



COVER SHEET

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Clare O'Farrell, (2006) Foucault and Post Modernism *The Sydney Papers* 18 (3-4): pp. 182-194.

Abstract

The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. This paper situates his work in the context of recent media debates on postmodernism and gives an account of his work, life and times and the critical reception of his work. Particular reference is made to his controversial discussions on truth and power.

I

I would like to thank Gerard Henderson for the invitation to speak at the Sydney Institute.

This paper will deal with the famous French philosopher Michel Foucault and debates centred around his career and works. [1] Foucault, who lived from 1926 to 1984, is one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. His ideas have been used extensively across the entire range of the humanities and the social sciences and in professional disciplines such as education, health and management studies. His work tends to attract dramatically polarized responses – Foucault has been both idolised and bitterly condemned. I would like to look at some of the dynamics of that reception as well as what is about his persona and work which generates such strong opinions and reactions. Foucault's name often crops up in popular discussions around postmodernity – this in spite of the fact that he made no claims himself to belong to this movement of thought – on the contrary in fact. In view of this perceived connection however, I would like to begin with a few comments on the recent debate in the public media over postmodernism and its apparently pernicious effects on what is currently being taught in schools and on literacy in general. Even the Prime Minister, John Howard, has weighed in on these discussions with widely reported remarks on the negative impact of so-called postmodernism on the teaching of both English and history in schools. It is not entirely

clear what the contributors to these debates actually mean by 'postmodernism', but generally speaking the word seems to designate an approach which combines impenetrable jargon with political correctness, an unwarranted attention to the products of popular culture and a heedless disregard for such things as objective truth and facts.

The argument runs that school students are being taught slabs of incomprehensible 'theory' derived from French and German philosophers (Foucault's name often figures prominently) and force fed a diet of 'political correctness' at the expense of basic skills such as knowing how to spell and punctuate and also at the expense of the acquisition of basic 'facts' about culture, history and historical chronology. Furthermore, it is argued that the great eternal canon of Dead White European Males which every school child should memorise is being replaced by an undue emphasis on the disposable ephemera of popular culture. In an interview broadcast on the ABC on the 20th April 2006, John Howard announced that he was in agreement with, to quote him, 'the views of many people about the so-called postmodernism'. He went on to add: 'we ...understand there's high quality literature and there's rubbish, and we need a curriculum that encourages an understanding of high quality literature and not the rubbish'. [2]

Understandably, these remarks have generated a lot of attention and debate in the media and in educational circles and have added fuel to the fire of a long standing campaign in *The Australian* against the evils of postmodernity and programs of 'critical literacy' in schools. There are, of course, a number of manifest contradictions and confusions in this debate as others have pointed out. On the one hand, there is the argument that high-level theory which is difficult even at postgraduate university level is being taught in schools.

This paradoxically co-exists with the argument that school students are being taught the trashiest of popular culture and that as a result, in Howard's terms, we are seeing a 'dumbing-down' of the English syllabus. There is no doubt that there are serious problems which have been generated by the garbled uptake of poorly understood ideas, but this is not sufficient argument to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

One particularly extreme contribution to this debate was offered by Giles Auty in the *The Australian* on the 21st April, the day after Howard's radio interview. [3] Auty begins by conflating Marxism and postmodernism – two world views which are generally recognized as quite divergent, and blames them for 'the present, covertly politicized and academically disastrous model' of education. According to Auty the embodiment of these two ideologies, and 'the posthumous arbiter of the way our children and university students are taught' is none other than Michel Foucault who in Auty's account emerges as something akin to the Osama Bin Laden of the intellectual world, exercising his baleful influence over the literacy skills and political views of 'hundreds of thousands of children now attending Australian schools'. Leaving aside Auty's lurid account of Foucault's alleged personal habits, this opinion piece is worth mentioning in so far as it rehearses a well-worn and familiar script of accusations against Foucault which usually run as follows:

1. First of all, Foucault doesn't believe in objective truth or things like facts and subscribes to an extreme postmodern position that anything goes. In short, if you believe it, then it's true. Furthermore there is no truth only power. What people take to be true is in fact merely the product of struggles for power.

