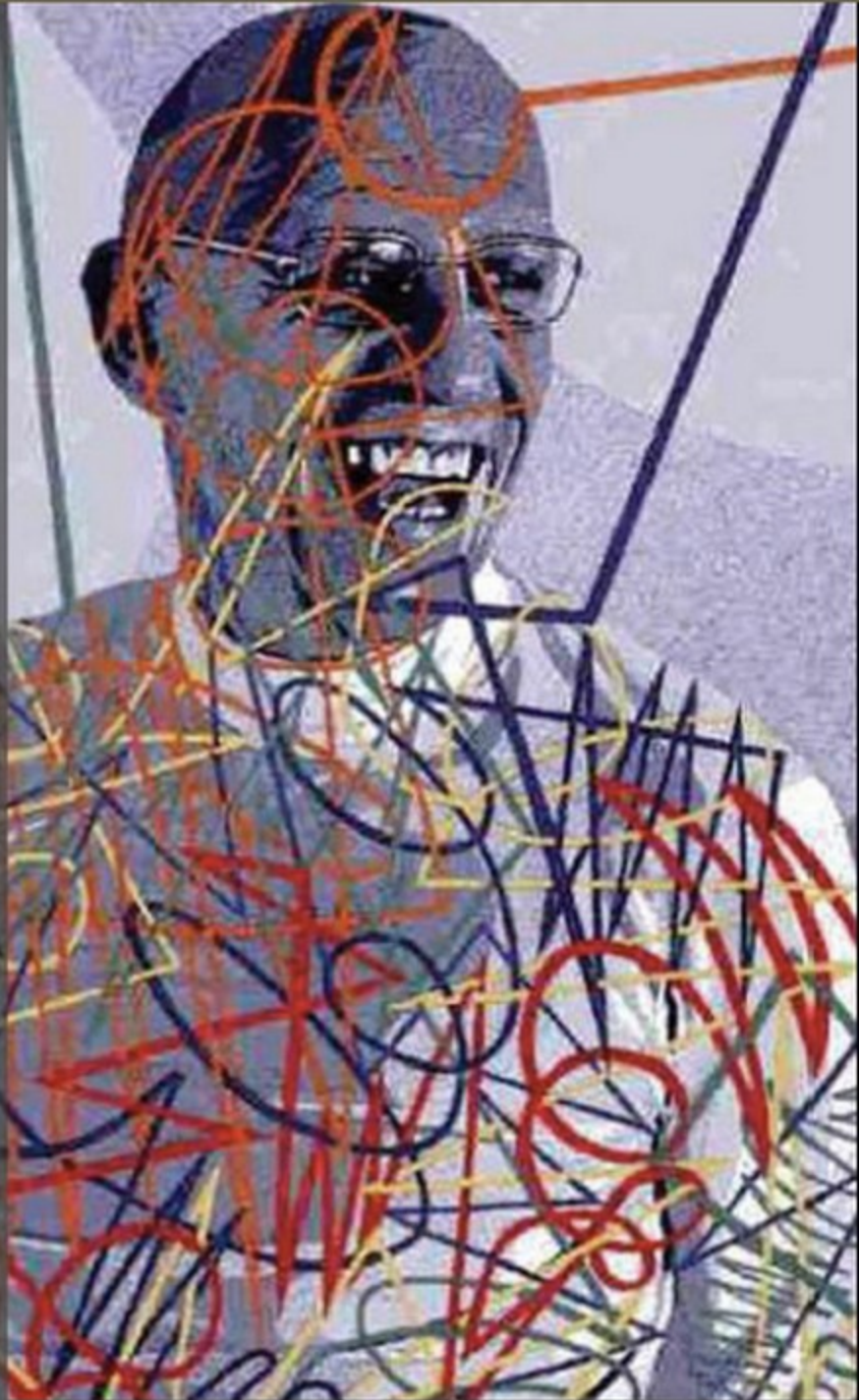


# FOUCAULT BEYOND FOUCAULT



*Power and its Intensifications since 1984*

JEFFREY T. NEALON

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My last run-through of the book coincided, tragically, with the final months of my father, Thomas J. Nealon (1926–2006). My earlier work on alterity was dedicated to my mother and my sister; on reflection, this



book on power owes an obvious debt to my father—not as a predictable Oedipal figure for power, but as the person who endlessly taught me to diagnose, confront, mock, and evade power. He'll be missed.

