

Key Thinkers on Space and Place

21 Michel Foucault

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Born in Poitiers, France (1926), Michel Foucault started his education inauspiciously in local state schools where his achievements apparently left his father less than satisfied. However, spurred on by the promise that learning philosophy would reveal 'the secret of secrets' (Sheridan, 1980: 2), he did well at the Catholic school to which he was removed, passing his *baccalauréat* with credit. Securing a place at the highly prestigious *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), Paris, he took his *licence de philosophie* in 1948, but quickly became disillusioned that philosophy could not, after all, reveal 'the secret of secrets'. He turned instead to psychology, taking his *licence de psychologie* in 1952 and commencing research on psycho-pathology.

The 1950s–1960s were a heady period in French intellectual and political circles, with challenges to Marxism and structuralism from various strains of existentialism and phenomenology, and certain trajectories – to do with the struggles between 'determinism' and 'freedom' – were to influence Foucault's intellectual development. Seriously reconfiguring his approach to philosophy, psychology and,

indeed, science, while wandering between jobs on the fringes of academia, Foucault eventually completed a doctoral thesis in 1959 and returned to the corridors of the academy. Two years later his first major book, *Histoire de la Folie*, appeared. In the early-1960s he returned to the ENS as Professor of Systems of Thought, an awkward term that he selected, a position that he held for many years alongside visiting professorships to institutions elsewhere. In the process he was 'globalised' as his ideas began to reach many different audiences and destinations, bequeathing a 'Foucauldian' (or 'Foucaultian') approach to social inquiry that ultimately led him to be fêted as one of the leading intellectuals of the twentieth century. He died prematurely in 1984, but having already contributed enough for Sheridan (1980: 225–6) to conclude that: 'It is difficult to conceive of any thinker having in the last quarter of our century the influence that Nietzsche exerted over its first quarter. Yet Foucault's achievement so far makes him a more likely candidate than any other.'

Foucault's reputation reflected a series of powerful theoretical interventions that problematised the production of knowledge. When asked to write a preface to the second unabridged version of his *Histoire de la Folie* (Foucault, 1972a), Foucault remarked upon the mass of 'doubles' that were by then 'swarming' around the original text. By this, he meant the many

commentaries and criticisms which effectively eased the text from the grip of its author, providing it with a 'life' of its own in relation to which Foucault – who had once laboured so hard in its writing – had largely ceased to matter. Consistent with Foucault's broader intellectual position, wherein writers of all sorts were viewed as occupying predetermined 'speaking positions' rather than being conduits of peculiar inspiration, he accorded himself no special privilege in the production of his own writings. In other words, he did not suppose that he himself was the key with which to unlock the meanings of his work, and certainly did not reckon his writings to be reducible to him and his intellectual lineage. Elsewhere, in an introduction to the English edition of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he insisted 'do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same' (Foucault, 1972b: 17). He then added in a memorable line, 'leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order' (Foucault, 1972b: 17).

The suggestion is that he objected to intellectual 'bureaucrats and police' who wanted to nail down exactly what kind of academic he embodied. Therefore, he might be suspicious of a book such as this, wondering if it tries to pigeon-hole intellectuals in too straightforward a fashion, ossifying them as the necessary 'partners' of particular ideas from which they are not allowed to depart. Yet, if the *Histoire* preface downplays the author's role, this moment in the *Archaeology* introduction plays it up, since Foucault as the moving locus of creative thought – a maverick thinker wishing to evade the shackles of conventional reasoning – now appears to be lent an agency, indeed a significance, rendering his ideas more than just his past texts and their batteries of critical commentary. In this respect, Foucault

was apparently inviting us to take him seriously for himself, not for what the 'bureaucrats and police' might say. Putting things in this way might prompt a more favourable response from him to the notion of a book in which he is a 'key thinker'.

