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 Transla
tor 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 53, whose shaven skull and
steel-rimmed spectacles give him a remarkable resemblance to Telly Savalas play-
ing 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 Cal-
ifornia to participate in a three-day symposium on himself. As usual the hall overflowned 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 bu-
reaucrats 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 ivor
ty cover. The book-lined walls are painted cer-
amic white, and the eighth-floor view overlooks the rooftops of Paris. A skeptic dur-
ing the tour of Nietzsche's "Ecce Homo" among the overeigns 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 ana-
lizing the relationship between power and
truth, he is in the process of redefining both. The methods he used to translate into English range from "Maddness and Civi-
лизation" (1961) through studies of hospi-
tals ("The Birth of the Clinic," 1966), prisons ("Discipline and Punish," 1975) to the first
volume of a projected five-volume "Histo-
ry of Sexuality" (1976). Foucault is now fin-
ishing the second volume, for publication early in 1982, but anyone who expects lu-
rid 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-
ter teaching psychopathology in Paris,
and then French at Sweden's University
of Upsala, the restless young Foucault
held official positions in Warsaw and
Hamburg. Out of his wanderings, internal
and external, came "Madness and Civi-
lization," which begins with a poetic evocation of the medieval ships of fools—those wan-
dering 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 classifica-
tion, a time of new differentiations be-
tween the normal and the abnormal, and thus of radical new forms of social regula-
tion. Instead of regarding the insane as possessors of a spe-
cial kind of knowledge, as the Middle Ages did, the Age of
Reason locked them up and silenced them. Today J. D. Ar
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 de-

finitions also change.

Many modern historians assume that history flows gla-
cially in a certain direction, and that it is their function to chart that flow, toward liber-

ty, or capitalizing on or creating the
tional state. Foucault, 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 intellec-
tual framework for its view of the world.

Foucault calls this framework an epistem

from the Greek word for science or knowl
dge. 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 cen-
tury finally ended the Middle Ages' empha-
sis 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 differentia-
ation. Another "discontinuity"—shortly after the French Revolution, ushered in the modern age's passionate belief in
revolutionary 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 expla-
nation of how or why such breaks occur.

Foucault entertains followers on a visit to University of Southern California

"He has become a kind of impossible object, a nonhistorical historian."
Education

“M. Foucault,” wrote one irritated colleague, “races through three centuries at full speed, like a barbarian horseman. He sets fire to the steppes 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 essentially 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, only wrapping.

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 European. 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, as a citizen 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 the condemned 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."

for being too personal and too impressionistic; Foucault offers a bracing 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 looking up the mentally ill—did historians bring it up? No, it was an individual 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 a great power that interests me, neither the power of the state nor that of the mechanism of control. So I tried to turn the problem around, saying to myself, ‘Why was

the state so interested in sexuality?’”

Foucault’s historical research uncovers 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 Riviere, Having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother . . .”

Foucault’s studies of sexuality led to Herculine Barbin. Being the Recently Discovered Member 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 bracing 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 looking up the mentally ill—did historians bring it up? No, it was an individual 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.”

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