reference to them (and to the pre-existing continuities which are their limits).

As Foucault works toward discussion and actualization of the shift away from continuity, he enables and describes a series of archaeological unities, generating them sometimes by forcing others aside; and sometimes by creating new positions from which to speak. The engine at the heart of it all, discontinuity, is most closely bound to the second archaeological unity he proposes and carefully defines, the “discursive formation.”

The discontinuities of the discursive formation

Though immediately after enabling discontinuities Foucault states that he will leave the problems of defining “statement,” “event,” and “discourse,” aside until later, and focus on describing “the relations that may legitimately be described between the statements that have been left in their provisional, visible grouping,” (31) it soon becomes clear that in spite of his stated intent to separate his argument into two sections, in reality, he will be working on both tasks simultaneously. Foucault admits as much in the methodological about-face which begins Part III of *AK*:

I wonder whether I have not changed direction on the way; whether I have not replaced my first quest with another ... instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word ‘discourse’, I believe that I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements ... (80)

Indeed, the most troubling addition to the meaning “discourse” are the problematic entities called the “discursive formation” and the “rules of formation” which are its conditions of existence (38). The definition for the

discursive formation is first proposed after Foucault attempts to answer the question of relation between statements by investigating the soundness of four assumptions commonly made about statements. Famously (or infamously, and perhaps importantly in a rhetorical sense) all of these assumptions fail—and every failure points Foucault to the discontinuity called *dispersion*. These failures set up the four categories Foucault will investigate while defining the discursive formation and rules of formation more precisely, over the next four chapters of the text, and also illustrate the incredible importance of dispersion—more so than may first seem apparent, in Part II, Chapter One, when dispersion appears to be the natural status of statements and events before they are made into language and/or History.

In the same way that statement, event, and discourse are not clearly defined in the section of *AK* which enables discontinuities (Part II, Chapter One), dispersion is not clearly defined there. Nor is it clearly defined after all four of Foucault's tried-and-failed hypotheses of relations between statements. Dispersion is never defined explicitly, but only through comparison with, and a careful working through, the concepts that bridge all the uncertain unities forged from discontinuities. The relationship appears circular and comparative: "discursive formation" and "rules of formation" are needed to define "statement," "event," and "discourse," which must be defined for a clear understanding of "dispersion," which is at the heart of the "discursive formation."³ While this may seem strange, it is consistent with the dual status of continuity and discontinuity—each enabled and controlled by the other. The discursive formation is not a simple structure forged from "dispersion," "dissension," or a host of other discontinuities, but a complex structure of interrelations. Hence the

³Perhaps the term "dialectical" could be applied to this relationship. However, since hearing S. Hunt use it, I've always been afraid to.

convoluted nature of its introduction in *AK*, and its multiple definitions—the statements such as, “A discursive formation is *xyz*”—which appear throughout the text. Hence the shifting definition of “dispersion,” the entity which lies at the heart of the discursive formation, and the necessity of reading across *AK* to understand fully the expansive terminology and corresponding concepts which multiply within it.

Dispersions first appear in the introduction as the portions of history rejected by historians (12). Soon after “the dispersions of history” and the “population of dispersed events” are named as the natural, pre-conceptual form of “reality” (though Foucault never uses this term, even with scare quotes) which History or the History of Ideas distort in their continuous representation.

As Foucault works up to proposing the discursive formation, the diversity of dispersion is revealed by the generative nature of discontinuities. A vast field of discourse has been freed, and “this field is made up of the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written), in their dispersion as events and in the occurrence that is proper to them.” Note that dispersion appears here, as it does earlier, without relation to time or space. At this point condition indicates neither of those things, but rather a general sense of “distance, scattering, and disappearing” such as reflected in a dictionary definition.

So, naturally, dispersion should be the starting point for the concepts Foucault will use in his analysis. But “naturally” is not good enough for Foucault, as the four trials-and-failures of Part II, Chapter 2 prove. The testing of hypotheses makes clear that Foucault’s sense of dispersion *does* include the elements of time and space. The first hypothesis proposes that “statements different in form, and *dispersed in time* form a group if they refer to one and the same object” (32, my italics). The failure of this hypotheses reveals that “to define a group of statements

in terms of its individuality would be to define the *dispersion* of these objects, to grasp all the interstices that separate them, to measure *the distances that reign between them*" (33, my italics). Dispersion isn't only about time and space, but neither of those elements are excluded from it.