Emphasising these different stances strikes at the deeper interpretative tensions regarding discipline and liberty that go to the heart of much, if not all, of Foucault's endeavour. On the one hand, the author who is relatively unimportant in himself, whose words are determined by forces from outside, equates with the broader focus in much of Foucault's work on how human subjects are 'produced': on how their characters, beliefs and conducts are profoundly shaped by the social and institutional settings in which they find themselves, turning them into thoroughly 'disciplined' citizens with little capacity for independent action. In this guise, Foucault appears as a pessimistic theorist, one who can readily explain why the existing orders of society are commonly reproduced, complete with the in-built inequalities that such orders often entail. 'In Foucault country', writes Thrift (2000: 269), 'it always seems to be raining.' Yet, the author who appears to have the opportunity to shift positions equates with a second focus on the possibilities opening up to the human subject who is 'self-produced': to individuals who just occasionally can seize a fragment of liberty to imagine and accomplish things differently, to mobilise the techniques for presenting and achieving in a 'style' differing from that of contemporaries, to pursue 'the art of a life'.

Foucault's first four major texts are usually cast as his *archaeologies*, excavating the 'discourses' (or organised bodies of knowledge) that emerged within European history as the foundations for

both intellectual orthodoxy and practical endeavour. *Histoire de la Folie* (1961; translated as *Madness and Civilization*, 1965) and *Naissance de la Clinique* (1963; translated as *The Birth of the Clinic*, 1973) probed the discourses present within prevailing understandings of mental ill-health ('madness') and physical illness, revealing how these gave rise to the 'invention' of both the mental hospital ('asylum') and the modern hospital. *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966; translated as *The Order of Things*, 1970) interrogated the wider discursive formations (or *épistèmes*) present within European conceptions of language, economics and nature, laying bare subtle transitions in the scaffolding of what Europeans have taken as the root 'order' of the world (the supposed links between 'words' and 'things'). *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (1969; translated as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1972b) reflected still more broadly on the making of knowledge – the text was more a topical investigation of 'what is knowledge?' than a methodological treatise on 'how to produce knowledge?' – and in so doing examined the conjoint temporality and spatiality of statements, discourses and their ordering in the 'archive'. Such texts betrayed the influence of structuralism, notably in the sense that human subjects appear to be 'spoken' by discourses rather than vice versa, but by now – and in line with his realisation that there was no 'secret of secrets' – Foucault's quest was not for the deeper truths of discourse, nor for the underlying logic of how they mutate, but merely to 'map' their eruption and effects within different phases of European history.

Foucault's next four major texts are usually cast as his *genealogies*, wherein he decided that the real 'object' of his inquiries was less discourse or knowledge and more the mechanics of power, in which case his earlier archaeologies also became

available for re-reading as more critical offerings charting how order (conceptual and substantive) arises and is maintained in the human realm. *Surveiller et Punir* (1975; translated as *Discipline and Punish*, 1976) ostensibly traced the spread of prisons and reformatories throughout later-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, but also interrogated the transition from an older regime of violent 'sovereign power' (whereby monarchies terrorised their populaces into obedience through the bloody spectacle of the scaffold) to a modern calculus of 'disciplinary power' as less an absolute possession and more a subtle – but ultimately more effective – relational play of forces between the state and its subjects. Foucault argued that the occupants of identifiable spaces (whether closed institutions or national territories) were quietly disciplined as 'docile minds and bodies' compliant with the demands of capital accumulation and civic responsibility.

The next three books in the 'sexuality' series – translated as *The History of Sexuality Volume One: An Introduction* (1978), *The History of Sexuality Volume Two: The Uses of Pleasure* (1985) and *The History of Sexuality Volume Three: The Care of the Self* (1986a) – furnished 'chapters' within a projected larger survey of how Europe has 'produced' notions of sexuality, of sexual conduct both accepted and shunned, from ancient times through to the present. Foucault demonstrated that these notions have never been fixed, but rather have differed according to the status, class, gender, age and place of the peoples concerned, and have been converted into the objects of discourse (in everything from self-help manuals to confessional whisperings) wherein the possibilities for sexual expression have been curtailed on many occasions but enlarged on others. If *Discipline and Punish* emphasised the shaping of human

