LOIS McNAY

FOUCAULT
A Critical Introduction
Foucault
Key Contemporary Thinkers

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FOUCAULT

A Critical Introduction

Lois McNay

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Lois McNay
Introduction

The scope and sophistication of the thought of Michel Foucault is imposing. His work straddles the disciplines of philosophy, history, sociology and literary theory. He has written detailed histories of the development of psychology, of clinical medicine, of the birth of the asylum, of the modern penal system, and of Ancient Greek and Roman morals. He has also written extensively on modern literature and has produced a structural analysis of the development of Western thought since the Renaissance. These literary and historical studies are, in turn, informed by philosophical reflection on the nature of rationality, truth and power, and on what it means to be an individual in modern society.

The breadth and complexity of Foucault’s work defies easy categorization and this has often led to certain difficulties in its critical reception. Historians have rejected Foucault’s work for being too philosophical, philosophers for its lack of formal rigour and sociologists for its literary or poetic quality. It is this breadth and complexity that has resulted in what Maurice Blanchot has called both the ‘difficult’ and ‘privileged’ position of Foucault’s work in relation to twentieth-century thought: ‘do we know who he is, since he doesn’t call himself . . . either a sociologist or a historian or a structuralist or a thinker or a metaphysician?’\textsuperscript{1} Foucault himself underlines the impossibility of such a task by claiming, in a well-known passage, that he writes not in order to disclose the self but to escape it: ‘I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same.’\textsuperscript{2} Despite its impossibility, the desire to know
who Foucault the thinker is has generated an enormous amount of secondary literature. With regard to the aims of this book, there already exist many excellent introductions to Foucault’s work. The justification for yet another critical overview is that most of the existing introductions do not include a sustained consideration of Foucault’s final work on the themes of government and the self. My objective is to fill this gap.

The ideas of government and the self encapsulate Foucault’s final thought on two major themes that run throughout his work, those of power and the subject. Indeed, it is probably these two themes that are the most well-known aspects of Foucault’s thought in so far as it is linked to the proclamation of the death of the subject and to the idea that all knowledge is ineluctably embedded in power relations: ‘power-knowledge’. It is the development of these two themes – of the addition of the idea of government to the theory of power and of the move from a problematization of the subject to the idea of an ‘ethics of the self’ – that forms the guiding thread of this introduction to Foucault’s work.

Throughout his work, the development and reformulation of a concept of power remains a constant preoccupation of Foucault’s. Partly in explicit counterposition to a Marxist perspective, Foucault’s interest was not directed at the expression of power in its most central and institutionalized forms such as state apparatuses or class relations. Rather, he was concerned to examine how power relations of inequality and oppression are created and maintained in more subtle and diffuse ways through ostensibly humane and freely adopted social practices. In short, Foucault questions the rationality of post-Enlightenment society by focusing on the ways in which many of the enlightened practices of modernity progressively delimit rather than increase the freedom of individuals and, thereby, perpetuate social relations of inequality and oppression.

While the concern with uncovering the dark side of modernity remains the undiminished force informing Foucault’s entire output, the conceptualization of power and its realization in social relations varied with the development of his thought. In his early work on madness, Foucault demonstrated how the apparently therapeutic practices of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis were instrumental in depriving mad individuals of a voice by construing their disorders in the univocally negative language of mental illness. The mad are not listened to and hence are alienated from themselves because modern clinical practice
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effaces the specificity of each individual case through the imposition of archaizing and alien concepts. The model of power relations that Foucault worked with at this stage is, on his own account, an essentially negative one in which power is always expressed in strategies of repression and exclusion. No differentiation is made between forms of thought and institutional practices which become indistinguishable in the uniformity of their repressive effects on the social realm. This leads to a rather bleak view of the total bankruptcy of the Enlightenment legacy both in terms of the philosophical rationality and the processes of societal rationalization it unleashed.

