

Lisa Downing



The Cambridge **Introduction** to
Michel Foucault

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Michel Foucault*

The French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault is essential reading for students in departments of literature, history, sociology and cultural studies. His work on the institutions of mental health and medicine, the history of systems of knowledge, literature and literary theory, criminality and the prison system, and sexuality has had a profound and enduring impact across the humanities and social sciences. This introductory book, written for students, offers in-depth critical and contextual perspectives on all of Foucault's major published works. It provides ways in to understanding Foucault's key concepts of subjectivity, discourse and power, and explains the problems of translation encountered in reading Foucault in English. The book also explores the critical reception of Foucault's works and acquaints the reader with the afterlives of some of his theories, particularly his influence on feminist and queer studies. This book offers the ideal introduction to a famously complex, controversial and important thinker.

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Contents

| | |
|--|----------|
| <i>Preface</i> | page vii |
| <i>List of abbreviations</i> | xi |
| 1 Life, texts, contexts | 1 |
| 2 Works: madness and medicine | 22 |
| 3 Works: the death of man | 38 |
| 4 Works: authors and texts | 53 |
| 5 Works: crime and punishment | 69 |
| 6 Works: <i>The History of Sexuality</i> | 86 |
| 7 Critical receptions | 104 |
| <i>Afterword</i> | 118 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 121 |
| <i>Selected further reading</i> | 130 |
| <i>Index</i> | 134 |

Preface

If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? The game is worthwhile in so far as we don't know what will be the end.

Michel Foucault

A reading of the works of Michel Foucault (1926–84) does not so much equip us with new pieces of knowledge, or even teach us new and different ways of knowing. Rather, it invites us to share in a radical calling into question of the ways in which knowledge itself operates. Foucault argues that all forms of knowledge are historically relative and contingent, and cannot be dissociated from the workings of power. Destabilising many of the key facets of Western epistemology, he effectively lays bare their functioning. This agenda of demystification, central to all of Foucault's work, encourages an uncommon way of perceiving language, social structures and medical institutions, university disciplines, and sexual acts and identities. We are provided not with an alternative theory of these domains, but with an awareness of the force fields of influence that bring them into being and determine their meaning and operation in given cultural and historical contexts. So different is this way of apprehending knowledge that the reader new to Foucault, and to post-structuralist continental thought in general, may struggle with the rigorous challenges posed by his guiding methodologies of 'archaeology' and 'genealogy'. This introduction to the work of Michel Foucault, which situates his investigations in their intellectual and historical contexts, and which proceeds by a detailed discussion of Foucault's major works available in English translation – both his full-length books and numerous articles and interviews – is thus indispensable for any student or other interested reader approaching his work for the first time.

It is helpful to think of Foucault's revisionist histories (archaeologies/genealogies) not as proposing entirely different versions of historical truth, but as relativising correctives, as texts which teach us that if we only look at the accepted and well-worn interpretations, we only appreciate a partial view of

history. So, in what is probably Foucault's best-known work, the first volume of *The History of Sexuality, The Will to Knowledge* (1976),¹ Foucault's critique of the 'repressive hypothesis' is not really intended to suggest that there were no censorious or prudish attitudes towards sex in Victorian Britain, because this would be the replacement of one totalising narrative with another. Rather, it sets out to show that this is *only half the picture*. It is by thinking *also* about that historical moment's obsession with inciting sexual confession, with naming types of sexual deviance and with producing what Foucault terms a proliferation of discourses about sex, that we see the fuller picture. At the broader level, it is also by engaging in this kind of game with history – for Foucault is nothing if not a magnificent game player – that we are afforded an insight into how Foucault thinks history works. The history of any cultural phenomenon always involves, alongside the commonsensical or authorised version of events, ulterior narratives, an unspoken set of truths, that often efface themselves as visible processes precisely as an effect of their operation within the larger grid of competing knowledge; authorised and unauthorised; normalising and dissident. One of Foucault's most striking and far-reaching points regarding power and knowledge is the insight that power operates according to and by means of secrecy and silence as well as – or instead of – by voicing its presence in loud and oppressive interdictions and orders.

The influence of Michel Foucault – a very French thinker – on the Anglo-American academic and reading public has grown in recent years, thanks to the incorporation of his corpus into the university curricula of contemporary literary studies, sexuality and gender studies, politics, and sociology. Accordingly, numerous introductory guides to Foucault, aimed at students and scholars in these various disciplines, have appeared from major academic presses. Despite their many and varied strengths, few of these works are primarily concerned with offering an accessible way in to reading Foucault for the student of literary and cultural studies. This, then, is the precise gap that *The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault* will fill. It will offer an accessible but thorough introduction to the main works in Foucault's corpus and will assist readers in understanding their relevance for the analysis of the conditions of literary and cultural production and philosophical ideas.

In addition, the book will provide some other unique features. First, it will identify and address the problem faced by the English-speaking reader of having

¹ When referring to Foucault's works, I shall use the accepted English translated titles (or, for page references, the abbreviations of the same listed under 'Abbreviations', p. xi), but the dates, unless otherwise stated, will refer to the original year of publication of the first French edition.