subjects from without, through anonymous forces inserting individuals into disciplinary apparatuses of one kind or another, *The History of Sexuality* mingled this focus with a sense of how individuals could be more knowingly, wittingly even, enlisted into their own self-fashioning not just as sexual beings but as agents consciously monitoring their overall conduct (and who appreciated the rules governing 'the (wider) conduct of conduct'). The tensions between discipline and liberty can hence be witnessed in the distinction between *Discipline and Punish* and parts of *The History of Sexuality*, a point to which we must return because there are also different geographies to be spied in the gaps between discipline and liberty.

SPATIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

It is increasingly argued that Foucault's contribution to social thought amounts to a thoroughly geographical provocation, in that he demands sustained alertness to questions of space, place, environment and landscape in a manner rarely encountered from someone who is not a professional geographer (Crampton and Elden, 2007). Indeed, Elden (2001) explicitly characterises Foucault as a practitioner of a 'spatial history', setting him in an intellectual heritage encompassing Heidegger, Nietzsche and Hölderlin, and concluding that:

Foucault's historical studies are spatial through and through, and that this is a fundamental legacy of his work to those interested in the question of space ... Understanding how space is fundamental to the use of power and to historical research into the exercise of power allows

us to recast Foucault's work not just as a history of the present but as a mapping of the present.

(Elden, 2001: 152)

It is important to stress that Foucault used historical research – converting it into what Dean (1994) calls 'critical and effective histories' – as a means to understand how 'we' have arrived at where 'we' are today (in short, how modernity has been shaped, complete with all of its tangled inequalities). By teasing out how space 'works' in history, tracing the spatial configurations that expose how power and knowledge operate in countless (mal) treatments of 'the unloved', he was seemingly able to throw into relief, to 'map', many of the more questionable contours of the present.

Most abstractly, Foucault advanced a fierce critique of what he referred to as the project of *total history*: 'one that seeks to reconstitute the overall form of a civilization, the principle – material or spiritual – of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of a period, the law that accounts for their cohesion – what is called metaphorically the "face" of a period' (Foucault, 1972b: 9). Such a project was anathema to Foucault, since its ambitions stand squarely in opposition to his own belief that 'nothing is fundamental: this is what is interesting in the analysis of society' (Foucault, 1972b: 16). As an alternative he advocated a *general history*, a 'bellicose history' (Lemert and Gillan, 1982: 39), which militates against the tidying up of the past to give neat patterns, steadfastly resisting the rush from the countless small details of lived struggle to the grander pronouncements of historians (particularly those of social scientists dabbling in the practice of history). Foucault thereby drew this distinction: 'a total description draws all phenomena around a single centre – a

principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world-view, an overall shape; a general history, on the other hand, would deploy the space of a dispersion' (Foucault, 1972b: 10). These comments about 'spaces of dispersion' appeared to envisage a spatialised ontology of the social world: a vision of a space or plane across which all of the events and phenomena relevant to the substantive inquiry are 'dispersed' (see Philo, 1992).

Foucault's own histories were spatial not solely in the philosophical sense of offering an a priori spatialised conceptualisation of worldly phenomena, nor because they offered an overview of changing conceptions of space (although a history of space in this guise does flicker through his famous 1967 lecture 'On other spaces': see Foucault, 1986b); instead, Elden (2001: 118) argues that Foucault's 'histories are not merely ones in which space is yet another area analysed, but have space as a central part of the approach itself', meaning that 'rather than merely writing histories of space, Foucault is writing spatial histories'. In one regard, this was simply because of the insistence on bringing details of past phenomena to the fore, as he acknowledged when borrowing from Nietzsche's notion of 'genealogy' as 'grey, meticulous and patiently documentary':

[It] requires patience and a knowledge of *details* [my emphasis], and it depends upon a vast accumulation of source material. Its 'cyclopean monuments' are constructed from 'discreet and apparently insignificant truths and according to a rigorous method'; they cannot be the product of 'large and well-meaning errors'.