Foucault subsequently attempted to reformulate this negative conception of power as repression to account for the conflictual, unstable and empowering elements inherent in any set of social relations. In the ‘archaeological’ phase of his work where Foucault sought to uncover the deepseated rules of formation that determine thought, the issue of power is not addressed directly. However, the transcendence of the previous monolithic view of power is implied in Foucault’s treatment of discourse as a relatively autonomous phenomenon which cannot be encompassed by a monotonous and reductive logic of social control. It is in Foucault’s work from the mid-1970s onwards, however, that the issue of power is addressed in the most sustained fashion, resulting in the well-known reformulation of power as an essentially positive phenomenon. On this view, power underlies all social relations from the institutional to the intersubjective and is a fundamentally enabling force. To understand power, therefore, it is necessary to analyse it in its most diverse and specific manifestations rather than focusing on its most centralized forms such as its concentration in the hands of a coercive elite or a ruling class. This focus on the underside or everyday aspect of power relations Foucault calls a microphysics rather than a macrophysics of power.

However, despite this reformulation of power as a positive and heterogeneous force, a central dilemma runs through Foucault’s work: it contains a tendency to fall back into a negative view of power as a unidirectionally imposed monolithic force. This prevents Foucault explaining, among other things, the possibility of social change and the dynamic and relatively autonomous nature of social action. Such difficulties have been noted by many commentators and I will outline in chapter 3 a few of the central aporia that arise from this tension between the positive and negative moments of Foucault’s theory of power. However, I will also show
that Foucault’s subsequent work on government – which has received comparatively little critical attention – is significant because it redefines certain aspects of the theory of power in such a way as to render the original insight of power as a positive phenomenon sustainable. This reformulation of the concept of power has two key elements. First, the idea of governmentality broadens the category of power by distinguishing more clearly between violence, domination and the types of power that characterize relations between individuals. Second, power is defined both as an objectivizing and a subjectivizing force. Power constrains individuals but it also constitutes the condition of possibility of their freedom. In short, the work on government is important because it indicates Foucault’s ability to think beyond the limitations of his previous work and to push his thought in challenging and often surprising new directions.

The second theme that lies at the centre of Foucault’s work is that of the subject, or rather a critique of the various notions of the rational subject that have governed Western thought since the Enlightenment. Foucault’s whole oeuvre is oriented to breaking down the domination of a fully self-reflexive, unified and rational subject at the centre of thought in order to clear a space for radically ‘other’ ways of thinking and being. With the development of Foucault’s work, the critique of the rational subject takes several forms. In his earliest work on madness, Foucault attacks the philosophical subject of Enlightenment thought by revealing its implication in certain social practices which, since the end of the seventeenth century, have led to the marginalization and silencing of mad individuals. Thus the effects of Descartes’ dismissal of the mad as beyond the realms of the rational cogito are not confined to the realm of speculative philosophy, but are directly linked to the development of certain institutional practices which have deprived the mad of their own voices through their categorization as inhuman. The claims of Enlightenment thought to universal legitimacy in virtue of its accurate reflection of transcendental structures of rationality are undermined by revealing its dependence on oppressive and brutal practices which derogate and exclude that with which it cannot cope: ‘the other’.

In the subsequent archaeological enquiry into the conditions of possibility of thought, the attack on the rational subject takes a more general form. Here Foucault shows that the idea of the subject as the sole origin of meaning is in fact an illusion generated by deep-level rules of formation that govern all thought and
speech. Far from being the source of meaning, the subject is in fact a secondary effect or byproduct of discursive formations. By laying bare these deep-seated rules that constitute the condition of possibility of thought, Foucault undermines not only the notion of an originative subject but also associated notions of truth and progress. The development of Western thought can no longer be characterized as a shift from superstition and magic to objective, scientific knowledge, but is seen rather as a series of abrupt and arbitrary paradigm shifts or epistemic breaks. The effect of this demystificatory strategy is to dislocate the rigid identity logic that orders modern thought and thereby to create a space in which it is possible to think difference or otherness.