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## FOUCAULT BEYOND FOUCAULT



## *Introduction: Foucault Today*

What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?

—Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?”

Although he’s been dead for more than two decades, Michel Foucault’s work has decisively lived on in academia—even after the so-called death of theory. In humanities and social sciences scholarship, Foucault’s work has been and remains by far the most cited among the “big names” associated with theory. In 2005, for example, the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences Citation Index turns up 1,535 hits for Michel Foucault, 1,016 for Jacques Derrida, 590 for Gilles Deleuze, and 403 for Jacques Lacan. These numbers have grown more or less consistently for the past several years: since the late 1990s, Foucault has generally led the way every year with around 1,000 citations, Derrida steadily in the 500–600 range, and Deleuze and Lacan holding their own at around 300–400. Contra the “theory is dead” hypothesis, these numbers are up considerably from the supposed heyday of theory, the mid-1980s: Foucault, the leader of the citation pack at that time too, scored only 410 hits for 1985.

However, the Foucault of the 1980s is substantially different from the Foucault of today. Along with the massive sea changes in the world at large since Foucault’s death in 1984 (the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the end of the cold war, the neoliberal revolution and the waning of the welfare state, the rise of identity politics, the Internet, globalization, the so-called War on Terror), the dominant critical picture of Foucault’s work has also morphed considerably. In the mid-1980s, Foucault’s name was virtually synonymous with power, and more specifically with his analysis of disciplinary power in 1975’s *Discipline and Punish*. Since his death, however, Foucault’s midcareer work on power has been eclipsed in the academic conceptual imaginary by his “late” work on the ethico-aesthetics of subjectivity. Foucault, in short, is today primarily referenced as a thinker of subjectivity, rather than as a thinker of power. Foucault himself lays down the bass line for this critical refrain in his late essay “The Subject

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and Power”: he writes, “It is not power, but the subject, that is the general theme of my research.”<sup>1</sup>

Since his death, there has emerged a widespread critical consensus concerning the historical development and trajectory of Foucault’s work: there’s the early neostructuralist Foucault; the middle “power” Foucault; and late Foucaultian concern with making one’s life a work of art. For example, with the caveat that “this periodization is only indicative and is discussed and criticized in the book itself,” Beatrice Han begins her excellent *Foucault’s Critical Project* with this schematic:

### “ARCHAEOLOGICAL” PERIOD

- 1963 *The Birth of the Clinic*
- 1966 *The Order of Things*
- 1969 *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

### “GENEALOGICAL” PERIOD

- 1970 *The Order of Discourse*
- 1975 *Discipline and Punish*
- 1976 Volume I of *The History of Sexuality*

### THE “HISTORY OF SUBJECTIVITY”

- 1984 *The Use of Pleasure*, Volume II of *The History of Sexuality*
- 1984 *The Care of the Self*, Volume III of *The History of Sexuality*.<sup>2</sup>

Simply taking this rough periodization at face value for a moment, charting Foucault’s career in this way (from archaeology to genealogy to subjectivity) helps to highlight just how much the late “history of subjectivity” Foucault has come to dominate our critical picture of his work today. Throughout the 1990s, Foucault’s work on the ethico-aesthetics of subjectivity became the linchpin for a wide range of thinkers who were trying to come to grips with the question of resistance in the postbinary, post-cold war world that was just emerging. Foucault, in short, became a central figure in thinking and rethinking identity and the myriad ways in which individual subjects who were armed with specific regimes of practice could reinscribe or resist hegemonic norms.

