The Poststructuralist Social Theory of Michel Foucault Power-Relations and Subjectivities

Benjamin M. Lamb
The Poststructuralist Social Theory of Michel Foucault

Power-Relations and Subjectivities

by Benjamin M. Lamb

SOCI 442: Sociology Thesis
Departmental Honors Project: Honors Senior Thesis
Advisor: Dr. John Eby
Spring 2008, Messiah College
ABSTRACT:

This thesis argues for the utility of interpreting Michel Foucault as a social theorist. The first part of this thesis accomplishes an intellectual history of Foucault's thought in reference to structuralism and poststructuralism in 20th century France. In these sections, I discuss what critical and methodological tools Foucault uses in his research and their similarity to social analysis. I compare and contrast Michel Foucault with Jurgen Habermas to demonstrate the intertextuality of their work, specifically in their theories of social technologies and power interests. The second part of this thesis expands a viable poststructuralist social theory, based on two of Foucault's concepts: power-relations and subjectivities. In his conception of power, Foucault presents systems analysis as compatible with discursivities and resistances. Lastly, Foucault provides a new way to analyze the subject and ethics in the domain of social theory.
I. Introduction

The thought of Michel Foucault is anomalous to the extent that it cannot be reduced to one academic discipline. Sound, substantive arguments can be made for recognizing Foucault as a historian, a philosopher, a literary critic, a psychologist, a political theorist, and a sociologist. This thesis will focus on the latter identification: how does Foucault operate at the benefit of modern sociology and to the benefit of future social theory? After some initial remarks about Foucault's philosophical framework, I will examine his life, his methodology, and his reception among other contemporary social theorists. Adopting terms that will be explained later in this paper, I will demonstrate how Foucault presents a viable poststructuralist social theory, predominantly consisting of two critical concepts: power-relations and subjectivity.

Within the field of sociology, there is still a large diversity of concentrations. What kind of sociologist is Michel Foucault? Some significant resonances will be expanded upon between him and historical sociology, political sociology, criminology, activist sociology, and even the sociology of religion. Understanding Foucault through these angles will find him to be a timely companion to contemporary sociology and its internal conflicts, especially the divide between quantitative social research on one hand, and theoretical-philosophical sociology on the other. In brief, Foucault's powers of application match his powers of theoretical analysis. Through a quasi-philosophical historical method, used for the perennial but problematic project of understanding 'the present',¹ Foucault defines sociology, and its critical procedures that produce knowledge, in a new and convincing way.

Sociologists may very well be the first intellectuals to agree with Foucault that understanding

'the present' is indeed problematic, because thinkers are always conditioned by a time period and a culture; thought is not pure, not even mathematics, but relative to context and social institutions. The same is undoubtedly true of sociology itself as a group of knowledges in the domain of human sciences. Here is the Foucaultian problem or paradox: a communication about one's culture is articulated through one's culture.³

The logic in this problem is quite Kantian, which is not surprising since Foucault often identifies himself directly in the Kantian critical tradition. Stated in a different way, the paradox deals with the modern analytic of reflexivity on various levels, whether self or society: we are limited by what conditions us—sociolinguistics has this two-fold logic. Understanding the present is an impossible task, because we can never fully realize how saturated our intelligibility is with culturally determined possibilities defined by the historical discourse we employ—the 'historical a priori' that establishes our constitutive limits. On the level of self, Foucault dismisses this 'analytic of finitude' as a imminently disintegrating modern paradigm.⁴ But on the level of society, Foucault cannot escape or find an alternative to the Kantian/critical logic, as Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow duly note.⁵ Before this is taken as an authoritative critique, readers of Foucault should note his explicit identification with Kant. Not only did Foucault write his secondary dissertation on *Kant's Anthropology from a Pragmatic View,*⁶ but in a later retrospective article of self-description, Foucault promotes his work as a continuation of the Kantian philosophical attitude.⁷

What does Kant have to do with Foucault's social theory? This question turns the discussion to

---

³ Of course, Foucault would agree with other French historians, like Fernand Braudel or Michel de Certeau, who problematize historical access to an unprejudiced past not affected by the cognitive interests of the present—so in a sense, the paradox of articulating an 'ontology of the present' applies to how the past is read as well. We will see how this complicates Foucault's method, since at the same time, Foucault attempts to chart historical discontinuities with an eye on how they elucidate the present. The logic here sounds more like a Schleiermacher's hermeneutical circle.
⁵ Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Hermeneutics and Structuralism*, 1983, p. 32.
⁶ Foucault, “Introduction to Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View,*” 2002.
an account of French intellectual thought in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, focusing on the movements that most impacted Foucault. When Foucault first rocketed to academic success and worldwide fame in the 1960s, he was on board the ship called 'Structuralism.'\textsuperscript{8} As if to verify the tenets of structuralism, the movement did not have a founder or master figure so much as a cross-disciplinary discourse which many intellectuals appropriated or rejected. Initially, structuralism was deployed as a science; it was the \textit{science of systems}, replacing any consciousness-centered or ego-oriented philosophy, namely existentialism (\textit{e.g.} Sartre) and phenomenology (\textit{e.g.} Husserl). In linguistics, Ferdinand Saussure explained the operations of language as differential relations between arbitrary sign and signified. Claude Levi-Strauss, in anthropology, studied myths as a set of binary oppositions and applied the Saussurian differential system to kinship relations. In psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan updated Freud by identifying the unconscious with the structure of language. Similarly, Louis Althusser tried to update Marx according to the tenets of scientific structuralism, scrapping Marx's historical, prophetic side while elevating his materialistic theory of economic determination and relations of production. France was a hotbed of monumental thinkers in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century that the rest of the world is still trying to absorb. Foucault's contemporaries also included influential thinkers in literature and philosophy, such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze.

Structuralism radically disturbed sociology but it also constructed new social theories. Rather than comment on specific analysts though, a general account of the contours of a 'structuralist social theory' will serve my purposes. Structuralism is said to have accomplished the disappearance of the 'subject' and the appearance of the 'object' as a product of discourse—today intellectual historians equate structuralism with 'the linguistic turn' and the preference for \textit{synchronic} explanations of causality rather than \textit{diachronic} or historical methods. What this means exactly must be elaborated in

\textsuperscript{8} Of course, Foucault only ever tenuously identified his thought with structuralism; later he denounced any association completely.
Foucault's thought in the 1960s was characteristic and consonant with the structuralist intellectual renovation. At that time, he was constructing his theories on discourse, discontinuity and periodization. In fact, Foucault's early writings actually show a scarcity of social analysis—he is more concerned with discourse and knowledge than with power-relations. However, what's significant for social theory is the Foucaultian rejection of the humanist individual, a singular genius or hero who gives birth to a meaningful world. This is where Foucault sharply diverges from the Kantian project: Foucault decenters and dehabilitates the transcendental subjectivity of philosophical idealism and its remnant in high historiography. The transcendental subject as constructor or even hermeneutic-reader of history, to put it dramatically, is murdered by the machine. In this new paradigm, society's rules and regularities, by language and law, effect the subject, not the other way around. Of course, subjects often proceed to misinterpret the relation between truth and discourse and power, as when they make conscious statements of meaning in a mythic world that revolves around 'Man.' They forget or are blinded to the fact that any intelligible statement merely is an already structured possibility of a epistemic cultural framework, a system of differences. So goes the structuralist theory of the unconscious.

This dark caricature of a 'structural social theory' is elucidated by the contrast with optimistic humanism and hermeneutics. Yet, it must be recognized from the start that Foucault, in the 1970s until his death in 1984, not only constantly dissociates himself from structuralism, as depicted above, but he also vehemently criticizes such canonical structuralism.  