With the move during the mid-1970s to a more explicit concern with power, Foucault resumes and develops the line of attack initiated in the work on madness. In an analysis of the modern penal system and of contemporary notions of sexuality, Foucault shows how the assumption that individuals have a deep interiority and innermost truth – expressed in concepts such as the soul, psyche and subjectivity – is a coercive illusion. The idea of an inner and essential depth is in fact an effect of material processes of subjection. To be a subject, in Foucault’s view, is necessarily to be subjected. Even when individuals think that they are most free, they are in fact in the grip of an insidious power which operates not through direct forms of repression but through less visible strategies of ‘normalization’. In this respect Foucault’s work resembles the critique initiated by Weber and continued in the work of Lukács, Adorno and others, which emphasizes the ways in which an Enlightenment notion of universal rationality has degenerated into a pervasive instrumental logic that homogenizes the social world, emptying it of meaning and purpose.

Foucault’s critique of Enlightenment rationality and of the rational subject of thought is mounted on several fronts and is devastating in its conclusions. It has had a profound influence on many other areas of thought. It has resonated, in particular, with feminist and postcolonial critiques of Enlightenment thought as a highly gendered and ethnocentric construct that implicitly naturalizes a white, masculine perspective and correspondingly denigrates anything directly or analogously associated with a feminine or non-European position. Yet despite the extent to which Foucault’s critique of the rational subject of Enlightenment thought has been drawn on in other areas, it is also not without certain theoretical limitations connected to the failure to rethink
subjectivity in terms of the excluded ‘other’ of thought. In short, Foucault’s attack on the subject is so total that it forecloses any alternative theoretical space in which to conceive non-hegemonic forms of subjectivity. Throughout this book, it will be shown that the difficulty in thinking through alternative or oppositional subject positions forms a persistent dilemma in Foucault’s work. Although very different in many respects, Madness and Civilization shares with the works of the archaeological period – The Order of Things and The Archaeology of Knowledge – a problematic conception of the other in terms of an ‘epistemic’ or absolute break. The tendency to present the domination of Enlightenment rationality as absolute means that the other can only be conceived as external to this identity logic and, therefore, only expressible in terms of a complete rupture with the dominant system.

The problem with such an antinomic conception of the relation between the dominant and its others is that it is unclear, given the absence of any interconnection or dialectical relation between the two moments, how the transition from a history of the same to an acceptance of difference is to be effected. This antinomic formulation also results in a rather Romantic presentation of the other as a liminal and eschatological figure that hinders a recognition of the social and historical forces that routinely and persistently construct difference as otherness, femininity as irrationality, skin colour as inferiority, and so forth. In short, the other is not always a marginal figure; rather its construction as such is always central, in a mundane way, to the maintenance of any hegemonic system of norms. The failure of Foucault to conceive of the other in such a way is intensified in The Archaeology of Knowledge, where the category of the subject is completely rejected and so too any theoretical framework in which to conceive of alternative positions which are at once within and also marginal to the dominant epistemic order.

With the shift to the ‘genealogical’ method and a more explicit concern with the theory of power, Foucault’s conception of the other is significantly altered. The other is no longer conceived as a shadowy, contestatory force on the margins of society, but as an effect of the power relations that permeate the social realm. The points at which power relations are exerted most forcefully are the points at which resistance to a dominatory force arises. Domination and resistance are no longer conceived of as ontologically different but as opposing effects of the same power relations. Thus the labelling of certain groups of individuals as ‘deviant’ provides
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those groups with a coherent identity from which resistant counter-identities may be formulated – for instance, the idea of ‘queer’ politics. The problem that arises in connection with this phase of Foucault’s work is that, by dispensing with the category of the subject and replacing it with that of the body, the idea of resistance is severely undermined because there remains no category around which a notion of active agency may be formulated.

