

Commentaire/Commentary

Michel Foucault: A Man of a Thousand Paths, a Thousand Faces, and a Thousand Emerging Relevancies – Continuing His Analyses in Pursuit of Our Present for the Sake of Our Future

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I'm perfectly aware of having continuously made shifts both in the things that have interested me and in what I have already thought... the books I write constitute an experience for me... An experience is something you come out of changed. If I had to write a book to communicate what I have already thought, I'd never have the courage to begin it. I write precisely because I don't know yet what to think... in so doing, the book transforms me, changes what I think...When I write, I do it above all to challenge myself and not to think the same thing as before... this lesson has always allowed me to conceive them as direct experiences to tear me from myself, to prevent me from always being the same (n/p).[1]

Introduction

Michel Foucault, relentless erudite scholar; militant intellectual,[2,3] borne of the tradition extending from Hegel to the Frankfurt School by way of Nietzsche and Max Weber[4] was described at the time of his death by those closest to him as a man possessing "very special difficulties".[2 p.xi] He was a complex, many-sided character, whose personality was almost impossible to discover beneath his many masks and successive disguises.[2] However, despite the seeming impossibility of discovery and the special difficulties he arguably possessed, Michel Foucault was a man with a dazzling mind, a thousand paths, a thousand faces, and a thousand relevancies. By all accounts Michel Foucault was iconic, one of the most influential of contemporary thinkers. Indeed, Foucault's intelligence was said to have known no bounds. His corpus, ceaseless and brilliant in its pursuit of the history of systems of thought, is said to be "one of the most astonishing intellectual enterprises of all time...";[5 n/p] one that has permanently altered understandings of the institutions constituting society, and

one possessing profound implications for understanding the social norms that control bodies and minds. [5] Foucault's was "an intelligence with innumerable focuses with movable mirrors, where nascent judgment was instantly doubled by its opposite, and yet without being destroyed or pulling back".[2 p329] All of this, according to one biographer, and contrary to numerous less respectful characterizations of Foucault as "anarchist, leftist, ostentatious or disguised Marxist, nihilist, explicit or secret anti-Marxist, technocrat in the service of Gaullism, new liberal"[6 p383-4), "with profound kindness and goodness"[6 p329] was Michel Foucault[2], preeminent philosopher, champion of the anti-psychiatry movement, advocate for prison reform, and hero of gay liberation.[7]

For all that Foucault's enterprise contributed to society and our understandings of who we are today, he steadfastly rejected "the canonical roles of revolutionary guru, great-and-good writer and 'master-thinker'".[5 p.viii-ix] Indeed, he persistently avoided such honoring and adamantly refused to align himself, or to be aligned, with any of the major traditions of western social thought (phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, hermeneutics).[3,6,8-10] This distancing arose despite his early rooting in the philosophical influences of his day, which included phenomenology, Hegelianism, and Marxism. Indeed, it was the influences of Nietzsche[11] that stimulated Foucault's outright rejection of what he called the 'mindless phenomenologies of understanding' an approach which gave "absolute priority to the observing subject...which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity – which in short leads to a transcendental consciousness".[9 p.xiv]

It was not necessarily that these approaches were not worthy. Foucault's intention was not to deny the validity of biographies. Rather, his wonderings were whether such descriptions were enough? Whether they do justice to the immensity of discourse? In his own words, he wondered,

whether there do not exist, outside their customary boundaries, systems of regularities that have a decisive role... I should like to know whether the subjects responsible for the scientific discourse are not determined in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them... I tried to explore scientific discourse not from the point of view of the individuals who are speaking, nor from the point of view of the formal structures of what they are saying, but from the point of view of the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse...[9 p.xxi-xiv]

For Foucault[9,12] it was the historical analysis of scientific discourses as those gave history to the ways in which human

beings were made subjects[13] that was always the central focus of his corpus.

The questions that concerned Foucault related to the conditions under which one speaks irrespective of topic, be it illness, economics, mathematics, cosmology, science, or language, the conditions under which human beings became subjects. "What I wished to do was to present side by side, a definite number of elements: the knowledge of living beings, the knowledge of the laws of language, and the knowledge of economic facts, and to relate them to the philosophical discourse that was contemporary with them...".[9 p. x] In other words, what Foucault wished to do throughout his intellectual enterprise was to reveal the '*positive unconscious of knowledge*'; that level of knowledge that eludes consciousness and yet is part of discourse.[9] Discourse that operates beneath the consciousness of individual subjects, all the while being productive in its endeavour, productive in the sense of influencing how individuals think and talk about things. Contrary to what those Foucault castigated for obfuscating his work through the use of such polemical labels as 'structuralist' and 'post-Marxist'[5] thought, and contrary to what those who depicted him a leftist, nihilist anarchist would have us believe, Foucault was not concerned with attempting to disrupt the validity and naturalness of science.[9] What he was concerned with, however, was the problem of the subject. He was concerned with disrupting the theory of the knowing subject by revealing the rules of the scientific discourse that gave history to the subjectivation of human beings. In other words, Foucault was concerned with exposing the rules that are not present to the consciousness of the subject. He was concerned with revealing the rules that form and transform thought. Put another way, Foucault was concerned with unmasking the rules that are implanted into the minds of subjects through discourse as a means of revealing how thought, speech, actions and behaviours are rendered helpless by its power. These are the *mechanisms* of power Foucault tenaciously strove to uncover. "I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.[5 p39] For Foucault, the observing subject "should, in the last resort, be subject, not to a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice",[9 p.xiv] that is hinged on a historically and culturally specific set of rules, systems and procedures that organize and produce different forms of knowledge.