---

9 *The Order of Things*, pp. xxii-xxiii.
10 For one among numerous examples, see Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 1997, p. 176.
**II. Is Foucault a Sociologist?**

*Biography*

An intellectual biography will help contextualize Foucault's thought or at least give some didactic ordering to it.\(^\text{11}\)

Foucault was born in 1926, and he reflects that his childhood was lived in the fear and rumors of war.\(^\text{12}\) His father was a physician and his family afforded him a quality education. In high school, Foucault was most interested in the study of history, while in college, his specialty shifted to psychology and psychiatry, in which he would later do his primary dissertation and write his first book. Very ambitious, he was accepted on his second attempt into the Ecole Normale Superieure (ENS), one of France's most competitive and prestigious universities. Moving to Paris for the ENS in 1945, he attended lectures by Georges Dumezil, Jean Hyppolite, and the more famous Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

While working on his primary and secondary dissertations, he was advised by highly influential intellectuals, most notably Louis Althusser and Georges Canguilhem. The latter professor was also a philosopher of psychology and was perhaps the most formative thinker upon Foucault's early work, *Mental Illness and Psychology* and *History of Madness*. The former book Foucault has mostly disowned, while the latter as his first famous work largely planted Foucault's name in the academic media.

Canguilhem's background was in the philosophy of science, specifically under Gaston Bachelard, and his project was to trace the emergence of 'concepts' in the formation of scientific psychology. By 'concept,' Canguilhem meant more than 'idea'; it is more akin to the social construction of perception, how experts like doctors constitute reality through terms like 'mental illness' or even

---

\(^\text{11}\) There are three definitive biographies about Foucault, each one with a unique emphasis and angle such that it is not a bore to read all three! Didier Eribon's *Foucault*, 1992; James Miller's more controversial *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 1994; David Macey's *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, 1993.

The most significant concept Canguilhelm studied was 'the normal and the pathological' and how norms of homeostasis and reason exclude the Other through a term, e.g. 'insane' or 'pathological.' Yet Canguilhelm also posits that the Other, though separated and segregated by structural division, is a necessary condition for operation of 'normal' or 'rational' discourse.\textsuperscript{13} Foucault obviously internalized much of Canguilhelm's thought in his \textit{History of Madness}. In this book, Foucault plots changing conceptions of 'madness,' especially its shift in perception from innocent folly to moral corruption or biological malfunction. Historically, Foucault identifies the Enlightenment and the 'Great Confinement' of madness as two sides of the same coin. The philosophical and geographical splitting between Rationality and Irrationality constituted the Classical possibilities for both reason and madness under a new set of designating and excluding definitions. Foucault's book is often discredited precisely for its grandeur, so Jacques Derrida has critiqued: Foucault's lifelong tendency to make generalizations on the basis of a few writers, in this case Descartes, is nowhere as glaring as it is with \textit{History of Madness}.\textsuperscript{14}

The other confusion arising from the book is due to Foucault's early obsession with the experience of madness. To some extent, Foucault not only defends madness but also advocates it as a limit-experience. This is the controversial topic that has led to much biographical guesswork, especially by James Miller, who sees the notion of 'limit-experience' as permeating Foucault's whole canon.\textsuperscript{15} This guesswork could make sense of Foucault's suicidal and instable years in college, if the experience of encountering death is interpreted as one such (im)possible limit-experience, which early Foucault does seem to suggest. But it is vital to recognize that this discussion occurs in an advance, obscure arena of philosophy, building upon predecessors like Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot who wrote that, “the being of language is apparent to itself only in the disappearance of the subject.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Georges Canguilhelm, \textit{The Normal and the Pathological}, 1991.
\textsuperscript{14} This is also the critique of Edward Said who nevertheless was heavily influenced by Foucault; \textit{c.f.} Said's essay, “Foucault and the Imagination of Power,” in \textit{Foucault: A Critical Reader}, 1986.
\textsuperscript{15} James Miller, pp. 32, 87.
\textsuperscript{16} Eribon, p. 149.
by the death of the self through its dispersion in language, a quasi-mystical experience that transgresses the norm-limit is possible (whether of madness, of sexual rapture, or of dying). While Miller tends to promote this as definitive Foucault, David Halperin\textsuperscript{17} and other scholars have mostly disassembled Miller's depiction by observing how this 'limit-experience obsession' is only symptomatic of early Foucault.

In later Foucault, many of these tropes occasionally resurface in interviews about the experience of homosexuality in modern societies. In France in the mid-century, practicing homosexuality was not exactly normal or pathological, though often considered 'transgressive' and even 'creative' relative to the 'heterosexual hegemony.' An intellectual biography, that includes Foucault's later interviews, cannot ignore that Foucault practiced homosexuality for his whole life and died of AIDS in 1984. Hence, James Miller's guesswork that many of Foucault's notorious troubled years of youth might have rightly been diagnosed by Foucault's psychiatrist in 1948 as due to a social “difficulty in experiencing homosexuality.”\textsuperscript{18}

Early Foucault does continue to philosophize about death in his next two books, published in the same year, 1963, but otherwise the two are unrelated. In \textit{Death and the Labyrinth}, Foucault exercises his talents as a literary critic by discussing the obscure poet Raymond Roussel who associates the experience of writing with death. In \textit{The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception}, Foucault returns to the history of science to trace the conceptual appearance of death itself as an object for the medical mind and the all-seeing gaze of the expert—an anticipation of the dual power/knowledge complex. Foucault's thesis is that in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, a new conception of 'life' arose with biologists, causing a massive reconceptualization of the body, sickness, and death. The objectivation of biological life becomes important in Foucault's later theorizing about the modern bio-

\textsuperscript{17} David Halperin, \textit{Saint Foucault}, 1997.
\textsuperscript{18} Eribon, p. 26.
power of the nation-state.

In 1966, Foucault became an intellectual celebrity with the publication of *The Order of Things* and its methodological defense three years later: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. These two books are the zenith of Foucault's unique form of structuralism. Basically they are a historical exercise in discourse analysis of three epistemological epochs and the transformations between the three: Renaissance, Classical, and Modern. In 1970, Foucault was elected to be a professor at the famous College de France, the paramount university for free-thinkers in France. He titled his own chair as “History of the Systems of Thought.”

At the College de France, Foucault was required to deliver a course of lectures on new research once a year to the public. Many of these have now been published as books, and they are a formidable source of Foucault's later thinking yet to be integrated in content with his intentionally-written books.19 The courses are also beneficial for locating his contributions to social theory, so I will mention a few of them for this purpose. From 1971-73, Foucault lectured on penal theories and punitive society. These lectures indicate Foucault's shifting method from *discourse* to *power* analysis, and the explanation of power as various social controls and mechanisms. Much of the content of these two lectures were eventually published in 1976 in *Discipline and Punish*, which is probably Foucault's most read book, at least by Americans. In 1975-6, Foucault presented a lecture series entitled, “Society Must be Defended.” In this course, Foucault directly challenges the claims of traditional political theory. He critiques social contract philosophy and theories of legitimacy and sovereignty. Dismissing them as ideological tools, Foucault traces a history of the modern nation-state, its emergence through war, and the new form control over populations: *bio-power*. Two of Foucault's last lectures at the College de France were titled, “Subjectivity and Truth,” and “The Hermeneutics of the Subject.” The return of a

---

19 One notable exception to this is Eric Paras's *Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power/Knowledge*, 2006. Paras's goal was precisely to update Foucault by integrating the content of his courses at the College de France.
usable concept of the 'subject' to Foucault's critical theory should be noted here as a poststructuralist
turn.