All this makes sense: of course the dominant critical picture of Foucault would change over the years, in accordance with the tools needed to diagnose and intervene in a changing “today.” Likewise it makes sense that thinkers hoping to extend Foucault’s own project shortly after his

death would attempt to take up where Foucault himself so tragically was forced to leave off, with the late work on the aesthetics of subjectivity. Following suit, I'll also spend a fair amount of time in this book tracing the shifting terrains of discipline and biopower, trying to reread and clarify their relations in Foucault's own corpus.

However, among my most overarching arguments will be that we have too hastily abandoned or thought ourselves to have profitably moved beyond Foucault's midcareer work on power. In the culture- and cash-saturated world of the go-go 1990s, it seemed that the nation-state and the welfare state, the two formations that Foucault's work on disciplinary power took decisively as its targets, were on the wane. A new, smooth world of global and individual flows was taking the place of the rigid segmentations of disciplinary power. Recall that many people, especially those on the American left, argued that in the 2000 U.S. presidential contest between Al Gore and George W. Bush, it really wouldn't have made any difference who won, largely because the nation-state was yesterday's news and corporations (with their distinctly nondisciplinary forms of domination) were bound to run the world one way or another. Questions of power and politics were being eclipsed by (or reunderstood in terms of) work on "resistant" subjectivities, both in the Foucault literature and the (academic) world at large.

Since September 2001, however, we've seen the nation-state, and its investments in disciplinary power and panoptic surveillance, come roaring back, indeed intensifying beyond our wildest dreams (or nightmares). We live in a world where outright torture of detainees and constant government surveillance of the citizenry are no longer projects that have to be carried out in secret: they've become official policy, at least in the United States. This historical (re)birth of discipline and panopticism is, it seems to me, one of the primary reasons for us today to reexamine Foucault's midcareer work on punitive power and its relations to his late work on the ethics and aesthetics of resistant subjectivity.

Even more specifically, my argument will be that the ostensible reasons we've "moved beyond" Foucault's work on power seem all too clear, even if they often go unstated. In short, critics seem to have agreed that Foucault's midcareer work constituted a dead-end, a totalizing cage, an omnipresent panopticon with no possibility for any subjective or collective resistance. This reading subtends a kind of "Foucault consensus" that shows up everywhere, even (one might say, especially) in works that

aren't primarily about Foucault: in tag-end footnotes concerning the recent history of theory, throwaway paragraphs on post-1968 thinkers, and translator's introductions to books by Foucault's contemporaries. Here, for example, is the Foucault paragraph in the English translator's introduction to Alain Badiou's *Infinite Thought*:

In his middle period, Foucault argued that networks of disciplinary power not only reach into the most intimate spaces of the subject, but actually produce what we call subjects. However, Foucault also said that power produces resistance. His problem then became that of accounting for the source of such resistance. If the subject—right down to its most intimate desires, actions, and thoughts—is constituted by power, then how can it be a source of independent resistance? For such a point of agency to exist, Foucault needs some space that has not been completely constituted by power, or a complex doctrine on the relationship between resistance and independence. However, he has neither. In his late work, he deals with this problem by assigning agency to those subjects who resist power by means of an aesthetic project of self-authoring.<sup>3</sup>

This quotation offers a very concise statement of the prevailing wisdom on Foucault's work after 1969—his shift from the genealogical work on power to the late work on the ethics of subjective creativity—and is likewise a succinct example of the neo-Hegelian progress narrative that guides much of our present understanding of Foucault's work and career.

The dominant narrative goes something like this: Foucault's early "structuralist" work fails to provide the critical wedge he's seeking, so he abandons it—after 1969's *Archaeology of Knowledge*—to take up the study of power in the 1970s, in the wake of the upheavals of May 1968. However, the two most famous "power" books, 1975's *Discipline and Punish* and 1976's first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, likewise comprise a failed project (though for very different reasons than the early neo-structuralist project: archaeology fails to account for the bridges among words and things, while the genealogical work on power is—one might say—seen as having been too successful, too totalizing and demoralizing). Insofar as Foucault so convincingly demonstrates that power is indeed everywhere, capillary and molecular, how can we possibly resist it? How can we be anything but dupes for power? Hoping finally to answer this nagging question of resistance, Foucault turns in his late work to the ethical project of making one's life a work of art.