

Education

France's Philosopher of Power

Elusive and exasperating, Michel Foucault has a growing cult

Watching French Marxists grapple with the radical theories of Michel Foucault, says the philosopher's Translator Alan Sheridan, is like watching "a policeman attempting to arrest a particularly outrageous drag queen." The solemn specialists who patrol the American university have their own difficulties with Foucault. Leo Bersani of the French department at Berkeley eulogizes him as "our most brilliant philosopher of power," but Yale Historian Peter Gay dismisses him: "He doesn't do any research, he just goes on instinct." Anthropologist Clifford Geertz of the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study attempts a new classification: "He has become a kind of impossible object: a non-historical historian, an anti-humanistic human scientist. He is what any French savant seems to need to be these days: elusive."

The object of all this controversy is a taut, trim man of 55, whose shaven skull and steel-rimmed spectacles give him a remarkable resemblance to Telly Savalas playing Kojak. On one of his periodic forays to the U.S., a week ago, Foucault appeared in the brick-and-glass Davidson Conference Center of the University of Southern California to participate in a three-day symposium on himself. As usual the hall overflowed with students and professors trying to unravel the mysteries of "panoptic

discourse," "bio-power" and other matters raised in Foucault's intricately argued and opaquely written works. "Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same," says he. "Leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order."

Officially, Foucault's papers declare that since 1970 he has been a professor at the celebrated Collège de France, which permitted Foucault to create for himself a new field that he called "the history of systems of thought." Most of his work, though, is done in an expensively austere Paris apartment that could pass for an ivory tower. The book-lined walls are painted off-white, and the eighth-floor view overlooking the rooftops of Paris is spectacular. The only sign of frivolity: a marijuana plant burgeoning among the petunias on the terrace.

In this setting, Foucault has produced a piercing and extremely influential series of books on the subtlest problems of indi-

vidual liberty and social coercion. In analyzing the relationship between power and truth, he is in the process of redefining both. The nine major books translated into English range from *Madness and Civilization* (1961) through studies of hospitals (*The Birth of the Clinic*, 1966), prisons (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975) to the first volume of a projected five-volume *History of Sexuality* (1976). Foucault is now finishing the second volume, for publication early in 1982, but anyone who expects lurid revelations will be disappointed.

"I did not wish to write a book on sexual behavior," says Foucault. "What I wanted to know was what questions peo-



Foucault entertains followers on a visit to University of Southern California
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ple posed on sexuality, and why. Why, for example, did questions about sex play a larger and larger role in the Christian practice of confession in the 16th and 17th centuries?" After restudying Greek and Latin texts, Foucault says he shifted "the center of gravity" in his newest book to include more classical material on a Foucaultian range of questions: What advice did the Greeks give to newlyweds? What diets did their doctors prescribe? Did they think men or women got more enjoyment from love?

As the son of a physician in provincial Poitiers, Foucault turned to the study of psychology, and disliked it, particularly his internship at Ste. Anne mental hospital in Paris. "I felt very close to and not very different from the inmates," he says. "I was also uneasy about the profession of medicine. It was there that the question was planted: What is medical power? What is the authority that permits it?" A.f.

ter teaching psychopathology in Paris, and then French at Sweden's University of Uppsala, the restless young Foucault held official positions in Warsaw and Hamburg. Out of his wanderings, internal and external, came *Madness and Civilization*, which begins with a poetic evocation of the medieval ships of fools—those wandering hulks that really did bear captive cargoes of madmen away from their own communities.

Foucault had some specific historical questions to ask: Why were the various hostels and shelters of Paris consolidated in 1656 into one general hospital? Why were similar institutions soon built in all provincial cities? And why were they filled not only with the chronically ill but with both the insane and the unemployed? Because, Foucault argued, the dawning Age of Reason was also an age of classification, a time of new differentiations be-

tween the normal and the abnormal, and thus of radical new forms of social regulation. Instead of regarding the insane as possessors of a special kind of knowledge, as the Middle Ages did, the Age of Reason locked them up and silenced them. Today Joan of Arc would be treated with Thorazine. Yet Foucault not only insisted that the changing definitions of insanity are arbitrary, but that they also define sanity and, indeed, reason itself. And those definitions also change.

Many modern historians assume that history flows glacially in a certain direction, and that it is their function to chart that flow, toward liberty, or capitalism, or the national state. Foucault claims, by contrast, that there are sharp breaks—"discontinuities," he calls them—separating one historical period from another. At each such break, the new age unconsciously creates a new intellectual framework for its view of the world. Foucault calls this framework an *episteme*, from the Greek word for science or knowledge. It represents a radically different sense of whether a statement is true, even of what life itself is.

One such break in the mid-17th century finally ended the Middle Ages' emphasis on the resemblances among all God's creations (Shakespeare: "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin") and began the Age of Reason's passion for differentiation. Another "discontinuity," shortly after the French Revolution, ushered in the modern age's passionate belief in evolutionary progress, both social and scientific. According to Foucault a third break may be occurring now, but he offers no clear definition of it, and no explanation of how or why such breaks occur.

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"M. Foucault," wrote one irritated colleague, "races through three centuries at full speed, like a barbarian horseman. He sets fire to the steppe without caution."