During the late 1960s and 70s, Foucault also became an icon of political activism and public
resistance to governmental power, though Foucault understood his participation in protest on very
different grounds than the frequent Marxist or Maoist in France during the 1968 revolts. Foucault
founded an organization called the GIP, or *Group d'Information sur les Prisons*. The objective of this
group was to expose jail conditions and advocate prisoners to speak politically for themselves. In 1973,
Foucault translated and published a dossier of reports on a criminal case in 1836, including a round of
articles by various French thinkers.\(^20\) In the late 1970s, Foucault turned into an international journalist
for a year, covering the Iranian Revolution. From his activity at Tehran and elsewhere, a stream of
articles, interviews, and social commentaries poured from his pen about religion and political change.
In the early 1980s, Foucault teamed up with a famous French sociologist, Pierre Bordieu, to draft a
signed declaration of protest against the repressive policy of the communist government in Poland. All
of these events established Foucault's reputation as a social activist in addition to France's most popular
philosopher.

During the last decade of his life, Foucault was often traveling abroad; he studied Zen
Buddhism in Japan, gave lectures in Brazil, and taught seminar courses at the University at Berkeley in
California. Around this time, he published a forgotten suicidal memoir written by a French
hermaphrodite.\(^21\) Foucault's last publication venture included three books in an incomplete project
Foucault started called *The History of Sexuality*. Volume 1, *An Introduction*, was published in 1978 as a
dense outline of the domain and methods for a future project that would trace the historic formation of
the modern heterosexual-family ethos and configuration of sexuality. Volumes 2 and 3, respectively

Uses of Pleasure and The Care of the Self, were not published until 6 years after the first volume. The classicist content of these latter two volumes was a surprise to everyone including Foucault. He had made the decision to begin his history of sexuality by studying Greco-Roman society, thus putting him in a new conversation with classicist colleagues such as Pierre Hadot, Paul Veyne in France, and also Peter Brown in the United States. Foucault died in a hospital shortly after reading the first public response of reviews to these two books.22

Methodology

Foucault's reputation as a philosopher often leads sociologists to discriminate against him as irrelevant to their study. I am arguing that this is a mistake and that there are good warrants for taking him seriously as a theoretical sociologist. I am not interested in a game of academic ownership; rather, I propose that evaluating Foucault as a sociologist is beneficial to both commentary on Foucault and the field of sociology—opening both the person and the discipline to better interpretations. To demonstrate Foucault's strengths for social theory, I will enter a methodological discussion.

Does Foucault have a 'method'? Perhaps the benefit of studying Foucault two decades after the close of his oeuvre, is that he is finally being rescued or rather salvaged from his vituperative critics who smear him as either a simple structuralist or a skeptical postmodernist who makes simpleton statements, like “truth is power” says one mantra often misattributed to him, another says “power determines people.” More careful commentary has lead most scholars to recognize the complexity of Foucault's thought. His complexity comes from the fact that he does not have one method, nor does he have an immobile core system or similar goal behind every project and publication. Gary Gutting skillfully investigates this same question, and comes to the conclusion that Foucault gravitates to different methods for each work written. Gutting claims Foucault often switches his methods dependent
on the objects at hand, which makes sense since every 'object' that appears is defined by a certain discourse that may be more vulnerable to some methods rather than others.\textsuperscript{23} The breadth and diversity of Foucault's oeuvre is immense, as even my brief biography shows.

However, Foucault should not be criticized as flippant in his methodology. On the contrary, Foucault seems to be proving a point through his oeuvre's ostensible lack of systematic unity. The modern notion of 'the author' includes a complex set of rules, including the truth-game of self-sameness and context-text coherence.\textsuperscript{24} To write professionally one must bind one's self to a set of rules: agreement with what one said before, and coherence of text according to the expectation of one's context. This is the deadlock Foucault tries to break through, rather apocalyptically, when he announces "the death of the author" along with Roland Barthes. In one book, Foucault might analyze written documents produced by experts, \textit{e.g.} The \textit{Birth of the Clinic}; in another book, his investigations might lead him to discuss architecture and social patterns of space, \textit{e.g.} \textit{Discipline and Punish}; in his later writings on Greco-Roman and Christian societies, Foucault adopts rather traditional methods, those of intellectual history and contextualism. Foucault considers it a mark of intellectual maturity, and true 'curiosity,' to not be confined to one method according to conservative academic rules. Indeed, he writes that all research would be futile if it did not lead one to change one's mind against what one thought they already knew.\textsuperscript{25}

Unexpectedly, Foucault in some recorded interviews of the 1980s, later offers his own self-descriptive take on the coherence of his oeuvre. His self-commentary is undeniably retrospective but still very instructive. The hermeneutical key to his texts turns out to be the disappeared-but-returned subject which never really disappeared in the first place, Foucault argues. These interviews and their content which shed light on the whole of Foucault's thought will be discussed at length in my last

\textsuperscript{24} See Foucault's famous article, "The Death of the Author" in \textit{Language, Counter-Memory, Practice}, 1978.
section on Foucault's poststructuralist social theory.

Even if Foucault exercises flexibility in choosing his methods differently in different projects, there are still several characteristics that all of his books have in common. A good heuristic is the title of Foucault's academic post at the College de France, “Chair of the History of Systems of Thought,” which he coined himself. The first feature of this title to note is Foucault's historicism—insofar as he is a sociologist, he is a historical sociologist. Foucault's biographers all state how Foucault could live in the archives during the entire working day. Gilles Deleuze frankly calls Foucault an 'archivist' before a 'philosopher.'

The hyperboles are duly called for: Foucault lives and breathes in the historical documents of multiple archives of the best libraries in France. One's first impression when opening a Foucault book may be the overwhelming presence of strange names, people important in their own time, but archaic or forgotten today, many whom Foucault singles out for a discursive criticism that has the effect of elevating their significance as revealing key symptoms of ephochal, cross-continental transformations. For instance, appearing in the first 100 pages of *The Order of Things* are Porta, Croilius, Cesalpino, Belon, Aldrovondi, Paracelsus, Ramus, among many others. Hence, Deleuze writes that Foucault provides us with an alternative archaeology and cartography surrogated for belletristic or individual/event-centered historiography.

Foucault 'does history' for objectives that coincide with sociologists: *i.* To understand the present, even through the paradoxical way described in my introduction; *ii.* To demonstrate the contingency of contemporary configurations of power—this historical method Foucault calls 'genealogy' in the spirit of Nietzsche; *iii.* To expose the relativity of certain problematics between discourse and power that constitute objects and subjectivities.

Foucault achieves this last objective by employing explicitly *comparative* methods. By

---

27 This locates Foucault with Fernand Braudel of the *long duree* or *Annales* school of history (vs. event-history).
comparing different cultures and different periods, the historian gains a perspective on the emergence and disappearances of 'objects,' i.e. why certain cultures institute some social patterns as 'problems' while other social patterns are neither detected nor observed—hence called 'cultural.' A typical example Foucault gives of this social-fact problematization in his later interviews is homosexuality. First, Foucault notices that homosexuality had not been a 'problem' until relatively recent. Sexual behaviors between same-sex persons have occurred throughout history, yet in Greco-Roman culture, they took place without being an 'object' of moral analysis. Then, Foucault asks why the shift in our modern perception occurred. In attempting an answer, Foucault formulates the hypothesis that as the practice of 'male friendship,' as performed in antiquity and the middle ages, gradually disappeared, homosexuality was inverse-proportionately problematized. It thus became not only an \textit{a posteriori} object of historical-social analysis, but primarily an epistemic-historical \textit{a priori} social fact of society, a problem to be dealt with by regulation, control, and surveillance—the mechanisms of juridical power.