2. Secondly, Foucault was an amoral nihilist, an anarchist who was only interested in dismantling and destroying existing systems of order and then proposing nothing in their place – generating general despair, apathy and political nihilism amongst those foolish enough to read his work.
3. Thirdly, he and others such as Jacques Derrida (founder of deconstructionism), Jean-Francois Lyotard (author of *The Postmodern Condition*) and Jean Baudrillard (famous for his notions that modern culture represents nothing but itself), are responsible for creating an impenetrable wall of jargon which has had a woeful effect on clear English expression and prose in a number of academic disciplines. This ‘wooden tongue’, as the colourful French expression describes the vocabularies of ideologies, has trickled down to afflict the English and history curricula of schools.
4. Lastly and by no means least, Foucault’s personal morality was highly dubious. He is represented as a self-destructive homosexual who died of AIDS and who may, it is whispered, even have gone out and deliberately infected other people with the disease. This behaviour of course completely negates any value that his work might otherwise have had.

Inflated rhetoric indeed, and all too commonplace within certain media both in Australia and abroad. More balanced or sympathetic accounts usually only emerge in academic journals and books with a restricted circulation, or in the specialist media aimed at an educated or academic public, such as *The Book Show* and *The Philosopher’s Zone* on ABC Radio National. Thus, unfortunately, the general public continues to receive uninformed and often deliberately misleading accounts of the ideas in question, with no

alternatives offered to balance the ledger. The most recent public incidence of this kind of rhetoric in relation to Foucault's work can be seen on the Wikipedia page on Foucault which was in August 2006 the subject of a fierce no holds barred editing war. Wikipedia is, of course, the handy internet font of all knowledge for many in a hurry. This recent edit war, which is fully documented on the discussion page relating to the Foucault entry, has resulted in the permanent banning of two contributors and the suspension of another. All four positions mentioned above were given more than ample airing in this battle.

II

After this long preamble, what I would like to do here is weigh in here with a positive assessment of the impact of Foucault's work. I would like to place particular emphasis on the various political and historical events which serve as a context to his work as these are often glossed over, indeed completely ignored, when his name is dropped willy nilly into various moralizing tirades about the current decadent state of Western civilisation.

Foucault was born in the French provinces into a comfortable middle class professional family in 1926. His father was a surgeon who expected his son to follow in the family profession. In 1946 he entered the prestigious Ecole Normal Supérieure in Paris. This institution which was founded in 1845 was originally a teacher training college but developed into a very elite institution which has over the years produced a number of France's top intellectuals, scientists, politicians as well as Nobel Prize winners. Louis Pasteur, Jean- Paul Sartre and Georges Pompidou all number amongst its alumni. Foucault like every other self-respecting young radical student at the time joined

the local communist party cell at the Ecole in 1950. His decision to join was influenced by events in the war in Indo-China but his tenure was less than enthusiastic - he seldom turned up to meetings and left in 1953 when a number of Jewish doctors were arrested in the USSR for alleged treason. Interestingly, Foucault's uncompromising rejection of anti-semitism also emerged later in his career. After a serious terrorist attack on a well-known Jewish restaurant in Paris in 1982 which left several dead and many wounded, Foucault would eat there as often as possible as a gesture of protest against terrorism. But let's return to the political and intellectual climate at the end of World War II in France. Right wing ideologies which had advocated adherence to homeland, traditional family values, respect for authority and the army were severely discredited in the aftermath of the German occupation, and the actions of the puppet Vichy Government led by aging World War I war hero Marshall Pétain. The void left by the collapse of right wing political philosophies was initially filled by a variety of left wing, Marxist, Catholic and atheist versions of existentialism. The Communist Party which made much of its (somewhat late) contribution to the Resistance also acquired a glorious and illustrious cachet in the public eye as a result. Remnants of right wing philosophies nonetheless survived notably in the form of Gaullism. All these various movements were grouped under the broad umbrella of 'humanism'. The main assumption of this philosophy was that something called 'human nature' determined how people lived and acted in the world. Human nature, depending on your point of view, was either God-given or a natural biological template which remained constant throughout history and which could be gradually uncovered and defined via the efforts of both the physical and human sciences, or, if one

was of a literary and philosophical bent, through a process of artistic and philosophical introspection.