Again, just as the notion of government represents an important advance in Foucault’s understanding of power, so the introduction of the category of the self overcomes some of the problems in the conceptualization of individuals as active agents. Derived from the notion of government, the idea of ‘technologies of the self’ enables Foucault to conceive of individuals as active agents with the capacity to autonomously fashion their own existences. This notion transcends the limitations of the etiolated view of individuals as docile bodies that characterizes the middle phase of Foucault’s work. It also overcomes the difficulties arising from an understanding of the other in terms of a complete break or rupture. The idea of technologies of the self enables Foucault to elaborate a theory of resistance – an ‘ethics of the self’ – which is situated in the interstices of power relations, at the level of individuals’ daily practices. In a characteristically indirect fashion, this idea of an ethics of the self is most fully explored by Foucault in his study of Ancient Greek and Roman moral practices in the second and third volumes of The History of Sexuality. In other essays, Foucault also pondered the problem, raised by Kant, of the nature of critique. This preoccupation is reflected in Foucault’s work, where the negative or critical moment in his attack on the subject is complemented with a positive moment – essential to critique – in which a theoretical framework to explain the construction of counter-hegemonic forms of identity is allowed.

The shift from criticism to critique also signals a modification in the way in which Foucault viewed the relation between his work and the tradition of Enlightenment thought. The idea of an ‘ethics of the self’ relies on a cluster of terms drawn explicitly from the Enlightenment tradition, including the notions of reflexivity, critique and autonomy. The rapprochement with Enlightenment thought should not be interpreted as a refutation, on Foucault’s part, of his previous critique of the rational subject of thought. Rather it should be seen as a retrospective attempt to situate his oeuvre more clearly with regard to such a tradition. As many
commentators have noted, even at its most hostile, Foucault's work is more indebted to Enlightenment thought than is explicitly acknowledged. In common with writers such as Max Weber, Theodor Adorno and Georges Bataille, the emphasis that Foucault places on the dark side of the Enlightenment legacy derives much of its force from an implicit reliance on certain other Enlightenment categories such as dignity, reciprocity and self-determination. The failure to acknowledge this indebtedness to or covert reliance on a tradition of thought that is explicitly denounced results in what Jürgen Habermas has called the 'cryptonormativism' of Foucault's earlier work. However, in his final work, notably, the important essay 'What is Enlightenment?', Foucault acknowledges more explicitly his ambivalent relation to Enlightenment thought. His aim is to reread the philosophy of the Enlightenment in such a way as to salvage a critical ethos that may be relevant to the contemporary era: 'the thread that may connect us with the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude – that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.'

It perhaps goes without saying that Foucault's interpretation of Enlightenment thought is far from straightforward. It cannot be dissociated, in part, from his derivation of a notion of the ethical subject from classical morality. It is also achieved by reading the philosophical moment of the Enlightenment through a stream of thought on aesthetic modernity. Foucault identifies Kant as the founder of two critical traditions between which modern philosophy has divided. On the one hand, there is the tradition of philosophy that is concerned with uncovering the transcendental foundations of true knowledge – an 'analytics of truth'. On the other hand, there is a stream of thought concerned with formulating an 'ontology of the present', that is to say, a critical analysis of the present moment, of the 'present field of possible experiences'. It is this second tradition, associated with the Kantian notion of the mature use of reason, that Foucault places at the heart of his ethics of the self. Foucault attempts to jettison its foundations in an ahistorical categorical imperative, associated with the first tradition, by reading Kant through the Baudelairean figure of the dandy.

The reading of philosophy through aesthetics in order to separate the critical moment of Enlightenment thought from its foundations in transcendental notions of rationality and human nature
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concurs with a more general critical vigilance that characterizes Foucault’s oeuvre, namely the attempt to eradicate a certain essentializing tendency associated with notions of depth or inferiority. In Foucault’s view, it is the idea that all experience has an essential core or hidden truth that enables normalizing and, in the final analysis, oppressive systems of thought and behaviour to function. To borrow a phrase from Maurice Blanchot, it is this ‘distaste’ for depth that underlies Foucault’s attacks on systems of thought which attempt to define and impose notions of the normal, the natural and the inevitable through reference to a fixed and essential human nature. Perhaps Foucault’s best known attack on the idea of depth is associated with the work on power and the body. A radically anti-essentialist view of the body is proposed in the argument that sexuality is not an innate or natural quality of the body but is, in fact, a historically specific effect of the operations of different regimes of power on the body. By emphasizing the socially determined and hence arbitrary nature of what are usually taken to be immutable and natural characteristics, Foucault aims to radicalize the realm of sexual behaviour by pushing it away from heterosexual norms and towards a more imaginative exploration of ‘bodies and pleasures’.