(Foucault, 1986c: 76–7)

Hutcheon duly talks about Foucault's 'assault on all the centralising forces of unity and continuity', and on his requirement – using terms that should immediately arrest

the geographer – that 'the particular, the local and the specific' be pursued in place of 'the general, the universal and the eternal' (Hutcheon, 1988: 120). Whilst no straightforward empiricist, it remains the case that taking seriously particularity, specificity and locality was fundamental to Foucault's notion of 'spaces of dispersion', with his spatial histories furnishing systematic insights into the play of spatial relations in the historical record (as can now be further elaborated).

KEY ADVANCES AND CONTROVERSIES

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault suggested an opposition between 'the Same' and 'the Other' (Philo, 1986) that framed many of his major historical studies. Firstly, he identified his inquiries into discourse and knowledge as reconstructions of what it is that a given society takes as the Same, incorporating both the leading statements of 'experts' (academics, politicians, moralists) and the taken-for-granted assumptions figuring the everyday lives of the populace. Secondly, he effectively identified his social histories of 'the mad, the sad and the bad' as reconstructions of what it is that a given society regards as the Other, as the unacceptable mass of activities, people and places beyond the boundaries of what is deemed as 'normal' and which thereby necessitate some response of policing, removal or even eradication:

Ostensibly, [Foucault's] project is to describe the mechanisms of order and exclusion that have operated within European society since the sixteenth century, and

above all since the late-eighteenth century. In a motif that recalls Bataille's reflections on Hegel, Foucault sees a conflict in history against which it can define itself, just as every 'master' needs a 'slave'. When such an 'Other' is absent, it must be invented.

(Megill, 1985: 192)

For Foucault, madness, sickness and criminality, as well as sexual dissidence, were hence traced historically in their Otherness to European norms, laying out the shifting bases for their constitution as oft-feared moments of alterity.

In this respect *Madness and Civilisation* examined how 'Reason' (or the Same) has progressively identified, named, stigmatised and sought to exclude 'Unreason' (or the Other). It is telling to repeat the assessment that Serres offers of this text, since he 'interprets Foucault's categories of inclusion and exclusion in terms of spatial relationships, and ... views Foucault's concept of Unreason as a "geometry of negativities"' (Major-Poetzl, 1983: 120). Such a geometry embraces projections in which society imaginatively positions itself over and against those phenomena – especially peoples reckoned less-than-human in their madness, sickness, criminality and so on – that are supposed to transgress the limits of the sanctioned. Yet, beyond these projections, and paralleling the spatialised vocabulary deployed when charting what occurred at 'the level of the imaginary' it is also true that Foucault's spatial sensibility transferred to 'the level of the real' (Elden, 2001: 93). Thus, he was clearly interested in 'the physical divide of segregation and exclusion' that distances the Other from the Same, and for this reason he ended up 'conceiv[ing] of madness and reason, sickness and health in spatial terms, and then examin[ing] the groups that inhabit these liminal areas' (Elden, 2001: 94–5). He thereby paid repeated attention to

specific 'liminal areas', notably the bricks-and-mortar solutions of institutions such as asylums, hospitals and prisons (see also Philo, 2000; 2002; 2003) designed to confine, to 'reform' and, where appropriate, to 'cure' those displaying signs of such difference.