As another example of his comparative methodology, Foucault contrasts Eastern practices of sexuality with Western practices in the first volume of \textit{The History of Sexuality}. Foucault describes the Eastern conceptuality of sexuality as an \textit{ars erotica}: sexual practice is a set of skills for enhancing bodily pleasure to be moderated. In contrast, Western Christianity-derived culture conceptualizes and enacts sexuality as a \textit{scientia sexulis}: sexual behavior is seen as the secret truth of subjects according to a confessional hermeneutic of desire. In the West, desire and truth constitute sex; in the East, sex is the management of bodily pleasure. Of course, Foucault has been severely criticized for this simplistic typology that roughly misrepresents eastern cultures in their diversity. But the point here is a methodological one: Foucault's \textit{comparative} analysis exposes the \textit{objectivation} or \textit{problematization}\textsuperscript{28}.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ethics}, p. 171: “I think the reason [homosexuality] as a problem, as a social issue, at this time is that friendship had disappeared.”
\textsuperscript{30} However in a later interview, \textit{Ethics} p. 259, Foucault concedes that he was wrong about using the \textit{ars erotica} as he did, almost like an ideal-type.
procedures of our present Western culture by contrasting specific social-facts and social-objects relative to different discourses.

I have purposefully deployed Durkheim's term 'social fact' even though Foucault did not. Perhaps most social theorists would recognize the similarity of conceptual analysis though. No secondary literature I have found connects Foucault to Durkheim directly.\textsuperscript{31} Its seems quite plausible though, considering how influential Durkheim was upon French social theory, that Foucault read and internalized Durkheim as he had Canguilhelm. That Foucault read Durkheim can easily be evidenced by the occasional references to him, such as in \textit{Discipline and Punish}.\textsuperscript{32} But even if Foucault did not consider himself properly Durkheimian, his analysis exemplifies historical sociological methods in a similar vein.

Sometimes Foucault promotes the agenda of social theory more consistently than practicing sociologists. The topical affinity between Foucault's writings and social theory is easily evident: deviance, mental illness, sexual behavior, governmentality, and lastly, how the self is constituted/socialized and conscious of itself. As for where and why Foucault often excels in social analysis, I am led to credit his critical philosophy. The innovations of Foucault's critical method exemplify the necessity of perpetuating dialogue between sociology and philosophy. From this bridge, Foucault is able to penetrate the paradoxes of social analysis, mainly by not letting social theory be a special exception to a rigorous discourse analysis. Foucault's critical analysis of all modern human sciences would lead social theorists to question the popular objects of social analysis, whether crime, gender, race, class, etc. Why are they the privileged objects or objectified subjects? Is not their list a new authoritative canon according to rules of the academic profession, research funding and teaching reputation? And has not the sedimentation of those objects become so saturated, that their social

\textsuperscript{31} Even though Mike Gane comprehensively comments of them both in his \textit{French Social Theory}, 2003.
\textsuperscript{32} Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, 1977, p. 23.
analysis often loses its usefulness—or at least that social analysts have lost the comparative creativity to discover what other problematics are operative in the present, which could be so close to us as instruments of our perception that we cannot even see them? Would Foucault suggest that the very focus on 'social problems' is conditioned by practices no longer performed, symbols no longer circulated except on a secondary historical order? These critical questions exemplify the value of Foucault for understanding the present. Furthermore, many social theorists and anthropologists of the 'everyday' already do research and analysis similarly to a Foucaultian genealogy of the present.

Returning to a discussion of Foucault's methods, they are often classified into two types: i. *archaeology*, and ii. *genealogy*. Early Foucault of the 1960s exclusively used an archaeological analysis that resonated with the structuralist paradigm. In the *Order of Things* especially, Foucault explicates historical documents on the basis of *discourse*, the object of archaeology. This methodology is elaborated at length in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Much like the historian of science Thomas Kuhn, Foucault showed that different time periods operated according to the rules of a dominant discourse. What is accepted as true or false in different epochs, varies accordingly to that episteme's truth-games. Foucault substantiates these claims in *The Order of Things* by comparing the production of knowledge within Renaissance, Classical, and Modern epistemic periods. The geographical method for this sort of investigation is Foucault's habitation in the historical archives of France. In the *archives*, one does *archaeology*, which will uncover the strangeness of truth-conditions in a time other than our own.

As mentioned in my introduction, Foucault posited that the *modern* discourse was constituted by the 'Analytic of Finitude' as inaugurated by Kant, a paradigm that perceives 'Man' as both the constructor of knowledge and an object of knowledge. A question left unanswered by Foucault is whether a *postmodern* discourse has arrived or if the 20th century still thinks in the shadow of 'Man.'
the 1960s, Foucault seemed to be introducing the new discourse of a new epoch under the banner of structuralism. According to these tenets, the being of man and the being of language are inversely related, so when theorists of semiotics and literature started to abound in France, Foucault interpreted the trend as a shift in the tide long overdue that signaled the 'death of Man.' But Foucault does not entertain the idea of being the spokesperson for a new structuralist discourse for very long.

In the 1970s, Foucault shifts methodologies, not only by distancing himself against structuralism, but by inventing a new method for historical analysis known as genealogy. Genealogy turns from *discourse* to *power* as the condition of truth. Some commentators conjecture that Foucault switches allegiances because he realizes the methodological inadequacies of archaeology, mainly that it presumed the autonomy of discourse apart from social context.\(^3\) Others think that Foucault never officially abandons archaeology, but rather complements it with another method: whereas early Foucault concentrated on discursive practices as a historian of philosophy, later Foucault focuses on non-discursive practices, in a way more akin to a social theorist. I prefer the later reading of the relation between archaeology and genealogy that engages them through a hermeneutical circle: discourse determines the rules of institutional truth and practice, while institutions condition the discourse that they protect and partake. Neither power nor discourse can be isolated in an originary place without the other. This reciprocity of power and knowledge—nicknamed 'power-knowledge'—constitutes individuals as subjects, persons who perceive their self according to discursive modes of subjugation.

In Foucault's main genealogical works, he describes how different kinds of modern subjects were formed, conditioned, and objectified by institutions and their apparatuses of power, be it discourse, space, surveillance, etc. For instance, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traces the 'the birth of the prison' and how punitive discourses constructed a whole architecture placing subjectified-criminals not

\(^{33}\) Dreyfus and Rabinow, pp. xxiv-xxv.
only as physical prisoners but also as immoral selves with a responsible 'soul.'

In my section on poststructuralist social theory I will explicate Foucault's nominalistic conception of power. Undoubtedly, Foucault's early methods, archaeology, were not as sociologically-minded as his later writings, genealogy. One of the main contributions Foucault makes to contemporary social theory is his critical thought and tool, 'power.' Is not to do sociology the same as performing diagnostics on complex power relations in the present, as an 'ontology of the present'—social theory as 'historical ontology' as Foucault suggests? The displacement of 'ontology' from metaphysics is an intentional philosophical statement in itself. Power analysis is conceptually advantageous because it provides a model for understanding its researchable manifestations as social objects, such as norms, identity, institutions. As I will discuss in my later section, Foucault's idea of power is not limited to wholesale oppression, but also includes productivity, visible and invisible.

Reception by Social Theorists

To substantiate many of my claims about Foucault's usefulness and propriety to sociology, I only need to refer to how many sociologists have already appropriated Foucault. Hitherto, I have not tried to split 'sociologists' from 'social theorists' because Foucault's methodology could be practiced by any so-interested and inclined sociologist. But now I turn more intentionally to several contemporary social theorists renown for their reputation within the international academy, theorists whose writings reconcile the sociology-philosophy divide, a Foucaultian project I entertained earlier. First, I will examine the commentary of Anthony Giddens on Foucault, both in his specialized work and in an introductory textbook he co-authored. Then I will turn to a few other social theorists, such as Georges Ritzer, Zygmunt Bauman, and David Lyons. The objective of this section is to briefly mention other social theorists who confirm my thesis and to list what specific examples they give of Foucault's impact.

upon the domain.