At the end of the 1950s, however, a number of events in France and abroad such as the Khrushchev report which condemned Stalinism, the Algerian war and the Communist suppression of the Hungarian Revolution produced massive political disillusion in the ranks of intellectuals. As a result, a number of them turned away from overtly political material to examine 'scientific' areas which appeared to be more ideologically neutral and also of more immediate concern. These young intellectuals rejected what they saw as the politically compromised and out of touch humanist approach. One of the members of this new movement was Foucault who notes in relation to this period: 'The experience of war had shown us the urgent need of a society radically different from the one in which we were living, this society that had permitted Nazism that had lain down in front of it... A large sector of French youth had a reaction of total disgust toward all that'. [4] This new movement was dubbed 'structuralism' by the press.

Generally speaking structuralism rejected the idea that there was such a thing as a universal human nature which was able to explain all of history and existence. Structuralists argued that meaning was determined by the relation between things – it was not located in the things themselves. Rather than trying to discover what a human being truly was in his/her essence, structuralists were more interested in looking at the structures underlying knowledge, culture, society and language. So, for example, literary critic Roland Barthes argued that the author simply was the conduit of a language that already had its own meanings and structures before the author even started writing.

Marxist thinker Louis Althusser suggested that history was simply a process that people acted out – they were not in charge of it at an individual level.

Michel Foucault's work fitted into this general movement of thought. If we wish to describe his work in terms of its subject matter: his early work in the 1950s and 1960s fell within the general area of the history and philosophy of science and the history of ideas. In the 1970s, he focused more directly on the area of the history of the institutions and the State before going on to examine the history of ethical systems in the early 1980s. He also wrote about literature and art, historiography, current events and politics. The key word here is history. Foucault was as much a historian as a philosopher. He was interested in discerning patterns of order in historical systems of knowledge without resorting to vague organizing categories such as 'genius', 'progress', 'rationality', 'cause' and 'effect'. These patterns of order were, he argued, quite specific to time and place and although they couldn't be used to predict what might happen tomorrow, they were very useful for understanding the substrata on which our current societies rest and for opening up awareness concerning avenues for possible change. But we are perhaps veering off into abstractions here and this might be a good point to start looking at the actual concrete content of Foucault's work.

III

Foucault published his first works in 1954 on psychology, but came to wider attention with the publication of his book *Madness and Civilization* in 1961. A full translation into English of this enormous 700 page volume was only just published this year in 2006. In this work Foucault traces the history of how madness has been dealt with in the Western

world from the thirteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. His history covers a broad sweep of disciplines, ranging from art and literature, to science, medicine and economics. He took a sympathetic view of the plight of those who were mad and argued that the modern scientific definition of madness as 'mental illness' was not necessarily an unambiguous advance in human history. If the book made little impact when it initially appeared, by the end of the 1960s sales had increased dramatically, particularly after the publication of Foucault's bestseller *The Order of Things* in 1966, and the general growth of interest in marginal groups and experiences. A group of traditional psychiatrists organized an entire conference in 1969 in France to denounce the book and its less than flattering portrayal of the somewhat shady historical origins of psychiatry. The anti-psychiatry movement latched onto the book with the anti-psychiatrist David Cooper providing the preface to the abridged English edition in 1967. If Foucault was sympathetic to the movement he emphasised that his work did not really fit comfortably within its boundaries. The difference lay in the fact that while the anti-psychiatrists claimed that madness was the result of social exclusion, Foucault maintained that there was a concrete biological basis for forms of behaviour usually designated as indicative of madness or mental illness.