Cross-cutting these spatial histories are different conceptualisations of power, themselves the basis for a profound theorisation of space and power (or power/knowledge: Gordon, 1980). Most abstractly, Foucault (1976: 215) insisted that power be understood through its 'micro-physics' – 'its techniques, procedures, levels of applications, targets' – and hence in a thoroughly relational fashion that subsequent theorists have readily elaborated in terms of 'capillaries', 'transmissions' and 'relays' of power through specific spatial fields (Driver, 1985, 1993; Hannah, 1997). More empirically, Foucault (1976: 141–9) analysed 'the art of distributions' underlying a host of nineteenth-century disciplinary mechanisms, tracing the enactment of spatial innovations across all manner of institutions from Bentham's design for an ideal prison, the high-walled 'Panopticon', to the example of an unwallled reformatory at Mettray. There is a danger that many readings of *Discipline and Punish* reduce Foucault's claims to the figure of the Panopticon, failing to register the significance of his arguments about Mettray (Driver, 1990), but it remains the case that the Panopticon has now become a dramatic spatial provocation for social theorists of power. With its internal spatial arrangements allowing a constant (threat of) inspection, a surveillance that captures inmates in an overall field of visibility while prompting them to convert the external eye of the inspection tower into the internal eye of conscience (Bender, 1987), it is unsurprising that many have found here keys to unlock the

broader workings of disciplinary power throughout modernity.

Leading out of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault subsequently developed the notion of 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1979), encompassing both the government of populations, wherein states and religions seek to control the processes of life, birth and death, and the government of individuals, especially in their everyday sexual and reproductive conduct. As Dean (1994: 174) explains, governmentality 'defines a novel thought-space across the domains of ethics and politics, of what might be termed "practices of the self" and "practices of government", that weaves them together without a reduction of the one to the other.' As when describing his later genealogies, Foucault became increasingly concerned with questions surrounding 'the conduct of conduct', reconstructing past codes of conduct, notably sexual and political codes, whose effects have inevitably been ones of power (in the sense of laying down the conditions for the successful exercise of power across different domains of human endeavour). The emphasis hence alighted upon individuals who regard themselves to be free or at liberty, as opposed to the inmates of institutions who know themselves to be shut away, although the typical Foucauldian twist was to assert that liberty is itself ultimately a discursive effect, a product of a particular power/knowledge nexus, rather than some true social state. This being said, Foucault did appear to grant the human subject more wiggle-room than before, offering the fleeting possibility, as hinted earlier, of the individual being something other than a mere drone of a pre-existing order. While he said less about space in this later thinking on power, a spatial sensitivity continued to bubble under the surface in what he said about countless specific sites – from the confessional to the late-Roman

city-state (see Sharp et al., 2000: 16–19) – that become implicated in the persuading of people (or, rather, in people persuading themselves) to take seriously 'the relationship that one ought to have with one's status, one's functions, one's activities, and one's obligations' (Foucault, 1986a: 84).

For one who has been dead for over 20 years, Foucault continues to be remarkably productive. Countless interviews, magazine articles and examples of his utterances have found their way into print over the intervening years; the first major text, *Histoire de la Folie*, now has an unabridged re-translation (*The History of Madness*, 2007); and, most important of all, his lecture courses given at the Collège de France from 1971 to 1982 are currently in the process of being reconstructed – from lecture notes and tapes – and then published first in French and subsequently in English. The latter are remarkable documents, in part containing Foucault's 'trial runs' of materials later appearing in his major books, but also offering a substantial body of both substantive history and theoretical labour that is really quite distinct from what has previously appeared. They reveal more continuity between his archaeologies and genealogies than has commonly been appreciated, not least when recovering 'subjugated local discursivities' as a resource for contestations of power (which also starts to answer critics who have queried where exactly 'resistance' lies in Foucault's *oeuvre*). These lectures also greatly enlarge our understanding of what he meant by the constructs of 'biopower' and 'biopolitics' as forms of power playing out around questions of who should 'live and die', where and when, under what regimes of supposedly 'expert' truth-telling and through what precise mechanisms of intervention in matters of national, racial and class 'hygiene'. At the same time, the sharp

historico-conceptual lines drawn in the prior published work between 'sovereign' and 'disciplinary power' have become blurred, and instead we learn about multiple series of powers – now including species of 'pastoral' and 'biopower' – articulating, accommodating and being a(n)ta)gonistic

in varying forms and spaces, from ancient Greece and Rome through to more recent (neo)liberal states. In short, there is arguably now a 'new' Foucault for academics to contemplate and a host of exciting new Foucauldian geographies to discern.

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