Quite noticeably, a few of Foucault's books are considered classics by now among social theorists, while others are almost completely ignored. *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* are Foucault's two seminal texts in the estimation of social theorists. Anthony Giddens proves this trend, hailing *Discipline and Punish* as Foucault's “most brilliant, the focus of most of what he had to say of importance about power.” Giddens also elevates 'power' as the quintessential conceptual contribution made by Foucault to social theory. Offering a definition of how Foucault uses the term, Giddens writes, “Power was actually the means whereby all things happened, the production of things, of knowledge and forms of discourse, and of pleasure.” Since the same conception of power animates Foucault's first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, it is no surprise social theorists are attracted to that work as well.

In addition to power, Giddens thinks that Foucault has offered sociologists several other critical concepts as well: i. *Architecture* – how space itself, as it is constructed and laid out, manifests social patterns such as hierarchy and control. "Technology' and 'technique' are ubiquitous concepts in Foucault's vocabulary and they can usually be translated simply as the various means and instruments used by institutions or individuals to constitute and control subjects, including the relation of self to self. iii. *Theory of Organization* – Giddens also calls this 'administrative power.' This notion in particular is featured in Giddens's *Introduction to Sociology* textbook, in which he associates Foucault with the theory that institutions control time and space through techniques like surveillance, time-tables, and information. On this last

---

35 Giddens, *Politics, Sociology and Social Theory*, p. 263.
36 Ibid. p. 263.
37 This has special affinities with another contemporary social theorists: David Harvey on geography.
38 Giddens, *Introduction to Sociology*, p. 571.
Giddens praises Foucault for making “perhaps the most important contribution to the theory of administrative power since Max Weber's classic text on bureaucracy.” The comparison and contrast between Weber and Foucault is often touched on by social theorists. Similar to Weber's notion of bureaucratic rationality, Foucault analyzes modern forms of organizational power. The main difference between the two social philosophers is that Weber's vision of rationality totalizes society—society is a cage—but Foucault maps the power of domination more like an archipelago of islands in the sea of civil society, i.e. there are places where repressive power is totalizing, but there are many places, perhaps even within the same society, where pleasure and peace is not domination-based though still conditioned by power.

Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist living in exile in England, also finds Foucault to be a resourceful ally. Unlike Giddens though, Bauman is not persuaded that Foucault's theory of power as organizational domination is his best contribution. Rather, Bauman dwells in Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, focusing on several reconceptualizations of sexuality that Foucault proposes there. In this work, Foucault debunks the popular liberal repressive-hypothesis that urges humans to free their desires from the social constraints fettering them. The libertine and the conservative Victorian have this fundamental truth in common: the perception of sex as a special object. Foucault questions the very social fact that constitutes sex as the intimate, secret center of desire and truth in a subject. By this critique, coming from a standpoint that recommends 'desexualization,' Foucault finds himself at odds with both Christians and psychoanalysts. In Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault outlines a future project that will accomplish a genealogy of modern sexuality, exposing the contingency of the ternary structure of sex, truth, and desire. Foucault roughly sketches the specifics in the first volume, making some quite controversial claims. First, Foucault traces this gestalt of sexual

---

41 'Archipelagos' of incarceration, as opposed to systemic rationalization, should probably be credited to George Ritzer and his way of wording it.
experience to the Christian practice of confession, in which individuals were to disclose their secret sexual immoralities to an authority. The gradual problematization and epistemic result was a hermeneutic that constituted the modern self as a “desiring man.” Second, Foucault seeks to uncover a historical connection between pastoral power, as performed through the visibilizing ritual of penance, to the modern state police power, both as instruments of population-wide surveillance and control. Clearly the scope of the genealogy of sexuality impacts a lot of territory for the social theorist, as Bauman indicates. Bauman also wishes to employ Foucault's methods to critique the modern patriarchy-derived social configuration of the nuclear family, exposing the contingency of its contemporary formation.43

Perhaps a spectrum of reactions to Foucault by social theorists can be plotted, from those who embrace him to those who avoid him. Georges Ritzer and Charles Lemert both hope to integrate Foucault's theory with contemporary social theory.44 Not necessarily agreeing with Foucault on many points, Ritzer thinks Foucault's whole oeuvre, early and later, is relevant to sociology. In his book Postmodern Social Theory, Ritzer summarizes and discusses at length all of Foucault books, from archaeology to genealogy and even some of Foucault's later ethical writings.45 Like Ritzer, David Lyon does not disregard Foucault's early methods of discourse analysis in its potential contribution to sociology. In his book Postmodernity, Lyon explicitly draws parallels between the implications of Foucault's work and Thomas Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions.46 Both Kuhn and Foucault describe the history of science not as a line of advancement through more accurate representations of the world, but as a series of paradigm shifts (though Foucault may be more skeptical than Kuhn about the 'reality' of scientific truth-games). Despite the parallel, Foucault's work in a sense comes closer to challenging sociology directly since Kuhn specializes in the hard sciences while Foucault addresses the

44 For Charles Lemert, see his Michel Foucault: Social Theory and Transgression, 1982.
45 Georges Ritzer, Postmodern Social Theory, 1997.
David Lyon makes another theoretical parallel between Foucault and the famous German sociologist and critical philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a parallel often and popularly noted. Writing within the framework of modern critical philosophy, they both reject the dominant Hegelian form of history centered on a sovereign subject and the dual subject-object character of 'Man.' Structuralism has denounced and decentered that Kantian paradigm, in and turn, generated a rising knowledge of the 'being of language' for Foucault, or of 'communication' according to Habermas's lexicon. As social theorists, Foucault and Habermas offer acute critiques of modern institutions, political and economic, as extensions of the rationalizing power of domination. However, their conceptions of power quickly part paths after that initial agreement. Since I delineate the similarity of these two thinkers in relation to social theory, I will comment at length on their theoretical differences.

Foucault and Habermas

Most of the continental debate between Foucault and Habermas, as contemporaries, has been facilitated by their American colleagues, and unfortunately, they have been pressured into making remarks about the other that betray their mutual misunderstandings. Foucault calls Habermas's attempt to continue the project of modernity through undistorted consensual communication rather utopian.\footnote{\textit{The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom}, p. 298.} Conversely, Habermas dismisses Foucault's theory of power as being metaphysical in a Nietzschean sense that inevitably leads to anti-humanistic skepticism. These are both gross and overused stereotypes they are promoting about the other. However, Habermas expands a more nuanced critique of Foucault in his later work: \textit{i.} Foucault is trapped in the same paradox of self-reference that he refutes elsewhere; \textit{ii.} Foucault's fundamental idea of power is essentially a matter of control and determinism; \textit{iii.} Foucault's genealogies pretend to be value-free, but in doing so, they lose a necessary normative
This critique abides in several misreadings of Foucault, though Habermas's third critique shows a true difference between the two thinkers. First, accusing Foucault of a 'paradox of self-reference' is misleading since for Foucault the 'self' is not the transcendental-empirical doublet of a bygone era. Moreover Foucault's paradox concerns the contemporary discourse about discourse: what *episteme* conditions Foucault's historical analysis of other epistemes? But this is a problematic explicitly embraced by Foucault in his discussion of the difficulties in doing an ontology of the present. Furthermore, as I proposed in my introduction, this is a problematic that positively characterizes the critical thought Foucault finds in Kant. What Habermas forgets is that Foucault is as much a Kantian as a Nietzschean.

