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Lisa Downing

Excerpt

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## Chapter 1

# Life, texts, contexts

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I don't find it necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.

Michel Foucault

Didier Eribon opens his biography of Foucault with the following assertion: 'Writing a biography of Michel Foucault may seem paradoxical. Did he not on numerous occasions, challenge the notion of the author, thereby dismissing the very possibility of biographical study?'<sup>1</sup> Having presented this problem, Eribon proceeds with the caveat: 'even so, Foucault could not isolate himself from the society in which he lived. He, like everyone else, was forced to fulfil the "functions he described".'<sup>2</sup> Throughout this book, and particularly in this opening chapter on Foucault's intellectual and social contexts, I will be sensitive to the particular tension raised by the prospect of writing about the life and influences of Michel Foucault, a thinker who insisted many times that the self should be an ongoing process of creation rather than a fixed identity or personality. As he famously remarked: 'Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same' (*AK*, p. 19). Instead of trying to make him remain the same, then, instead of uniting the various Foucauldian voices, I shall provide an introduction to his texts, and to the contexts from which they arise, that is broadly sympathetic to his critique of biographical criticism.

In this chapter, I will discuss the complex interplay of ideas, political events and currents of thought that influenced the period in which he was writing and shaped the kinds of texts and ideas that bear the author name 'Foucault'.<sup>3</sup> Here and in later chapters I will also address the various perceptions of Michel Foucault as a public, political figure, and the difficulty of reconciling Foucault's

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actions with some of his ideas. Most prominent among these is the disjuncture – which may also be read as a productive tension – between his involvement in direct prisoners’ activism in the 1970s and the genealogical theorisation of the prison system in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), which does not straightforwardly seek a reformatory or liberationist agenda with regard to conditions in prisons, but instead shows that techniques developed in a carceral context extend everywhere into modern life. The book thus constitutes a critique of a society that has internalised an idea of carceral power, but not a call to arms against the workings of a particular institution.

Foucault’s oft-commented-on suspicion of the notion that the self is a transparent entity that can be accurately or usefully written about, or wholly divulged to – or by – the other, is in sympathy with the ideas of other prominent thinkers of his epoch and place. These include Louis Althusser, who attempted to remove any traces of humanism from Marxist theory, and Jacques Lacan, whose post-structuralist psychoanalysis restored the most anarchic aspects of the Freudian text in a direct refusal of the primacy of the ego so central to American psychology at the time. Foucault’s problematisation of the social self is a largely political project, at least in later works. In *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will to Knowledge*, it is made clear that the modern self is constituted through, and by means of, the operations of various kinds of disciplinary mechanisms acting on the body. Accepting the notion of an independent or transparent self would be a dangerous undertaking, even if it were possible, as it would ignore the operations of these systems of knowledge, and our internalisation of them. Ultimately, Foucault’s work reveals how we are both *subject to* and *the subjects of* the workings of power relations. This is an idea he expresses via the concept of *assujettissement*, a term carrying different valencies of meaning at different moments in the corpus of works, valencies often flattened out by the translation process.

The Foucauldian notions of ‘self’ and ‘subject’, then, are paradoxical ones. They describe at once, and intriguingly, a historical and political agent (affecting history by accessing the impersonal and productive workings of power and resistance) and the *effect* of the operations of historical processes. Foucault is initially dubious of the ‘cult of the self’, since that self would simply be a set of internalised social norms and expectations, and yet he becomes fascinated in his final works with our individual potential to exploit the constructed nature of the self as a project. In his theoretical exploratory works on the ‘care of the self’ and the ethics and aesthetics of pleasure (volumes two and three of *The History of Sexuality*), and in interviews given in the USA shortly before his death, he plays with the question of how one might – in Nietzsche’s words – “give style” to one’s character – a great and rare art.<sup>4</sup> It is this concern with

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the self – an individual self understood at times as the effects of discourse and yet at others as the agent of resistance and transgression; a radical ethical and aesthetic subject effecting self-stylisation – that is one of the most intriguing features of Foucault's later texts. The playfulness of Foucault's project – the way in which he tends to parody the discourses he is critiquing and to take oppositional positions at certain moments for strategic reasons, even if he later makes productive use of the very propositions he was earlier critiquing; and the chameleon-like nature of his ideas about the agency of the self discussed above – all make Foucault a challenging, difficult, but always entertaining writer.