The idea of ethics of the self continues this anti-essentialist project through the emphasis on an aesthetic self-fashioning or the re-creation of daily life as a ‘work of art’. By reading Kant through a Baudelairean notion of stylization, ethics of the self is oriented not towards the recovery of an essential inner identity but towards an exploration of a myriad of potential identities and ways of existing in the world. It is based on a principle of self-critique that is experimental, endless and gives up any hope of attaining a ‘complete and definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits’.

While a certain notion of the aesthetic enables Foucault to retrieve a moment of critique from its metaphysical foundations, it is also a source of considerable theoretical difficulty in his work. By relying too heavily on an unexamined notion of the aesthetic – associated with a specific tradition of avant-garde and surrealist art and literature – Foucault reintroduces an essentialist moment into his thought. By neglecting to situate the notion of aesthetics within an analysis of historical and social relations – that is to say, by failing to perform the type of genealogical analysis that he so rigorously performs on other categories – Foucault finishes by assuming rather than demonstrating the inherently contestatory
nature of the idea of an aesthetics of existence. I will show that this
tendency is not confined to the final work but recurs throughout
Foucault’s thought. It can be seen in the tendency to romanticize
the contestatory force of madness and in the assumption of the
inherently revolutionary status of certain avant-garde art forms.
In his final work on the self, Foucault imputes a self-evident or
apodictic radicality to the idea of an aesthetics of existence in the
absence of a more sustained consideration of the social and polit-
ical implications of his theory of ethics.

This book is intended as a critical introduction to Foucault’s
work. The emphasis placed on some of the problematic aspects of
his thought is however not meant in a dismissive spirit. Indeed, it
is apparent that Foucault is often his own most trenchant critic,
ceaselessly overcoming the limitations of his thought by pushing
it in original and challenging new directions. However, I concur
with the judgement of Edward Said that Foucault was a brilliant
thinker whose work was simultaneously marked by pronounced
blindspots. Given the productive convergence there has been be-
tween his work and feminist and postcolonial theory, Foucault’s
apparent indifference to some of the issues raised by gender and
identity politics in general is striking. Foucault’s silence on such
issues may be interpreted, to some extent, as a tactical withdrawal
in the sense of a legitimate refusal to legislate for other autonom-
ous movements. Nevertheless, there are points in his work where
silence on these issues raises considerable difficulties and, indeed,
these lacunae have provoked widespread accusations of gender
blindness and ethnocentrism from cultural and feminist theorists.
It is some of these issues, particularly those arising from recent
feminist work on identity, that compose the implicit backdrop of
the critical consideration of Foucault’s work in this book. It is only
by engaging with these weak points to see how they may be
overcome that the continued relevance of Foucault’s work for a
range of academic research may be sustained, renewed and
pushed into new areas of debate.

The book is divided into four chapters that roughly correspond
with what are perceived as the main stages of Foucault’s work.
The first chapter considers Foucault’s early work on the cultural
construction of madness and the devastating critique of Enlighten-
ment rationality that arises from this critique. The varying critical
responses to this work will be examined and also Foucault’s own
retrospective critique that the impoverished conception of power
with which he worked at the time led to an overstatement of the case against rationality. The status of ‘madness itself’, a problem raised most forcefully in Jacques Derrida’s critique of *Madness and Civilization*, will also be examined. It will be shown that an unresolved tension permeates Foucault’s work, expressed in a vacillation between a conception of madness as a cultural construct or empty space on to which society projects its discontents, and a conception in which madness is ascribed some essential contestatory core with the potential to overthrow the edifice of Western reason. The subsequent work on transgression overcomes, to a certain extent, this theoretical ambivalence, but at the cost of replacing an awareness of the cultural and historical specificity of the experience of madness with a romantic and aestheticized view of the phenomenon.