Foucault harshly chastised those who persisted in labeling him. "I have been unable to get it into their tiny minds"[9 p.xiv]

he states, in reference to “certain half-witted ‘commentators’, that I have used none of the methods, concepts, or key terms that characterize structural analyses”. [9 p.xiv] Indeed, Foucault [9] appealed to a more serious public to free him from such honorable connections to which he felt entirely undeserving. He insisted that he, of all people, could not claim that his discourse was independent of the conditions and rules producing the subjects we are, of which he too was subjectivated, and of which he too was largely unaware. His seemingly harsh criticism of these less serious commentators was an expression of a mounting exasperation with his critics, who from his perspective avoided the trouble of analyzing his work and the many paths it followed, instead choosing to give it “impressive-sounding, but inaccurate” labels. [9 p.xiv]

A man of a thousand paths

In response to the critique of the evolving nature of Foucault’s thought, Foucault [10] did not feel the necessity to know exactly what he was. He consistently reserved the right to (re)think and (re)work his analysis. [14] “I should like this work to be read as an open site. Many questions are laid out on it that have not yet found answers; and many of the gaps refer either to earlier works or to others that have not yet been completed, or even begun”. [9 p.xii] Not unlike most individuals’ interests in life and work, Foucault’s too was to become someone else, someone else he was not at the beginning of his project. [10] “Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same”. [8 p.xiv] In one of his many self-critiques, Foucault described his work as simply “trails to be followed”. [15 p78] For Foucault, it wasn’t a matter of where his work led, “indeed, it was important that they did not have a predetermined starting point or destination”. [15 p78] He thought of his work as “merely lines laid down” [15 p78] for those who read his work, and indeed for himself as well, to pursue, divert, extend, or re-design as the particular need might warrant. “They are, after all, and in the final analysis, just fragments, and it is up to you or me to see what we can make of them”. [15 p79] As Gutting asks in his introduction to Foucault, why do we insist on attempts to read the life into the work of Foucault when the life of Foucault can be read out of his work? [7] Indeed, Foucault’s investigations of the prison, schools, barracks, hospitals, families and all organized forms of social life are the segments that guide the path to understanding Foucault and his relentless pursuit of the present. [5]

As difficult as Foucault [3,8,16,17] was to pin down he was by all accounts a massively influential, contemporary icon. [3,5,10,11,14,18,19-24] Few thinkers have registered

the kind of influence across such a diverse range of disciplines as Michel Foucault. [14] The application of his multifarious approach and distinctive thoughts on discourse, power and the subject abound in the humanities and the social sciences over the past decade, appearing more regularly in texts about health, healthcare, and nursing, [25–32] thereby opening up the space for understanding aspects of health, care delivery, and the organization of nursing work in a way not routinely thought about or represented in nursing. Foucault was the “quintessential embodiment of hyper-intelligence and frustratingly difficult ‘French thought’”. [3 p1] His quarter century intellectual enterprise (*oeuvre*), despite its range of objections and criticisms, its good and its bad critiques, and the still only partial character of its reception, [14] can not only be read as a “revolt against the powers of ‘normalization’”, [2 p.x] but also as a dynamic, coherent and comprehensive history of our present. [2,9,33-6]

Questions of our present

Foucault’s many and divergent writings consistently demonstrated concern with understanding the development and organization of the institutional practices that shaped human subjectivities. [14] Something he accomplished by asking questions of our present and of the contemporary field of possible experiences. [4] In doing so Foucault revealed the secrets of the institutions’ disciplinary and normalizing strategies and tactics. [14] Tactics he captures in his commentary on how risky and difficult a position it is to stand outside of discourse “pondering its particular, fearsome, and even devilish features”. [37 p7] In Foucault’s view, it is an easier position to “be borne along, within it, and by it, a happy wreck”, [37 p8] to which he argues the institution replies:

But you have nothing to fear from launching out; we’re here to show you discourse is within the established order of things, that we’ve waited a long time for its arrival, that a place has been set aside for it – a place which both honours and disarms it; and if it should happen to have a certain power, then it is we, and we alone, who give it that power. [37 p38]

As Gilles Deleuze commented, Foucault’s emphasis upon historicity was not necessarily all about a return to antiquity; rather it was about “us today”. [2 p331] Indeed, “Foucault begins where all truly original minds begin, in the present”. [24 p195] Gordon [5] concurs, commenting on the abiding concern, constant throughout Foucault’s work, with questioning and understanding the fluctuating possibilities, which in Foucault’s view were the necessary and contingent historical limits of intellectual discourse itself. For Foucault

the major problematic and the fundamental theme of his historical studies was that of *'pouvoir-savoir'* (power and knowledge), which for Foucault was "ineluctably a fundamental question concerning our present".[5 p.viii] Foucault worked from a position of thoughtful critical reflection "which has the form of an ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the present".[4 p96] In his own words, Foucault's aim was always "to explore not only these discourses but also the will that sustains them and the strategic intention that supports them".[36 p8]