## Intellectual contexts

It is against the backdrop of a very particular intellectual climate that Michel Foucault's work must initially be understood. In post-Second-World-War France, existentialist phenomenology and Marxist thought provided the dominant and – to some extent – conflicting forces in intellectual life. The former, championed by the vibrant public intellectuals Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, attributed political agency and free will to individual consciousness, arguing that authentic freedom was a genuine possibility and that its assumption was a matter of responsibility for each citizen. In this regard, existentialism diverged from Marxism, as the latter dismissed the idea of individual free will as nothing more than a comforting bourgeois fiction, and held that only through collective struggle could the oppressed classes liberate themselves from the dominant classes. On some questions, however, existentialist phenomenology and Marxism converged. Sartre had a certain amount of respect for the French Communist Party owing to its strong Resistance activities during the occupation of France, though he never became a member of the Party himself, and he also admitted to the intellectual importance of Marxist thought. Sartre's commitment to political action – the French post-war ideal of *engagement* – made the intellectual into a prominent political figure rather than a reclusive scholar. Foucault was intellectually weaned on these debates and divisions, like all those of his generation, and the work he would go on to develop bears the traces of their influence, even if it is often expressed in the form of critique or resistance. Refusing to accept entirely any given or established position is very much a characteristic of Foucauldian rhetoric, resulting sometimes in apparent internal contradictions.

Foucault's relationship to existentialism is perhaps simpler to summarise than his position with regard to Marxist thought. Despite an early interest in the phenomenological works of Heidegger and Husserl, and his strategic use

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of the ideas of ‘Daseinanalysis’ (more on this later), the bulk of Foucault’s work forms part of an explicit and politicised reaction against the ‘philosophy of consciousness’, associated primarily with Sartre, who throughout the 1950s and 1960s was the major intellectual figure in France. The French cultivation of philosophy as part of everyday life – as evidenced by its ubiquitous place on school and university curricula – means that an intellectual can occupy a very public national role in France, in a way that is more or less unheard of in the UK or USA. Sartre’s embodiment of this role approximated something close to celebrity, a concept that Foucault despised. Like Sartre, however, Foucault himself would become something of a public intellectual, engaging openly with political struggles (May 1968, prisoners’ rights) and combining commentary with direct activism. However, Foucault styled himself as a very different kind of intellectual to Sartre. He may have had Sartre’s public persona partially in mind when he wrote of the ‘teachers’ who become ‘public men with the same obligations’ (*TS*, p. 9). Foucault thought that the intellectual should be not a ‘universal’ but a ‘specific’ intellectual. By ‘universal intellectual’, Foucault meant an academic posing as a ‘master of truth and justice’ and conveying general profundities to the masses (*EW iii*, p. 129). By contrast, the ‘specific intellectual’ would be a professional with direct access to, and specialist understanding of, a given scientific discipline or institution, and would be politically sensitised to the ways in which its local configurations of power present privileged forms of knowledge as if they are truths.<sup>5</sup> There is a ‘grass roots’ element to Foucault’s thinking, then, which suggests his affinities with left-wing ideals and anti-bourgeois values. Uncovering and explaining the operation of the hidden workings of power is the principal task of the Foucauldian intellectual, even though Foucault himself did not identify wholly with any one ‘specific’ field, but rather commented on several, from plural perspectives.

To understand Foucault’s relationship to Marxism, the reader must firstly be aware that intellectual Marxism and communist politics diverged considerably in the France of the 1950s and 1960s. Where intellectual Marxism had a reputation for being radical and progressive because it refused the ‘philosophies of consciousness’ that it dismissed as bourgeois, the French Communist Party (PCF) appeared to many to be excessively institutional and *doctrinaire*. Foucault was a member of the PCF only briefly.<sup>6</sup> Its failure to criticise the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, as well as its anti-Semitic and homophobic politics, were particularly rebarbative to Foucault. Homophobia was a strong characteristic of mainstream interwar and post-war French culture, one which was particularly strongly pursued by the Vichy regime. In 1942, Amendment 334 was added to the Penal Code which raised the age of consent to twenty-one and made sex with a minor an offence punishable by a prison term of between six months