It was the French student rebellion of 1968 that pushed Foucault's thinking in a political direction. "I ask myself," he later told an interviewer, "what else I was talking about, in *Madness and Civilization*, if not power." Knowledge is power, Foucault now came to believe, or more specifically, "power and knowledge directly imply one another." So if each historic age developed new forms of knowing itself, new forms of defining life, then each age was really exercising new forms of power.

Military and police power were only the most obvious forms. As Foucault sees it, every accumulation of social knowledge, every kind of inspection, categorization and judgment is an exercise of power. Doctors, teachers, priests all take part in that exercise of power, but, most important, the modern citizen is trained to exercise state power over his fellow citizens and himself. "A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains," Foucault wrote in *Discipline and Punish*, "but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chains of their own ideas . . . The link is all the stronger in that we do not know what it is made of." And this chain of a man's own ideas, this accumulation of examinations, inspections, definitions and regulations, this intellectual prison is the man himself, Foucault believes. There is no basic human nature underneath, awaiting liberation.

Foucault traces the origins of his bleak views ("I cannot experience pleasure," he told an interviewer) to a childhood under the Nazi Occupation. Says he: "I have very early memories of an absolutely threatening world, which could crush us. To have lived as an adolescent in a situation that had to end, that had to lead to another world, for better or worse, was to have the impression of spending one's entire childhood in the night, waiting for dawn. That prospect of another world marked the people of my generation, and we have carried with us, perhaps to excess, a dream of Apocalypse."

Like many intellectuals of his generation, Foucault joined the Communists after World War II; he quit within two years, sooner than most. Marxism "interested me but left me dissatisfied," he recalls; Marx himself was, after all, a product of the 19th century *episteme*. As for the "young people of my generation who were attracted to Marxism, they found in it a means of prolonging that adolescent dream of another world." Foucault remains politically unclassifiable but gener-

ally within the radical left. Says he: "I lived in Sweden, country of liberty, then Poland, a country quite to the contrary, and these experiences showed me that whatever the legal system, mechanisms of power constrain the individual and direct his conduct in an effort to normalize him."

Foucault's views are colored to some extent by his homosexuality. That too he sees as an issue of power. Says he: "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." In his historical research, Foucault was impressed by the fact that although a few homosexuals were burned at the stake as late as the 18th century, such drastic punishment was rarely actually used. Says he: "The practice of arrest served rather as a mechanism of control. So I tried to turn the problem around, saying to myself, 'Why was



U.S.C. students press Foucault for explanations of his complex writings

"Do not ask me who I am, do not ask me to remain the same."

the state so interested in sexuality?"

Foucault's historical researches unearth extraordinary documents that he publishes separately as supporting evidence. Thus his inquiries into crime led to the discovery of a confession that he quoted as its own title: *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother . . .* Foucault's studies of sexuality led similarly to *Herculine Barbin—Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, which he prefaced with one of his most startling rhetorical questions: "Do we truly need a true sex?" His newest discoveries, due out in book form shortly, are a series of 18th century cases in which men asked the Parisian authorities to imprison their wives or children. Says Foucault, with considerable understatement: "There is in this series an aspect of family conflict that speaks to the families' rapport with power."

To those historians who rebuke him

for being too personal and too impressionistic, Foucault offers a bristling response. "If I wished to be a historian in the present sense of the word, that would not be difficult," he says. "But it would be better to ask why I have done what I have done. This problem, say, of locking up the mentally ill—did historians bring it up? No, it was necessary for a 'twisted' person to have the bad idea of introducing questions at once personal and political. But historians always take their problems from the present. If it is not from the immediacy of their personal lives, or the political and social life of their country, it is simply from their university environment."

Foucault's constant turning around of problems, his new questions that often remain unanswered, can be exasperating. He frequently thrusts forward a dramatic idea only to back off and start redefining terms. "It is not so much power that interests me," muses the philosopher of power, "but the history of subjectivity. My problem is to

make a history of this society of normalization." His critics justifiably argue that his research is too narrowly limited to French history and his theories somewhat derivative from earlier thinkers. Even his admirers raise some basic objections. Says Columbia University Professor of English Literature Edward Said: "Foucault has never been able to explain historical change, how things get done. There is also no role in his scheme for such things as justice, freedom, beauty, those positive ideals." Adds Princeton Philosophy Professor Richard Rorty: "His obviously sincere attempt to make philosophical thinking be of some use is not going to get anywhere unless he . . . can join the bourgeois liberals he despises in

speculating where we go from here."

Foucault shrugs off such criticisms as a matter of differing philosophical systems. Says he: "Among the reasons it is truly difficult to have a dialogue with the Americans and English is that for them the critical question for the philosopher is, 'Is it true?' whereas the German-French tradition consists basically of posing the question, 'Why do we think as we do? What effect does it have?' I consider the problems that I pose to be those of modern man."

That may be why Foucault exerts such a strange fascination on a growing cult of students. This is a time when the young, especially, see themselves enmeshed in a thousand invisible wires of social control. If Foucault's theories often seem inconsistent or incomplete, that is partly because they are still evolving in his head. The main point is that he is thinking boldly about problems that need thought.

—By Otto Friedrich. Reported by Sandra Burton/Paris