This is an important point. One of the misconceptions concerning Foucault's work is that he ignores concrete reality at the expense of so-called discourse. According to this misconception, things only acquire reality as the result of social practices or the way we talk about them. Foucault, contrary to this, holds that there is in fact an intractable physical reality – but the way we describe, interact with and focus on it is highly variable and by no means fixed. The only way we can apprehend this raw level is by means of a

whole panoply of complex cultural and conceptual tools which differ considerably according to historical period and culture. Foucault argues that the way we link words and things is by no means obvious, and that there is simply no way of pronouncing any of the links we make between words (or knowledge) and things to be absolutely true for once and for all. If this lack of certainty is a matter of despair for some – Foucault sees it as a reason to be optimistic. Ideas and practices which have oppressive and unjust effects on people and limiting effects within knowledge and science can always be changed. Whole sections of the population need not be condemned to a lifetime of misery in the name of some spurious truth – whether this be scientific, religious or political. Foucault notes: ‘It is one of my targets to show people that a lot of things that are a part of their landscape – that people think are universal – are the result of some very precise historical changes. All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence’. [5]

This is not an argument that there is no such thing as truth. Foucault states quite explicitly that he is not engaged in a ‘skeptical or relativistic refusal of all verified truth’. [6] What he is interested in doing is examining the historically and culturally specific rules which regulate how people are able to gain access to the truth and how truth is distributed throughout the social body. For example, one can look at who is authorized to speak the truth (priests, scientists, experts, journalists, therapists of all kinds). One can also analyse the methods which are recognized as valid in producing and organizing statements recognized as true (scientific research, historical research, therapeutic or religious introspection). Thirdly one can focus on institutions which are socially

authorized to distribute truth (schools, churches, political parties, colleges of experts, academic journals, the media and so on).

This seems a timely point to introduce a notion indissolubly linked with Foucault's name, that is power. Foucault defines power as the capacity of one structure of actions to modify another structure of actions. It is not something that can be owned and it has to be exercised to exist. In Foucault's view, the production and deployment of truth is intrinsically linked with the exercise of power. The commonplace handed down from Plato is that power and truth are at opposite poles of the spectrum. But one has only to cast a cursory glance at the politics involved in research funding to counter this argument. Clearly, a well-funded medical researcher in a fashionable area such as cancer is going to be able to produce a lot more in the way of 'truth' than an unfunded researcher in a less glamorous area such as fibromyalgia. Foucault's 1963 book *The Birth of the Clinic* makes this very point in relation to the development of modern clinical medicine in France from 1769 to 1825 relating the formation of medicine as a science to complex political, economic and social factors at the time. Foucault is careful to point out that the involvement of these factors does not invalidate the internal conceptual apparatus of science or other forms of systematized knowledge. In short, knowledge and science still remain operational in relation to the physical and external world.

Foucault's next book *The Order of Things* published in 1966 was an instant best seller. It was hailed as one of the manifestos of the new structuralist movement –even if most of the people who bought the book didn't get beyond the first chapter and with good reason. This is probably Foucault's most difficult and specialized book dealing with the history of economics, biology and linguistics. The press ignored the specialist content

however, and zeroed in on Foucault's provocative statements that Marxism constituted a mere storm in a children's paddling pool (OT: 262), and that the Man revered by humanism was dying if not already dead. These statements provided fertile fodder for controversy in both the structuralist and humanist camps.

Two years after the publication of this book in 1968 student uprisings erupted around the world. Just as an aside here, with the increasing all pervasiveness of American culture, if until recently it was events in Paris in 1968 that have been held up as iconic – America is now jostling to occupy the whole stage as it attempts to do in so many other cultural and historical domains. Foucault was living in Tunisia at the time and was deeply affected by what happened to the students there – beatings, torture and years of imprisonment for merely distributing political tracts. He took risks himself – hiding a student printing press at home, an action which if discovered could have had serious consequences. He returned to France at the end of 1968 determined to take an activist and politically involved stance. In this he was not alone, 1968 marked the radical politicization of not only intellectuals, but students, workers and a variety of socially disadvantaged groups and ushered in a decade of general social unrest and contestation.