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and three years. ‘Minors’ indulging in consensual sex could also be prosecuted for assault. While the PCF would not have supported Vichy law, neither did it repudiate homophobia, a fact which must have seemed particularly harsh to a radical young homosexual entering the Communist Party. As Foucault has put it: ‘I was never really integrated into the Communist Party because I was homosexual, and it was an institution that reinforced all the values of the most traditional bourgeois life.’<sup>7</sup> It is important, however, to dissociate Foucault’s strong opposition to party dogma (and, indeed, to dogmatic politics in general – Foucault shied away from any long-term political allegiance, professing himself suspicious of the way in which political parties tend to organise themselves around charismatic leaders) from his continued intellectual interest in Marxist thought. Foucault would engage with Marx’s analyses of power relations throughout the whole of his body of work, but his methodology diverged from that of Marx in a number of ways. Where Marx proposes a global philosophy, Foucault is concerned with specificity. Where Marx puts forward a system, Foucault seeks to demystify the working of systematisation. And – most significantly – where Marx locates power in the oppression of one group, the proletariat, who, via the raising of class consciousness, should be encouraged to throw off their shackles and aim for revolution, Foucault develops a model of power relations, a network or force field of influences which is never the unique preserve of the dominator over the dominated. One can argue that, as Foucault’s work developed, it dissociated itself progressively from the Marxist agenda. It is only in his first book, *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (1954), that Foucault sets out an explicitly Marxist approach to his subject matter (here the institutionalisation of mental illness), an agenda which he later erased from subsequent editions of the work (starting with the first reprint in 1962). However, in *Discipline and Punish*, as late as 1975, the description of the coming into being of the *homo docilis* can be plausibly read as an alternative to Marx’s description of the creation of a class of workers, and indeed Foucault refers directly in that text to the workings of ‘state apparatuses’, a term coined by his teacher and friend at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the Marxist thinker Althusser. However, Foucault’s position in *Discipline and Punish* ultimately differs from a Marxist analysis of class oppression, owing to the specific nature of the Foucauldian concept of *homo docilis* or disciplined body, which is found everywhere in society, not just in the toiling classes but in the classroom, the army and the prison, since the workings of what Foucault would call disciplinary power saturate the whole of society. I shall explore these ideas in more detail in Chapter 5.

Foucault’s revised uses and interpretations of Marxist theory, and his disagreements with it, were in no small part indebted to his intellectual affiliations

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with Althusser, who was the leading intellectual of the French Communist Party. Both Althusser's and Foucault's works downplay the tendency to assert the primacy of human intentionality – in analysing the workings of the class system in Althusser's case, and in remapping the history of institutions in Foucault's. Althusser's reformulation of Marxist theory, which denudes it of its links with Stalinism as well as of any traces of humanism and subjectivity, bears certain similarities to Foucault's development of a theory of discourse as constitutive, rather than revelatory, of subjectivity.

The influence of other mentors, teachers and friends on the formation of Foucault's methodological and theoretical leanings must also be explored. Two of the most important of these are Georges Canguilhem and Georges Dumézil. Canguilhem's contribution to the philosophy of science, drawing on the works of Gaston Bachelard, was undoubtedly influential in shaping Foucault's early interest in, and approach to, the history of mental illness. Canguilhem denies the priority of the acting subject, focusing instead on the formation of knowledge and the concept. Foucault's suspicion of transparent models of subjectivity and his privileging of discontinuity over linear progress suggest the importance of Bachelard, via Canguilhem, to his method. Indeed, in explicitly aligning himself with the 'philosophy of concept' as opposed to the popular philosophies of consciousness or experience, Foucault was acknowledging this debt.

Georges Dumézil elaborated a reading method based on the awareness of a system of 'functional correlations between discursive formations', similar to the archaeological exploration of forms of knowledge essayed in Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). Dumézil's method of discourse analysis was explicitly referenced in Foucault's inaugural address at the Collège de France in 1970 (published as *L'Ordre du discours* ['The Order of Discourse'], 1971) as a foundational influence on his work: 'it is he who taught me to analyse the internal economy of a discourse in a fashion completely different from the methods of traditional exegesis'.<sup>8</sup> Although the work of Dumézil is almost unknown in the Anglo-American world, he is significant as the proponent of a French structuralism of myth, long before the heyday of high structuralism.

Foucault's direction as a thinker, then, was driven by a desire to seek intellectual alternatives to – or, at least, critical variations on – the dominant poles of existentialism and Marxism and their philosophical debt to Hegelian dialectical historical thinking. The work of various contemporary thinkers, in a range of fields, provided models for thinking outside of the box. Some of these influences seem unlikely ones for Foucault, seen in the light of his corpus as a whole, but they provided specific insights for a given problem or project. When preparing his early work on mental illness, for example, Foucault was drawn to the therapeutic discourse of Daseinanalysis developed by Ludwig Binswanger and