Secondly, orienting himself on the possibility of an ideal speech situation, Habermas predictably finds Foucault as an aid for charting 'communication pathologies.' Habermas's goal is to remove the political obstacles that may interfere with pragmatic and communal reasoning. But Habermas limits Foucault as a theorist of pathology who defines power solely as that which distorts communication. Of course, many distinctions of types of power need be noted, as Habermas notes, but he nevertheless targets Foucault for a generalized metaphysic of power as domination. As we will see more in my next section, Foucault also differentiates between types of power (e.g. 'domination' vs. 'governance'), and does not think that power and freedom are mutually exclusive in the way Habermas does. Power-relations condition all knowledge, for later Foucault, and power structures a field of possibilities that includes freedom and resistance. Hence, Foucault considers Habermas's objective of sterilized, power-neutral conversation to be impossible. Foucault accuses Habermas of committing the “failure to see that power relations are *not* something that is bad in itself, that we have to break free of.”

---

48 Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, pp. 128-129.
49 David Ingram, “Foucault and Habermas,” In the *Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, p. 262.
50 Foucault, *Ethics*, p. 298., *emphasis mine.*
Lastly, Habermas's third critique is more than a misunderstanding; it is a valid, perhaps irreconcilable difference between them. Habermas, among many other critics like Richard Rorty, wonders about the apparent impersonality of Foucault's text. Foucault's archaeologies and genealogies seem to lack a standpoint, a place from where the force of his criticism is issued. From a sociological point of view, this accusation would indeed be condemning of Foucault if he did not take into account his own situatedness. Yet, Foucault is more complex and more aware of this problem than Habermas claims. Indeed, it would not be a stretch to call Foucault an advanced standpoint theorist in regards to his comparative methodology. As mentioned already, Foucault's methods of social analysis work through comparing and contrasting the past with the present, precisely to expose the prejudices of the present, rather than assume with theorists that we already begin with an unproblematic identity. “But the problem,” Foucault states in an interview rebutting Rorty's critique, “is to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a 'we' in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts...because it seems to me that the 'we' must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result—and the necessarily temporary result—of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it.”

However, the second part of Habermas's critique here is still not resolved. Can a social theorist be critical of a regime without some sort of normative grounding, which Habermas finds in the Enlightenment vision of a universal human community. Foucault consistently attacks such humanism as excluding more than it includes (in respect to the mad, the criminal, and the sexually abnormal). Whereas Habermas needs the category of the universal to legitimate social criticism, Foucault is content to perform the activity as a conditioned, relative practice of truth-telling.

Despite some irreconcilable differences, 'final Foucault' was heavily influenced by Habermas, as evidenced in his interviews from the 1980s. Foucault especially appropriated Habermas's theory of

---

52 Ingram, p. 241.
53 I will briefly discuss this distinction between 'later Foucault' and 'final Foucault' in more depth below.
knowledge interests, first proposed by Habermas in his book, *Knowledge and Human Interests* in 1968. In his sociology of knowledge, Habermas distinguishes between three types of social-actions or techniques. Each one of these has a respective domain of knowledge: *i. work or production* conditions instrumental reasoning, used in the empirical sciences as well; *ii. interaction or communication* conditions history and hermeneutics; *iii. domination* conditions the opposition of oppression and emancipatory theory. In his appropriation of this quasi-transcendental schemata, Foucault defines the techniques as “three types of relationships which in fact always overlap one another, support one another reciprocally, and use each other mutually as means to an end.”\(^5^4\) Foucault here is slightly adapting Habermas's conception of the techniques so that they accord with his own theory of power. Basically, each type of social-action represents a pattern of power-relations for Foucault. Rather than *reduce* power to domination, Foucault uses Habermas to *expand* and specify the constitutive functions of power in its holistic differentiation that encompasses all knowledge. In this context, Foucault provides the underlining *principle of play* governing the scheme of technology of power. And in the last section of my thesis, I will explain how Foucault supplements Habermas's theory by adding a crucial fourth technique.

The vital question for us is how this conceptual architecture, this typology of techniques, impacts the science of sociology as a form of knowledge, but also how the future of social theory can live up to the importance Foucault and Habermas both grant it. In Habermasian terms, the cognitive interest of sociology is power, oppression, and violence, the third type of social action. In this case, sociology as a field of knowledge can be recognized as Habermas's idealized 'emancipatory theory.' Yet, even more primordially, they both accede over a certain primacy to social theory when they describe the functions of social-action or power in producing knowledge. The 'stuff' of sociology is not only a field of knowledge in itself, but the condition of all knowledge. Contemporary critical theory can

\(^5^4\) Ingram, p. 260, but originally in “the Subject and Power,” in Foucault’s *Power*, 2000.
be thought of as a social rendition of the Kantian transcendental analytic, the complex of categories that conditions our perception of the world. However, whereas Kant grounded the categories in the transcendental subject, Foucault locates them in power and discourse, within the sphere of social concepts.

This is not a retrogression to social positivism, to calculable objects or social facts. Techniques are not to be understood atomistically. Rather, as Foucault intended and indicated, they frame the structural possibilities of social-action. Every institution or school of thought can be plotted as a configuration of power-relations, a diversity and total of its specific social-actions. In Foucault's estimations, the techniques are much more than cognitive interests. They are the permutations of power that produce the possibility of all social consciousness and all social practice. Nor is this a regression to any overly rationalistic account of society. The missing key that Foucault provides is the association between power and play in a Deleuzian sense. Foucault's assessment of the productivity of power implies that power is compatible with chance and discontinuity, irreducible intelligibilities and incorporealities, and freedom and even social responsibility. At this intersection, I will turn to an evaluation of Foucault's thought through the rubric (or ruse) of poststructuralist social theory.

III. Foucault's 'Poststructuralist' Social Theory

Poststructuralism is a much more tenuous term than structuralism. A theoretical account of structuralism can detect several theoretical tenets that cohere the inter-disciplinary movement. This cannot be said of poststructuralism. However, the neologism is not vacuous despite its ambiguity. If one interprets it literally, poststructuralism is simply what occurred in French intellectual thinking after structuralism waned. Current historians of the rise and decline of structuralism hail Foucault's *The Order of Things* in 1966 as the zenith of the movement before its popularity rapidly fell. The loss of

---

55 Some philosophers would term this “dialectical materialism.”
interest is aptly captured by the mantra during the student revolts around France in 1968: “Structures don't take to the streets!”⁵⁶ By 1970s, Foucault refused the label structuralist, claiming he had never been a structuralist despite some minor methodological similarities. George Ritzer's comment perfectly describes this shifting Foucault: “The poststructuralists are generally embedded in structuralism at the same time that they are trying to distance themselves from it.”⁵⁷ In summary, poststructuralism is not a unified group of adherents; rather, it is a retrospective term that attempts to represent the creativity or circumlocutions of heterogeneous French critical theorists who, though steeped in structuralism, continue to disown it. Under its banner, many famous intellectuals are thrown, often inaccurately or against their will: Jacques Derrida who coined the literary methods known as deconstruction to expose inconsistencies in texts; Roland Barthes who gradually shifted in his self-description from a structuralist to a semiologist; Julia Kristeva who wreaked havoc on Lacanian structuralist psychoanalysis; Jean-Francois Lyotard who explored the notion of a pre-discursive event. Most of these writers took an active part in a philosophical literary journal in France titled Tel Quel, named after the Nietzschean insight: “as it is.” A cursory search for some sort of common ground among this cohort might touch on these features: i. a rejection of the closure of structuralist synchrony that had led to a conception of language as a totality in the moment; ii. the return of several topics or themes vehemently dismissed by earlier structuralists, such as: history, hermeneutics, religion, and the subject; iii. a rejection of anthropological constants as explicated by the structuralist Levi-Strauss—the settled contours of 'systems' i.e. binary or ternary oppositions, are destabilized further by poststructuralists; iv. the preference for semiological surfaces rather than mechanistic depths; and lastly v. the growing or resurging interest in the possibility of a non-discursive event or experience.