All four failed hypotheses lead to dispersion. But the failure is productive: instead of seeing a discontinuity of objects—which are made up of series of gaps, interplays of differences—Foucault sees a dispersion (unity) of objects, and makes that dispersion the subject of description and analysis. The same shift is proposed for enunciations, concepts, and strategies. "Such an analysis ... would describe *systems of dispersion*. Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion ... we are dealing with a *discursive formation* (37).

The language is important here: Foucault is not providing a definition for the discursive formation, but merely noting its conditions of possibility. The definition of this critical concept is not a matter of a single concept: for each possibility of objects, enunciations, concepts, and strategies, Foucault shows the operation of the discursive formation. Foucault's development of the discursive formation in the four directions of his failed hypotheses makes the critical nature of dispersion even more apparent, as four particular and contingent definitions are constructed (objects, 44; enunciations, 54-55; concepts, 60, 62; strategies, 68).

The stakes for understanding the relationship of dispersion and in this manner are very high. Near the middle of *AK*, Foucault observes,

And if I succeed in showing that this discursive formation really is the principle of dispersion and redistribution, not of formulations, not of sentences, not of propositions, but of statements ... thus I shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse. (107-108)

In other words, Foucault realizes fully here that the legitimacy of the discursive formation is not the only thing being tested by *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The legitimacy of other texts—*The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things*, *Madness and Civilization*—and in the *oeuvre*-constructing eyes of the historians, the legitimacy of Michel Foucault himself—are all placed at risk by this discontinuous movement, this difficulty, this dispersion.

Labeling Foucault

As Foucault argued many times, the unities of history aren't invalid concepts—they are simply inserted in places that they don't belong. We can consider Foucault's response toward being labeled "the philosopher of discontinuity" in a similar light. Foucault resisted labeling not because it was intrinsically wrong, but because labels were so often misapplied or misconstrued. This essay began with the issue of labeling; a brief return to that subject serves well as a conclusion.

Throughout his life Michel Foucault resisted the labeling literary critics and interviewers tried to pin upon him—especially when charges of "structuralism" were levied in his direction. This matter is taken up directly in the strange conclusion of *AK*, as quoted in several instances above (the notes from *AK* 174 and 205 come to mind).

At times Foucault's responses to attempts to label him were humorous; sometimes they were swift and sardonic. A radio interview with Jacques Chancel, broadcast on Radio-France in October 1975, is typical of the latter: the interviewer, perhaps a bit under-prepared, constantly tries to steer Foucault toward simply stated positions, simply picks out phrases from Foucault's answers and repeats

them (comparisons to the Eliza “psychologist” computer program are frighteningly accurate). But Foucault resists at every turn:

Q: You were ahead of others.

A: Ahead of others? Not at all.

Q: You have quite a few degrees?

A: I suppose.

Q: A degree, or a satchelful of them, is pretty burdensome?

A: No. There are certain ones which are very burdensome.

(Chancel and Foucault 134)

In a similar fashion, Foucault’s lengthy response to a question posed by *Esprit* magazine adds weight to the arguments from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* presented here, and provides a final word against labeling Foucault a “philosopher of discontinuity.” When asked why he “emphasizes discontinuity,” Foucault demanded a careful qualification of his project, repeating his larger goal, and pointing toward both of the movements highlighted above:

My problem is to substitute the analysis of different types of transformation for the abstract general and wearisome form of change in which one so willingly thinks in terms of succession. ... Replacing, in short, the theme of becoming (general form, abstract element, primary cause and universal effect, a confused mixture of the identical and the new) by the analysis of the transformations in their specificity. ... there is absolutely no question of substituting a “discontinuous” category for the no less abstract and general one of the “continuous.”

(Foucault, “History,” 36)

In that spirit, if Foucault shall be labeled, let him be labeled specifically and descriptively: not as a “philosopher of discontinuities,” but as, “a philosopher for whom continuities were the usual form of a distortion called history, and discontinuities a means of exposing these customary unities and enabling new unities to be constructed in their place.”

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