The second chapter examines the work of Foucault’s ‘archaeological’ phase and its critique of the constitutive subject of thought. It is this period of Foucault’s work that has led him to be associated, along with thinkers such as Roland Barthes, with the proclamation of the ‘end of man’ and the ‘death of the subject’. Foucault argues that there does not exist any prediscursive subject that can be located as the origin of meaning, but rather that the notion of a unified subject is an illusion generated through structural rules that govern discursive formations. The technique of archaeology – the disclosure of these latent, deep-level structures that constitute the condition of possibility of all thought and speech – represents a powerful attack on the subjectivism of phenomenological and biographical approaches to intellectual history, but it will be shown that it is excessively antinomic in its formulation. An absolute separation is maintained between discursive formations and their social and cultural context. Issues raised by a consideration of the necessary social embeddedness of discourse – in particular the issue of how individuals come to occupy certain discursively constructed subject positions – problematizes the validity of Foucault’s complete rejection of any notion of the subject. Indeed, it will be shown that power relations and struggles are ineluctably provoked in a consideration of the social context of discourse; and they do in fact creep into Foucault’s archaeological analysis on a covert level, creating several theoretical aporia.

It is Foucault’s celebrated reformulation of his theory of power from an essentially negative to a positive conception that will be considered in the third chapter. While, on an abstract level, the
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notion of power as an enabling and constitutive force rather than as a repressive one is theoretically innovative, there is in fact an inability, on Foucault's part, to sustain this claim and a resultant tendency to view power simply as unmitigated domination. This slippage generates a series of contradictions in Foucault's thought. These are partially overcome with the concept of a governmentality elaborated in his final work. First, the idea of governmentality broadens the category of power by distinguishing more clearly between violence, domination and the type of power relations that characterize relations between individuals. Second, power is defined both as an objectivizing and a subjectivizing force. This is to say that power is no longer understood to operate in a unidirectional fashion through the imposition of various effects from above but is conceptualized as an agonistic struggle that takes place between free individuals. This strategy enables Foucault to explain systems of social regulation in less one-dimensional terms than as 'an endless play of dominations'.

In the final chapter, the notion of the self that is derived from the understanding of government as a subjectivizing force is considered. The shift that this implies in Foucault's relation to Enlightenment thought is analysed through the idea of an ethics of the self obtained from a rereading of Kant and Baudelaire. On the one hand, the idea of ethics of the self overcomes many of what have been regarded as the nihilistic implications of Foucault's previous critique of modernity. However, on the other hand, the centrality accorded in this notion of ethics to a rather problematic notion of aesthetics raises difficulties in respect of some of the social and political implications of the Foucauldian theory of ethics.
From Repression to Transgression

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Edward Said has said that at the heart of Michel Foucault’s work lies the variously formulated idea that always conveys the ‘sentiment of otherness’. This concern with the other manifests itself in a fascination with ‘deviation and deviants’ and with ‘everything excessive, all those things that stand over and above ideas, description, initiation, or precedent’. It is in Foucault’s early work on madness that this sentiment or concern for the other receives its most passionate expression. At face value, Foucault’s work in Mental Illness and Psychology and Madness and Civilization constitutes a study of the cultural constructions of madness in Western society from the Renaissance to the late nineteenth century. However, the implications of Foucault’s argument extend far beyond this narrow remit, resulting in an impassioned denunciation of the modern attitude towards madness which, in Foucault’s view, is profoundly dehumanizing. Foucault’s arguments are addressed here at modern psychiatric practices which construct a negative and, therefore, alienating view of madness as mental illness. However, on the most general level, Foucault’s argument constitutes an attack on Enlightenment thought and the notion of rationality with which it is underpinned. Foucault shows how Enlightenment thought is predicated on various strategies, expressed at both a philosophical and social level, that exclude and derogate forms of experience that cannot be readily assimilated into the notion of a pure, self-sustaining rationality.

Like much of Foucault’s subsequent work, Madness and Civilization has provoked controversy, particularly with regard to the