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MICHEL FOUCAULT: HISTORIAN OR PHILOSOPHER?

THE DEBATE IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH

by

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A thesis submitted in December 1986
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the Australian National University.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any University; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Clare O'Farrell

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SUMMARY

In the last few years, the ideas of the French thinker Michel Foucault have become the subject of much discussion in both French and English. Foucault's first book appeared in 1954 and his last in 1984, and during this time his writings covered a broad range of subjects and disciplines. When examining and comparing writings in French and English on Foucault, two things become immediately apparent: first of all, the marked differences between the two bodies of writings, and secondly, the recurrence of certain questions, which using Foucault's work as a central point of reference, can be summed up generally in the opposition between a world view based on the belief that we are discontinuous historical beings, and a world view which posits certain eternal essences and general principles true for all time and every society.

These questions emerge in the discussions over whether Foucault can be labelled a historian or a philosopher, and whether Foucault is creating his own philosophical system or working for the downfall of philosophical systems in general. The difference between the French and English language discussions can be seen in the interest of the latter for empirical classifications: which label describes Foucault best? Philosopher, historian, structuralist? His attacks on "totality" have also, in some cases, been used to support the validity of the empirical approach. French discussions, however, very quickly turn to broad philosophical, epistemological and indeed metaphysical issues, with each author

being ultimately less concerned with finding a category for Foucault than with stating the originality (however slight) of his own position and views.

Foucault's own work can be seen as a "thought of the limits", the attempt to analyse that philosophical and social edge between the Same and the Other, between history and that which is beyond or outside its order. His approach to this project changed, and during the 1960s, he proposed a number of different limits which each time he thought finally explained the relation of the Same and the Other. During the 1970s, perhaps disappointed with his failure to find the final limit, he proposed a system in which the Same and the Other were mutually coextensive, locked in an endless power struggle. This vision changed again in 1982, when power disappeared from his analysis to be replaced by the idea that as "free beings" living in history, we must continue to work on the limits and ourselves.

Is Foucault a historian or a philosopher, a creator or a destroyer of systems? These questions continue to be asked and generate many useful ideas in a number of disciplines besides history and philosophy. The conclusion here, is that Foucault became a historian in order to remain a philosopher, and that his works represent a coherent philosophical attitude towards the world. Rather than positing any essential explanation, he suggests that people should constantly search for the limits of existing systems and ideas and seek to go beyond them.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A number of abbreviations have been used in this thesis to refer to frequently cited works by Foucault. They are listed here in chronological order. Full references are included in the list of works cited at the end of this study.

MMP	<u>Maladie mentale et psychologie</u>
FD	<u>Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique</u> , 10/18, 1961, abbreviated edition.
HF (1972)	<u>Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique</u> , edition including two annexes.
HF	<u>Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique</u> , 1976, edition without annexes.
M&C	<u>Madness and Civilization</u>
NC	<u>Naissance de la clinique</u>
BC	<u>Birth of the Clinic</u>
MC	<u>Les mots et les choses</u>
OT	<u>The Order of Things</u>
AS	<u>L'archéologie du savoir</u>
AK	<u>The Archaeology of Knowledge</u>
OD	<u>L'ordre du discours</u>
SP	<u>Surveiller et punir</u>
VS	<u>La volonté de savoir</u>
UP	<u>L'usage des plaisirs</u>
PK	<u>Power/Knowledge</u> , ed. Colin Gordon.

When references to these texts have been made (with the exception of Power/Knowledge) the abbreviation has been included in the main text in brackets. For example (AS:32) refers to L'archéologie du savoir, p.32.

All translations are my own except where otherwise stated. Except in a few cases, I have generally consulted only the original French versions of Foucault's work.

INTRODUCTION

Why write about Foucault? Just a few years ago, an English speaking writer might have felt obliged to provide a detailed answer to this question in terms of Michel Foucault's prestige in France and the intrinsic historical and philosophical interest of his work. Nowadays, this same writer could dispense with these lengthy introductions and reply quite simply that it is because everybody else is writing about Foucault. It is this state of affairs which forms the basis of the present study: why are so many writers so interested in Foucault's work?

In the vast literature these writers have produced, certain questions appear again and again in one form or another: Unity or Fragmentation? Eternity or History? System or Difference? Philosophy or History? Jacques d'Hondt unwittingly sums up this discussion in a rather alarmist article about structuralism : "Certain ages ruminate with a gloomy delectation over the question, to be or not to be. Times have changed! Our contemporaries pose quite another alternative: to break or not to break".¹ It is this alternative, that in the present study is posed in terms of an opposition between history and philosophy. If "history" is defined for present purposes as the study of change, of discrete and concrete always different "events", and "philosophy" as the study of "eternity" or a small number of

1. Jacques d'Hondt, "L'idéologie de la rupture", Revue de théologie et de philosophie 21, no. 4 (1971), p.253. D'Hondt rejects the new alternative out of hand as a form of bourgeois mystification.

general principles valid for all times and places, then we are faced with two differing views of the world and its reality.