During the 1970s Foucault was to be found at the forefront of both militant and intellectual activity promoting social justice. He attended demonstrations, chaired committees, signed numerous petitions and founded and was involved in groups which supported prisoners, health workers and immigrants as well as others. Interestingly, France did not develop any active left wing terrorist groups – a feature of the landscape elsewhere especially Germany and Italy in the 1970s. There were some suggestions at the time that it was the moderating influence of Foucault and other intellectuals which helped

contribute to this state of affairs in France. In 1975 in the wake of his activism in relation to conditions in prisons, Foucault published a history of the adoption of the prison from 1757 to 1838 in France as a universal method of criminal punishment. The book was titled *Discipline and Punish*. This is arguably Foucault's best known and most influential work. Using the example of the prison he traces the emergence of what he describes as a 'disciplinary society', which involves the training of large populations of individuals to act in an easily manageable way. Institutions such as schools, prisons, military barracks, factories and hospitals all acted as conduits for this kind of training through the use of architecture, timetabling and the regimentation of physical activities and gestures. Compliance was guaranteed through complex systems of surveillance.

In 1976 Foucault published the first volume of a History of Sexuality. This book argues that far from repressing sexuality modern European thought has done nothing but talk about it endlessly – proliferating scientific and institutional categories to deal with it. He also outlines ideas on how power is exercised and resisted in the social body and introduces the notion of 'biopower', an idea which has found considerable fortune in recent years in the works of commentators. By biopower Foucault means the management of births, deaths, reproduction and illnesses of the population by the modern State. In the late 1970s, Foucault also introduced his now widely used notion of 'governmentality' which combines the words 'government' and 'rationality'. He initially used the term to describe particular ways of administering populations in modern European history within the context of the rise of the idea of the State. He later expanded his definition to describe the techniques used to guide people's everyday conduct and freedoms at every social level. This idea has been vastly popular and has generated a

huge industry applying the notion to the development of professions and the operation of bureaucracies worldwide.

In the 1980s, Foucault turned his attention to the history of ethical systems in the West and examined the work of the Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers. Hitherto his historical period of choice had always been the 17th to the early 19th century in Europe. Again, this work has been widely influential, giving commentators historical tools to reflect on how human beings fashion themselves as entities able to make choices about how to act in relation to each other and their external environments. He published two further volumes of a History of Sexuality in 1984 a month before his death from AIDS. These volumes dealt with Ancient Greek and Roman attitudes towards sexuality and ethics as handed down in a number of philosophical texts.

IV

So what is one to conclude from all of this in the context of the kind of critiques that I outlined at the beginning of this paper? Why should Foucault's work continue to be taken seriously? There is no doubt that Foucault's work is difficult. He willingly admits that his writing style is somewhat convoluted, but there is also the fact that writing that challenges usual ways of organizing thought is going to require some effort on the part of the reader. Foucault was also writing for an educated, indeed a specialist audience and without this background some of his work is hard to access. Added to this, reading his work in English entails dealing with problems in the translation of both language and cultural assumptions. This complexity has led to misunderstandings and faulty characterizations of Foucault's work. Foucault complained about this himself,

mentioning the reduction of his books to slogans and the fact that people often acquired their ideas about his work from the secondary literature rather than from the original texts.

Questions about Foucault's personal life and its relation to his work raise complex and long rehearsed questions about the relation between the author and his or her work and also about attitudes towards homosexuality in contemporary society. Many of the more scandalous allegations about his behaviour are not backed up by any evidence and it is unclear what implications they have in terms of the actual content of his work. Discrediting authors' work by ad hominem arguments is a long-standing rhetorical device and of debatable merit. Artistic and intellectual production needs to rise and fall on its own terms and generally this is the historical test for any body of work.

