

A Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power & the Subject.

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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. This 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 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 theorisation. 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 other continental 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 most 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' (1977, p.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 (or 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, p.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, and within the body by the functioning of power. (1977, p. 29)

Then, having detailed this 'theoretical shift' of focus from discursive practices to the 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' (1986, p.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 aspects of ourselves today can be framed as a set of questions:

- who are we in terms of our knowledge 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 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 how 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 debated on questions of gender and sexuality.