The question is then which view or which combination of these views most accurately describes the reality of existence?

Foucault's own solution to this problem was to write a history of the limits, that edge between the orderly and historical systems societies impose upon the world, and that which is outside, or beyond that order. He often changed his mind about how this project should be carried out, and one of the aims of this study is to show the constancy of a certain philosophical quest and a certain philosophical vision which led Foucault to make these constant changes, shifts in emphasis, and reinterpretations of his work.

Such is the volume and the sheer diversity of the writing on Foucault, not to mention the fact that it spans several cultures, that its analysis poses quite a problem.² Hence the examination of this literature will be limited in a number of

2. Foucault remarks with a certain ill-disguised glee concerning his political classification: "I think I have in fact been situated in most of the squares on the political checkerboard... as anarchist, leftist, ostentatious disguised Marxist, nihilist, explicit or secret anti-Marxist, technocrat in the service of Gaullism, new liberal, etc... None of these descriptions is important by itself; taken together, on the other hand, it means something. And I must admit that I rather like what they mean. It's true that I prefer not to identify myself and that I'm amused by the diversity of the ways I've been judged and classified". "Polemics, Politics and Problemization. An Interview with Michel Foucault", in The Foucault Reader, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p.384.

ways. First of all, only French and English speaking literature, which forms the main body of writings on Foucault, will be examined. This will also provide the opportunity to examine some of the similarities and differences between the French and Anglo-Saxon intellectual mentalities.³ Secondly, questions of empirical and specialised application will be left aside and a series of recurrent and important issues relating to philosophy and history will be addressed. In addition, the treatment of literature produced before Foucault's death in 1984, will be more comprehensive than the treatment of the literature after that date.⁴ To remain entirely up to date with every element of this massive and ever more rapidly growing industry would be a task that would fully occupy the most willing of writers, to the exclusion of their own contribution to the industry.

However, this study is not simply restricted to the analysis of the "industry" surrounding Foucault's name, it also deals with his own work. Again, it is essential to clearly define the scope of the analysis: Foucault's work will be dealt with in philosophical terms as a historical, philosophical and ethical reflection on the "limits" of history, society and culture.

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3. The term "Anglo-Saxon" includes all English language writings. For practical reasons, we will not distinguish between the products of England, America or other English language countries. Such differences as do exist are not of overwhelming significance for the purposes of the present study.
 4. Most of the books on Foucault produced since then, have been looked at however.

In this context, although most of Foucault's work will be referred to in this study, two writings in particular will act as a focal point. The first of these is Histoire de la folie, written at the beginning of Foucault's career and the second is "What is Enlightenment?", written right at the end.⁵ The empirical details of Foucault's historical interpretations will not be discussed as this has been done elsewhere by a host of specialists. Neither will "power" and related notions form as important a part of this study as they do in most other current English language studies of Foucault's work. At the same time, two works will not be discussed in any detail, these being his last two books, L'usage des plaisirs and Le souci de soi, published two weeks before Foucault's death. There are a number of reasons for this exclusion: first of all, these works represent a considerable change in emphasis, style, philosophical attitude as well as in historical subject matter. To discuss them in detail would not only add prohibitively to the length of this study, but would take it into areas relating to individual ethics which are not the immediate concern of a study which is generally addressed to discussions concerning collective historical and philosophical experience (even if collectivities are made up of individuals). The second reason for this exclusion is that this study is as much about the writing generated by Foucault's work, as about his own work. It was earlier specified that literature produced after 1984 would not

5. "What is Enlightenment?", in The Foucault Reader, ed. Rabinow, pp. 32-50.

be examined in great detail, and a cursory examination of these writings also indicates that these last books by Foucault have not as yet been fully assimilated into discussions of his work. Nevertheless, these last two works of Foucault have not been totally ignored, and references to them occur throughout the text.

A few final remarks about what is not being done in this study: it is not a "survey", or a "general overview" of what has been said about Foucault, neither is it a defence of Foucault's work from misappropriation by his critics, or alternately a refutation of his work based on the arguments of these same critics.⁶ It is, in fact, the analysis of certain recurring debates in a body of French and Anglo-Saxon literature which focuses on or departs from Foucault's work. Neither is the treatment of Foucault's work intended to be totally exhaustive. The problem of the limits and a certain relation between the Same and the Other remains the focal point of the discussion and in some places is extrapolated beyond Foucault's own treatment. Finally, in the context of a literature which is not, in the English speaking world, particularly noted for its clarity or simplicity, there has been a consistent attempt to avoid certain types of jargon popular amongst "foucauldians", except where it is absolutely unavoidable.

6. The latter approach appears to have been taken by one recent commentator on Foucault. As Colin Gordon says in a review of a book by J.G. Merquior, Foucault (London: Collins, Fontana, 1985). "Few writers who have attacked Foucault are denied Merquior's courteous certification of their shrewdness and perspicacity ... to contradict him, it appears, is to refute him". "Attacks on Singularity", Times Literary Supplement, 6 June 1986.