In short, I would like...to search for instances of discursive production (which also administer silences, to be sure), of the production of power (which sometimes have the function of prohibiting), of the propagation of knowledge (which often cause mistaken beliefs or systematic misconceptions to circulate); I would like to write the history of these instances and their transformations.[36 p12]

The ongoing relevance of Foucault

It is clear that Foucault's interests always lay in examining and understanding the fabrication of the modern subject, that is, of who we are today. He was not concerned with what we should or ought to be.[38] Rather, Foucault believed that the modern subject, who will go on existing, is a fabrication made available largely through the human sciences of medicine, biology, economics, psychology, sociology, and philosophy; disciplines that will remain relevant only until they are renewed or replaced by other practices that will impose new rules that will once again form and transform the way human subjects think, speak and act.[39]

As we move forward as modern human subjects, we will always have to talk about the world in which our navigating occurs,[39] and as such Foucault's corpus will always remain relevant and pertinent. As May argues, "it will turn out, it is often the stamp of this world that, in important ways, makes me who I am, makes us who we are".[39 p11] Therefore, as our present evolves so too will our history, and it is the contingencies that shape who we become that will provide the fodder for the exploration of those unrelentingly relevant questions of who we are today. As such Foucault will not be forgotten, nor will his corpus become irrelevant or outdated. As long as there remain projects of normalization, irrespective of discipline or context, Foucault's insights into who we are in the present will remain pertinent. As May asserts, as long as humans continue the pursuit of an understanding of "what what we do as subjects does",[39 p19] that is, as long as humans strive to understand the discursive effects of their human practices on how subjectivities, including our own, are formed and transformed, controlled and surveyed,

manipulated and organized in the particular ways they are, so too will Foucault remain relevant. Foucault advanced the argument this way: "People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does".[12 p187] To understand this notion of 'what what people do does', among the multiple divergent paths Foucault followed to illustrate his dogged pursuit of 'the problem of the subject' he also retraced the history of 'the art of government'. He retraced, "the thousand and one different modalities and possible ways that exist for guiding men, directing their conduct, constraining their actions and reactions...".[40 p1,2]

Therefore, for all the special difficulties, the complexity of his thought, the many-sidedness of his character, and the implied impossibility of discovering who Foucault[2] was beneath his many masks and successive disguises, for those who persist in the pursuit of understanding who we are today, who persist in understanding our present, who persist in the pursuit of the way history and philosophy intersect and interact with present actuality, and who persist in the pursuit of revealing the practices that ensnare, regulate, surround, organize, strangle, manipulate, constrain, and penetrate bodies and minds, Foucault's corpus is not only elucidative for those seriously concerned with who we are today, his work in its limitlessness will remain permanently relevant.

Pursuing the present for the sake of the future

Indeed, as a society, we are indebted to Foucault's innovative methodological manoeuvre of historicizing and politicizing the knowledge of the human sciences. His work will go on offering the means to influence the future and the change required in the political, economic and institutional regimes that produce 'truth'.[41] For the sake of our future Foucault's *'oeuvre'* opens up the space needed for considering the inherited nature of our everyday, the entities of our experiences of ourselves; our individuality and subjectivities.[11] Importantly, Foucault's unappeasable pursuit of the anonymous, yet positive basis of knowledge, as it is employed in language, "grammar and philology, in natural history and biology, in the study of wealth and political economy"[9 p.xxi] offers the means to reflect deeply, to understand, and to take responsibility for the discourses that produce human practice. As Foucault contends, such an analysis is an inquiry that aims to discover on what basis knowledge becomes possible.[9] As Julianne Cheek asserts, "if we only ever try to improve what is, it may well be the case that we never look beyond the seemingly obvious to consider what might be".[42 p391] Thus, if we leave unexamined the

beliefs / assumptions that comprise our thought our capacity to resist their influence will be undermined.[43]

Indeed, in the service of society, those who are responsible to be the 'conscience of society',[20] philosophers and intellectuals, have a responsibility to continue Foucault's pursuit of the present, to perhaps fill the gaps and answer the questions left unanswered by his too early death. To make the necessary links between the political and ethical axes of his thought,[44] for the purpose of troubling the workings of the institutions imparting power/knowledge and opening up the possibility that things could be different in the future. As Cooper[20] contends, while there may be special problems for historians of the present associated with they themselves being part of the power systems that also influences them, he insists on their duty to unblock what the subtle systems of power-knowledge have invalidated by rendering too familiar, and calls upon contemporary thinkers to tell the truth, to be the '*conscience of power*' and therefore '*the conscience of society*'. Changing something in the minds of the collective, and critically reflecting upon one's own knowledge claims will surely assist in a more complete recognition and understanding of our own conformity and our own complicity,[41] and may inspire the possibility of being, doing and thinking differently.

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