I will examine Foucault's poststructuralist maneuvers for some clues about what the

---

⁵⁶ Some die-hards, such as Jacques Lacan re-asserted, indeed structures do take to the streets!
⁵⁷ Ritzer, p. 33.
implications for social theory may be. Foucault's later thought does manifest several of the poststructuralist characteristics listed above. For our purposes, I will focus on how Foucault theorizes about an extra-discursive reality, the power-relations that condition discourse, and how Foucault resurrects the 'subject' or 'self' after its death and disappearance during the short reign of structuralism. Social theorists should take special interest in these two topics: power and the subject, as they are key sociological concepts and objects. A Foucaultian social theory can be considered poststructuralist due to several innovations that distinguish it from other modern social theory: 

- its non-positivist historicist relativism (in contrast to structuralism's alleged ahistoricism); 
- the compatibility it welds between structural power and social agency, due to the principle of play; 
- a new conception of the body as a pre-discursive site to be marked and penetrated by power; 
- for plotting a way to sociologically analyze ethics and the subject that is neither existentially ego-centric nor deterministic.

On this last venture consists Foucault's intimated addition to Habermas: a fourth basic technique of power.

_A Power: Towards a Positive Reappraisal._

A large portion of Foucault's intercollegiate efforts during the last decade of his life were merely spent on correcting misconceptions of power that unintentionally resulted from his work. In one interview, he bluntly says, “The idea that power is a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom cannot be attributed to me.”[^58] In this section, I will try to pin down Foucault's definition of power in order to appropriate it as a usable social concept of analysis.

Both Giddens and Habermas can be indicted for spreading some stereotypes about Foucault. Giddens accuses Foucault of seducing social theory to the nihilism of Nietzsche. While Foucault indeed hails Nietzsche as his most important influence, the way many commentators understand their relation is quite naïve. In this narrative, Nietzsche invents the cosmic principle called the “will to

[^58]: Foucault, *Ethics*, p. 293, emphasis mine.
Lamb 30

power,” and Foucault later affirms it non-critically as the basis for all knowledge and human society. But this account lacks a recognition of the social complexity that Foucault represents through power analysis. 'Power' is never singular for Foucault, but rather it denotes a specific set of power-relations. In one sense, this is a continuation of Nietzsche's philosophical inversion of relations and activity over substance and essentialist metaphysics. Giddens's targeting of Foucault's 'power' as an essentialist idea, as a “mysterious phenomenon” is mistaken. Foucault instructs that “one needs to be nominalistic, no doubt.”\(^59\) Furthermore, especially in his final years, there are numerous times when Foucault is not the faithful Nietzschean, but instead can be quite critical of Nietzsche.\(^60\) One of the easiest differences to note between them is Foucault's identification of power and freedom, and his positing of freedom as the basis of ethics.\(^61\)

This leads to another misconception that Giddens promotes: the frequent allegation that Foucault's theory of power necessarily implies determinism. Perhaps this would be the case if Foucault was solely a theorist of 'total domination.' In contrast though, Foucault often writes that totalitarianism is only one configuration of power-relations, the one which does exclude various liberties, but even that the totalitarian state is merely one terminal and temporary end of the multitude of political possibilities of power-relations. As discussed above, some distinctions within the term 'power' can greatly abate this confusion. Foucault states, “There are three levels to my analysis of power: strategic relations, techniques of government, and states of domination.”\(^62\) Each of the three units listed here is extremely comprehensive in the social patterns it refers to. 'Governance' could mean a form of representative-democracy or it could denote a family arrangement of patriarchal authority. 'Strategic relations' comes close to a synonym for power. In this same passage, Foucault defines power as “games between

\(^{59}\) Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, p. 93.

\(^{60}\) For one example, see Foucault, *Ethics*, p. 275.

\(^{61}\) Of course, though Nietzsche is a determinist, he still grants a moral creativity to the ubermensch, but not to subjects in general.

\(^{62}\) Foucault, *Ethics*, p. 299.
liberties—in which some try to control the conduct of others, who in turn try to avoid allowing their conduct to be controlled or try to control the conduct of the others.”

Since Foucault is simplifying his theory for an interview, we should be sure not to misunderstand 'control' as a psychological concept—'control' in Foucault's sense is fundamental to all social relations and a quasi-transcendental condition of any intelligibility.

It is very informative in itself that Foucault's most famous discussion of power occurs in a section entitled 'Method' in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. This indicates that power is, for Foucault, the supreme critical tool of doing historical sociology, or in this case, the genealogy Foucault outlines on modern sexual practices. This passage from *The History of Sexuality* is well-known for consecutively setting aside several popular misunderstandings of power. Power is not a possession held by rulers, nor a quality of their strength. Rather, it is an interplay “exercised from innumerable points.”

It is a name for situational strategies or tactics. Power is not 'outside' or 'above' social relations, but rather 'immanent' to them, *i.e.* power *is* social relations, and more primordially, the condition of their possibility. Like a structuralist would, Foucault still claims that power is “nonsubjective.” If power-relations are meaningful, hermeneutically, it is because they are finely calculated: “there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives.” And lastly, power should not be confused with determinism. Power is instead the play of freedoms, practiced by individuals and institutions—without freedom, there would be no power. In the diction of social activism, absorbed by Foucault, this freedom translates as “resistance.” Wherever there is power, there is resistance, its immanent and imminent antagonism.

Foucault's theory of power is radical and disturbing due to its inversion of the dominant

63 Ibid.
64 Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, p. 94.
65 Ibid., p. 95.
66 Ibid.
conception of power as negative and repressive. The type of thought that Foucault severely prosecutes occurs especially in romantic liberalism and Freudian psychoanalysis. Both schools of thought presume a juridical-discursive model of power, ultimately derived from the modernist political theory of sovereignty. This current of liberalism resurfaces in opinion about sexuality today through the “repressive hypothesis,” the popular idea that sex is repressed by law and religion, and that human desire should be freed. Though the psychoanalytic picture is much more complicated, the Law of the Father (the master signifier, social symbolic authority) is still repressive, the big Other to the desires of the id. In contrast to all these legal-metaphors and desire-discourses, Foucault offers a new picture of power as positive and productive. In his characterizations above, ‘power’ includes the possibility of social action through its structurations, intelligible or not.\(^67\) Quoted at length, Foucault defines power as the:

> “multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.”\(^68\)

Power is not equated with the force of the law, because the law and the tyrant is only one manifestation and expression of productive power—hegemony is the possibility of power losing its productivity and solidifying into a state of domination that decreases the potential of resistance. Obviously, this complicates and overturns the repressive-hypothesis which, according to Foucault, still obeys the Western injunction to speak about sex in relation to truth, a confessional problematization, as opposed to not speaking about it all (which is different from being silent about it—another advanced form of speaking). In his evaluation of the repressive-hypothesis, Foucault states that power-relations are internal in the production of discourse and that discourse often deceives its subjects of enunciation. The

---

\(^{67}\) I use Gidden's term 'structuration' intentionally to suggest that Giddens is not as different from Foucault as he claims.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., pp. 92-93.
first point is poststructuralist, while the second point is vintage structuralism: on the hermeneutical level, one can speak meaningfully, but erroneously in relation to the level of system and constitutive causality. For instance, the sexual libertine projects his or her frustration upon the law, without realizing the causal source of frustration is another problematic, contingently sedimented through history.

Another genealogy Foucault performs deserves the appreciation of modern sociologists. Like a social theorist, Foucault asks what type of power is dominant in the contemporary world. He answers with the notion of 'bio-power.' Many current political theorists have heavily adopted Foucault's analysis of bio-power as a new cornerstone to contemporary critical theory, especially Giorgio Agamben and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. These latter intellectuals employ the concept to analyze the tactics of the modern nation-state as a bureaucracy of efficiency, management, and war.