Roland Kuhn. This therapy draws on Heideggerian phenomenological theories of experience, or ‘being in the world’, to explore psychological phenomena. (So, that which occurs for a Freudian psychoanalyst at the level of phantasy or dream occurs for the Daseinanalyst at the level of experience.) Works by Foucault on mental illness, sexual psychopathology and the ‘dangerous individual’ are also clearly influenced by Daseinanalysis’ rejection of the therapeutic tendency to reduce individual suffering to the generic label or category. This is particularly clear in Foucault’s critique of the psychiatric system’s classification of the mentally ill, and sexology’s construction of the modern sexual subject via a taxonomy of the perversions. However, Foucault’s attitude to the notion of experience, central to a Heideggerian phenomenological perspective, mutates considerably at different points in his corpus. While declaring himself an exponent of Canguilhem’s ‘philosophy of the concept’ rather than the ‘philosophy of experience’ prized by phenomenology, Foucault’s critical interest in experience never the less persisted. His controversial *History of Madness* (1961) sought to inscribe a history of the experience of the mad, whose voice had been silenced by the authorised discourse of psychiatry and resurfaced only in fragments of writing. And in an essay on Canguilhem, Foucault tried to elaborate an account of experience as biological, as an alternative to the phenomenological notion of ‘lived experience’.<sup>9</sup> Given Foucault’s suspicion of the claims of biology elsewhere, we are reminded again of his tendency to use strategically whichever discourses and methodologies will allow him at any point to counter, or better *relativise*, a given target, even though those very discourses and methodologies may, at other times, themselves become the targets of demystifying work. At the beginning of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault draws attention to a problem regarding his own conceptualisation of experience in his earlier work, *The History of Madness*, which ‘accorded far too great a place, and a very enigmatic one too, to “experience”, thus showing to what extent one was still close to admitting an anonymous and general subject of history’ (*AK*, p. 18).<sup>10</sup> The anti-humanist archaeological project provided one way of denuding history of a general subject of experience. Later, Foucault would return more critically to a treatment of the question of experience in *The Will to Knowledge* and *The Use of Pleasure* (1984), where he argues that the subject’s perception of him or herself in the light of an internalised discourse of ‘truth’ about his or her desire is fundamental to the functioning of modern sexual subjectivity.

## Archaeology and structuralism

We are beginning to see how difficult it is to ascribe to Foucault’s intellectual perspectives and methodologies any defining label (partly because it is impossible

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to write ‘perspective’ and ‘methodology’ in the singular when referring to Foucault). One label that has been consistently attributed to him, and that he just as consistently rejected, is ‘structuralist’. In an interview held in 1983, published as ‘Structuralism and Post-Structuralism’, Foucault claims categorically, ‘I have never been a Freudian, I have never been a Marxist and I have never been a structuralist’ (*EW ii*, p. 437). And in the preface to the English translation of *The Order of Things*, Foucault writes: ‘In France, certain half-witted “commentators” persist in labelling me a “structuralist”. I have been unable to get it into their tiny minds that I have used none of the methods, concepts or key terms that characterise structural analysis’ (*OT*, p. xv). Despite his objections and negations, Foucault’s affinities with this latter term deserve particular attention, especially in the light of his acknowledged debt to the proto-structuralist Dumézil and his proximity to the group of French intellectuals at the centre of structuralist activity. (The differing applications of the ‘structuralist’ label were such that it is not accurate to term structuralism a ‘movement’ as such.) Foucault served alongside Roland Barthes, for example, from 1963, as a member of the editorial board of the journal *Critique*, and counted Julia Kristeva and Philippe Sollers, key members of the *Tel Quel* group associated with high structuralism, among his group of interlocutors and collaborators. Structuralism was the philosophical and literary method that rose to prominence in France in the 1960s and 1970s. It wished to ring the definitive death knell of the humanist underpinnings of phenomenology and existentialism, in favour of the rigorous study of systems and signs. These could be linguistic (Saussure’s seminal assertion that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, and that language should be studied synchronically rather than diachronically); anthropological (Lévi-Strauss’s analyses of systems of kinship); or literary (Roman Jakobson’s reading of poetry as a set of formal rules, Barthes’s structural analysis of narrative).

The refusal of structuralist analyses to engage with historical context is an obvious point of divergence from Foucault’s method, intimately connected as it is with rewriting histories and historicising the apparently transcendental. However, the structuralist agenda of reading literature in order to observe its inner rules, codes and patterns, rather than its content and meaning, is consistent with some of Foucault’s assertions. His theory of the ‘author function’ – the idea that we must understand the author’s name as a signifier of a set of historical and cultural conditions that led to the production of given ideas, rather than as the nomenclature of an individual genius – echoes Barthes’s groundbreaking notion of the ‘death of the author’ in 1967. Similarly, Foucault attempts to read history without taking account of the agency of personalities, and to observe the operation of discourse without assuming a personal



intentionality behind it. Thus, as with almost every other intellectual trend that he encountered, Foucault engaged judiciously with those elements that contributed to his project, but distanced himself from those aspects which ran counter to his primary interests and strategies. Above all, he resisted the constraints of being anchored to an identificatory label.