Why do people get so upset by Foucault's approach and characterize him as having no regard for truth? The fact of the matter was that he was not prepared to just accept at face value what is conventionally offered up as truth. Neither was he prepared to 'tell people what to do', as the accepted model of how a philosopher should conduct him or herself often has it. His view was that many so-called truths which are accepted as self-evident have very precise historical origins and are often maintained in the interests of particular distributions of power within the social body. His work was about the careful historical examination and taking apart of these processes. From this a number of commentators have concluded that Foucault was out to destroy what all good thinking people know to be unquestionably true and that he was prepared to use any means possible – including inventing complete fictions - to achieve his ends. The fact that some of the more garbled applications of Foucault's ideas sometimes veer closely towards this

position certainly does not help. But even a cursory examination of Foucault's actual work simply does not bear this out. At a technical level his work is underpinned by a wealth of empirical research, with rigorous methods of historical archival investigation and analytical methods of comparison, verification and citation. Foucault was a familiar figure at the National Library in Paris and numbers of people have mentioned seeing him in the main reading room day in and day out. So why isn't this enough to convince those who insist that he made it all up? One reason is that he deals with empirical material often ignored by others and arranges it in new and unexpected ways. Another reason is that he argues that this empirical material is already an interpretation, it has already been selected, and organized in particular ways. The idea that the 'raw material' of research is not neutral, which if not new is often conveniently ignored, also throws into question the efforts of other researchers and analysts, who thus find the foundations of their own work uncomfortably undermined.

But one cannot draw the conclusion from this that Foucault is claiming that nothing is true and that what is designated as truth simply serves the interests of power and that attempts to guide the behaviour of others are always bad. What he is suggesting instead is that we just need to be very careful – too easy an acceptance of the status quo at either the level of knowledge or social organization can lead to the acceptance and perpetuation of myth, injustice and the restriction of reasonable freedoms within the social body.

Foucault's work has helped to free up ossified points of view and has provoked many to reassess their own ideas, to start debates and to use his work as a springboard for further

research in a wide range of disciplines. Foucault's relentless challenges to the status quo are not an invitation to do away with all constraints. As he says:

The important question here, it seems to me, is not whether a culture without restraints is possible or even desirable but whether the system of constraints in which a society functions leaves individuals the liberty to transform the system. Obviously, constraints of any kind are going to be intolerable to certain segments of society. The necrophiliac finds it intolerable that graves are not accessible to him. But a system of constraint becomes truly intolerable when the individuals who are affected by it don't have the means of modifying it. [7]

Foucault offers a fundamentally optimistic point of view. The present situation in any domain is not set in stone and is instead the product of a whole collection of actions and decisions undertaken by many people over a long period of time. This means things can be changed. Such optimism seems to be in short supply at present and is in my view a major reason to continue to read Foucault's work.

ENDNOTES

[1] I have discussed Foucault's work at length in two earlier books: *Michel Foucault: Historian or Philosopher?*, London: Macmillan, 1989 and *Michel Foucault*, London: Sage, 2005.

[2] John Howard, "Interview with Madonna King",

<http://www.pm.gov.au/news/interviews/interview1892.html>, 20 April 2006.

- [3] Giles Auty, "Top Marx for our educators. Marxism should not keep infiltrating the English curriculum", *The Australian*, 21 April 2006.
- [4] Michel Foucault, "Interview with Michel Foucault". In J.D. Faubion (ed.) *Power*, New York: the New Press, 2000, pp. 247-8.
- [5] Michel Foucault. "Truth, power, self: an interview with Michel Foucault, October 25, 1982. In L. Martin et al (eds.) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, p. 11.
- [6] Michel Foucault, "The concern for truth". In S. Lotringer (ed.) *Foucault Live: Interviews 1961-1984*, 2nd ed., New York: Semiotext(e), 1996, p. 456.
- [7] Michel Foucault, "Sexual choice, sexual act". In P. Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984. Volume One*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997, pp. 47-8.