to read Foucault in a not-always-accurate translation. A tendency of much Anglo-American criticism and the other critical introductions to Foucault is to write about the translations as if they were the original texts. I will avoid this reductive tendency, bringing attention where necessary to the features of the French texts that have been elided or flattened out in the translation process, distorting the meaning and resonance of Foucault's words; and I shall comment on receptions of the translations of Foucault's works and the misinterpretations that have arisen from these in existing Foucault criticism. Secondly, this book will address and explain the status of the French intellectual and the part played by this figure in French cultural and political life. Any introduction to a French thinker requires a very careful contextualisation of a specific intellectual 'scene'. Thirdly, it will engage in detail with Foucault's reflections on literature, including a chapter on his writings on the works of Bataille, Blanchot, Klossowski and Roussel, and his significant essay on the 'author function' ('What is an Author?', 1969), a work which is often omitted or treated in parentheses or footnotes in other introductory guides. I will argue that many of Foucault's key concerns and concepts – the critique of reason, anti-humanistic thinking, the problematisation of the subject – are best articulated when he takes literature as the object of his investigation. Finally, where relevant, this book will also briefly treat the rhetorical qualities of Foucault's own writing: qualities that have made his work unpopular with philosophers of the analytic tradition but endeared him to literary scholars. Following the example of Dan Beer's recent innovative monograph *Michel Foucault: Form and Power*,² *The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault* will pay attention to what is important in Foucault's language and the ways in which his form enacts his meaning.

A further central concern of the analyses in this book will be to explore and chart Foucault's often apparently contradictory ideas about selfhood and subjectivity. A paradoxical suspicion of, and fascination with, the subject of experience runs through Foucault's corpus, resonating differently in the various texts, and causing some commentators on Foucault's life's work to accuse him of inconsistency and contradiction. From asserting the radical negation of the human being as the transcendental subject of knowledge and experience in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault moves on to a quest to theorise a controversial 'ethics of the self' in his final works, a project he was sketching at the time of his death in 1984, due to an 'AIDS-related' illness. The reason for placing 'AIDS-related' between scare quotes will become clear towards the close

² Dan Beer, *Michel Foucault: Form and Power* (Oxford: Legenda, European Humanities Research Association, 2002).

of the book, where I shall explore the legacy of Foucault's critiques of sexual knowledge and medical categories for late-twentieth-century sexuality studies.

The book comprises an introductory contextualising chapter followed by five further chapters, broadly structured along both chronological and thematic lines, each devoted to one or more of Foucault's major works; and concludes with a seventh and final chapter which charts some of the afterlives of Foucault's thinking. Chapter 1 takes the form of an introduction to the major intellectual and historical trends that influenced Foucault's thinking and determined the different methods and concerns of his works over the course of the twenty years during which he published. The next five chapters treat, in the following order, the institutions of psychiatry and medicine; the epistemology of the human sciences; literature and literary theory; criminality and punishment; sexuality, knowledge and power. The closing chapter treats the major reception of Foucault's work within the arts and humanities in the fields of feminism, gender and sexuality studies, and 'queer' theory. The book closes with a bibliography of selected titles designed to guide the reader's further study and point him or her towards specialised works on the different aspects, receptions and intertexts of Foucault's work.

I would like to acknowledge the help of Peter Cryle, Tim Dean, Robert Gillett, Dany Nobus and Elizabeth Stephens, who were stimulating and generous interlocutors about Foucault during my preparation of this book, and some of whom lent me materials to which I would otherwise not have had access. I would also like to thank Simon Gaunt, who invited me to present a paper on Foucault in a panel on 'Queer Theory in France' at the Society for French Studies' annual conference in July 2007, where I was able to discuss a version of the final chapter of this book with the learned audience and my fellow panel members, Hector Kollias and Jason Hartford. Finally, thanks are due to Ray Ryan at Cambridge University Press for being a most patient Commissioning Editor.

Abbreviations

Published collections of Foucault's lectures, essays, seminars and interviews referred to in the book

- A *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (London and New York: Verso, 2003)
- DE *Dits et écrits 1954–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, four volumes (Paris: Gallimard, 1994)
- EW i *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1988*, vol. 1, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley *et al.* (New York: New York Press, 1997)
- EW ii *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1988*, vol. 2, *Aesthetics: Method and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley *et al.* (New York: New York Press, 1998)
- EW iii *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1988*, vol. 3, *Power*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley *et al.* (New York: New York Press, 2000)
- FL *Foucault Live: Interviews 1966–84*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989)
- SMD *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004)
- TS *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988)

Foucault's books

(The original French titles and dates of publication are given after the English translations in square brackets.)

- AK *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) [*L'Archéologie du savoir*, 1969]
- BC *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) [*Naissance de la clinique*, 1963]
- CS *The Care of the Self, The History of Sexuality 3*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) [*Histoire de la sexualité 3: Le Souci de soi*, 1984]
- DL *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*, trans. Charles Ruas, intro. John Ashbery (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1986) [*Raymond Roussel*, 1963]
- DP *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991) [*Surveiller et punir*, 1975]
- HB *Herculine Barbin; Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1990) [*Herculine Barbin dite Alexandre B*, 1978]
- HM *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) [*Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, 1961]
- IPR *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister and My Brother: A Case of Parricide in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Frank Jellinek (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1975) [*Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma sœur et mon frère: un cas de parricide au dix-neuvième siècle*, 1973]
- MC *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) [based on an abridged edition of *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, 1961]
- OT *The Order of Things*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) [*Les Mots et les choses*, 1966]
- UP *The Use of Pleasure, The History of Sexuality 2*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) [*Histoire de la sexualité 2: L'Usage des plaisirs*, 1984]
- WK *The Will to Knowledge, The History of Sexuality 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) [*Histoire de la sexualité 1: La Volonté de savoir*, 1976]

Chapter 1

Life, texts, contexts

| | |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Intellectual contexts | 3 |
| Archaeology and structuralism | 7 |
| Nietzsche, genealogy, influence | 12 |
| Disrupting disciplines | 16 |

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?'¹ 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"'.² 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'.³ 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

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.”⁴ It is this concern with