It is mainly with reference to his work of the 1960s in the ‘archaeological’ vein that Foucault’s concerns can be said to resemble most closely those of structuralism. The Foucauldian method of archaeology was developed in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), the subtitle of which is ‘An Archaeology of Medical Perception’; but archaeology became most explicitly associated with structuralism in 1966. In this year, Foucault published *The Order of Things*, an attempt to uncover the tacit rules governing the organisation of knowledge at a given historical moment. The book was greeted as a key text of structuralism; indeed, Foucault himself privately described this book as his ‘book about signs’.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, *The Order of Things* and, to an even greater extent, the book that followed it, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, actually use the term ‘sign’ rather sparingly and tend to focus instead on ‘episteme’ (in *The Order of Things*) and ‘discourse’ (in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*), this latter being a term that would interest him throughout the course of his work, but which he uses in the archaeological texts only to mean a set of statements that are made official or authoritative under the governance of a specific set of rules, proper to a given discipline. What this early use of the concept of discourse lacks is a fully formed notion of power – of the way in which ‘discursive formations’ are intimately involved with institutions and socio-political situations. By the time Foucault comes to write *The Will to Knowledge*, discourse is a much more specific concept, describing the intersection of knowledge and power and the forms of expression and articulation they take in different fields.

Foucault used the term ‘archaeology’ to designate an analysis of the conditions necessary for a given system of thought to come into being and to impose itself authoritatively. The rules underpinning any system of thought – rules that are not always transparent even to those employing them – are defined as the ‘historical unconscious’ of the period, or its ‘episteme’/‘archive’. One of Foucault’s aims is to show, via an exploration of the past, the situation of the present. Thus similar underlying ‘rules’ to the ones that may have allowed the ancient Chinese, according to a fictional text by Borges, to classify animals according to such seemingly bizarre categories as ‘fabulous’, ‘included in the present classification’, ‘innumerable’ and ‘drawn with a very fine camelhair brush’ (*OT*, p. xvi) still operate today, governing and delimiting our ability to think certain things in certain ways. Of course, to us, the way in which we organise our knowledge does not appear odd and arbitrary like the classification of animals cited above,

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but reasonable and justified by both scientific method and ‘common sense’. However, like Saussure’s characterisation of the relationship between the signifier (‘dog’) and the furry, barking mammal as wholly arbitrary, Foucault’s contention is that our most instinctive and automatic assumptions about the truthful and inevitable rules pertaining to the nature of things may well seem, to some future epoch, entirely random and laughable, or else be completely lost to them. Undermining the tyranny of ‘common sense’ and the lauding of reason may be identified as one of Foucault’s principal and unchanging aims.

Archaeology is a history, but it is not a history of things, phenomena or people. It is rather a history of the conditions necessary for given things, phenomena or people to occur. It is an impersonal history and it tends to describe the constellation of the thinkable at a given epochal moment rather than a chronology of the development of thought, making it a rather static-seeming map of epistemology. It is also, however, an internal history – the history of what operates on people to make them think in a certain way, without their being necessarily aware of these forces of influence. It is in this respect that Foucault gets closest in a work like *The Order of Things* to the psychoanalytic method from which elsewhere he will distance himself. The archaeology is psychoanalytically informed because it admits of the possibility of unconscious functioning, even if the unconscious concerned is a collective cultural one rather than the individual’s. By ‘unconscious’, Foucault means hidden, inaccessible rules, codes and beliefs that have effects in the world; but effects which appear as facts of nature. However, it is distinct from psychoanalysis insofar as it does not offer interpretations or propose ‘cures’ for misguided beliefs based on unconscious phantasy. It simply describes what it uncovers or lays bare, as the metaphor of ‘archaeology’ would suggest.

Foucault’s ultimate rejection of the potential sterility of the archaeological method and its approximation to structuralism occurred, perhaps, in tandem with the reassertion of the imperative for the intellectual to be politically motivated at a grass-roots level. The students’ revolts of May 1968, the ensuing workers’ general strike, and the climate of unrest and opposition that surrounded them, touched most intellectual figures in France and provided a political and intellectual watershed. Foucault was not present for the events at Nanterre and the Sorbonne in 1968, as he was out of France at the time, occupying a university post in Tunisia. However, he was very sensitised to the spirit of the time. In 1966, he had supported student strike action in Tunisia and, once back in France and in post at Vincennes University in 1969, he was arrested for showing solidarity with his students during their occupation of university buildings. The aftermath of the student insurrections created a strong oppositional political sensibility among French intellectuals of the generation. This expressed itself