Bio-politics emerged as a new form of power in the seventeenth century. Traces of this genealogy can be found in Foucault's book *Birth of the Clinic*, but mostly in his courses at the *College de France*. The transformations in medical perception occurred analogously and simultaneously to a shift in how political power was maintained by states. In pre-modern societies, power over a *populus* was enforced through the punitive threat of death, whether in war or penal, public executions. In contrast, modern political power turned from punishment and discipline *through death* to regulation *over life*. Citizens thus became constituted as a variable but maintainable 'population,' subjugated in life to surveillance and conscription. The problematicization of 'public heath' hence became an instrument of power, including "utilized controls to regulate births, mortality, level of health, and so on." In summary, the bio-political management of life established a whole new field of objects, *e.g.* the body, sexual practice, biographical information and privacy, as tactical targets of state governmentality.

A profound irony in Foucault's intellectual progression is how, during Foucault's courses on biopolitics and governmentality, after the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*,

69 Ritzer, p. 67.
Foucault becomes an enthusiast of political and economic liberalism. Not only ironic, but perhaps shocking to many of his fans or critics who had accused him of a dark neo-conservatism in the name of Nietzsche. Yet Foucault's interest in modern liberal governmentalities makes sense when the political phenomenon is conceived as some sort of advance in the complexity of power-relations, mainly that a state can rule its citizens without centralized control.\textsuperscript{70} Foucault's preferred variant of liberalism has little to do with classical Rousseau-inspired romanticism. It is closer to the neoliberalism advocated by British and American economists. In fact, economics receives higher and higher praises from Foucault as an atheistic type of knowledge of relations without an absolute totality or sovereign point of view.\textsuperscript{71} The attraction of neoliberalism lies in its economic critique of strong centralized state power: liberalism argues for a set of power-relations without a controlling center, for a government that 'lets go' of the regulation of the periphery's independent life-processes. This description of liberalism has much in common with Habermas's later works that defend civil society and communication from the colonization of the “life-world” by a collusion of state and market forces. For both Foucault and Habermas, liberalism is a form of governmentality implementing a calculated letting-be.\textsuperscript{72}

Even more surprising, Foucault becomes a positive spokesperson for religion and spirituality in some of his later writings. This new horizon happens in the context of the Iranian Revolution and Foucault's observations as a journalist when he traveled to Iran. Achieving a realistic appraisal of religion in a way Marx never did, Foucault begins to see spiritual communities and practices as a potential force for resistance against domination. Unlike many of his French contemporaries though, Foucault was never a devoted adherent to Marxism or communism, so perhaps he was more open-minded to a non-Marxist sociology of religion.

\textsuperscript{70} See Colin Gordon's “Introduction” in \textit{Power} for more on how this topic of research fits with Foucault's oeuvre.
\textsuperscript{71} Paras.
\textsuperscript{72} I am indebted to Eric Paras's account of these intellectual shifts, especially in relation to liberalism. See his more popular, but no less credible \textit{Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power/Knowledge}. 
After the interpreted failure of the student revolts in 1968, as well as the fatal devolutions of Stalinism and Maoism, many disillusioned intellectuals struggled to come to terms with a 'post-revolutionary' globe. Known as the *nouveaux philosophes* (or the new philosophers), they became skeptics of grand theory, master narratives, and Hegelian dialectics. Foucault's name was often associated with them, including Andre Glucksmann and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. These new movements in French political thought also led to the period of bitter and silent strife between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze due to the latter's continued defense of revolutionary violence.

Part of Foucault's surprise as a new philosopher, was a return to the 'subject' though fully renovated from the aftermath of structuralism. The conception of the 'individual' in liberalism became a source of Foucault's philosophical preoccupations, and he eventually saw it and the body, as a site of resistance, as a partially self-constituting subjectivity. Due to such shifts in thought, many of the critiques of Giddens and Habermas are irrelevant for another reason: not taking into account final Foucault.

On the other hand, we should not be surprised with Foucault's changes. After all, he had warned us from the 1960s that he would not obey the rules of the unity of the author, including the confinement to one methodology and platform throughout one's life. Foucault self-describes his transformations as a certain 'curiosity,' almost like a stubborn open-mindedness. His momentary interlude with liberalism soon became the vanishing mediator between his focus on modernity and his eventual study of antiquity, the setting of the second two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. The practice of the self he discovers there, our much anticipated fourth technique, has very few resonances in neoliberalism. Though launched into Greco-Roman history through the expansion of his genealogy of modern sexuality, the culture and philosophy of antiquity became the raw material for many of Foucault's most impressive and most neglected theories—theories of the self, ethics, and spirituality. The complexity of

---

73 Ibid. p. 79-80.
Foucault's intellectual biography has led me to chart his life chronologically into three stages—early, later, and final—in accordance with several other commentaries. In the next and last section, we evaluate final Foucault as a poststructuralist social theorist of the self.

The Ethical Self

In his introduction to a collection of writings on ethics by Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow, one of Foucault's finest commentators, observes the irony of Foucault's legacy: “Foucault himself argued in *The Order of Things* that there could be no moral system in modernity, if by 'moral system' one meant a philosophical anthropology that produced firm foundations concerning the nature of Man and, thereby, a basis for human action. Ultimately, though, Foucault may well be remembered as one of the major ethical thinkers of modernity.” True to Rabinow's words, as a late-blooming ethicist, Foucault is enormously creative, elucidating ancient texts on morality vis-à-vis the moral problematizations of modernity. In Foucault's longest-spanning genealogy, he traces the separation between philosophy and spirituality in Western civilization, uncovering the moral ethos of ancient and premodern societies in a nearly nostalgic way. Two ethical injunctions in Greco-Roman culture complemented each other indivisibly: *i.* Take care of the self; *ii.* Know thy self. Partly due to high Christian theology, and partly due to Cartesianism, the second imperative, know thy self, became detached from the care of the self, slowly resulting in an identification of valid knowledge with the external world, isolated from a practice the self as a form capable of transformation, that is, from any recognition of spirituality as procedure of truth. In a nutshell, Foucault's theory defines *ethics* as the practice of the self, and *spirituality* as the self-governed transformation of the self.

Alas we are approaching the final arena of Foucault's social theory on ethical subjectivity. At

---

75 Foucault, *Ethics*, p. xxvi.
first, Foucault seems to adopt a common philosophical definition of the self, Kierkegaardian to be more precise: the ways the self relates to the self. These 'ways,' or practices are the fourth technique, the technology of the self, which Foucault feels necessarily to add to Habermas's typology of social-action. This addition manifests a new focus in Foucault's thought: the freedom of the thinking individual to transform oneself and through truth and virtue, to stand apart from wider society, much as the first philosophers did in Greco-Roman antiquity. Thus, the activity of the self is not reducible to the other societal mechanisms represented in the Habermasian tripartite technology: production, communication, domination. Governance of the self by the self is another form of power Foucault teaches us to take seriously in itself:

It seems, according to some suggestions of Jürgen Habermas, that one can distinguish three major types of technique: the techniques that permit one to produce, to transform, to manipulate things; the techniques that permit one to use sign systems; and finally, the techniques that permit one to determine the conduct of individuals, to impose certain ends or objectives...But I became more and more aware that in all societies there is another type of technique: techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power. Let us call these technique 'technologies of the self'.

He describes the Greco-Roman practice as *askesis*, a form of training at self-improvement, in contrast to later Christian asceticism, which converges with the notion of renunciation. *Askesis* is an individualized exercise of self-creation and self-stylization, embodying and expressing the nobler values one aspires for teleologically to a 'state of perfection'. However, Foucault uses the term 'telos' unsuggestively, keeping it open to the relativity of its meaning among different cultures or even different individuals. As opposed to Habermas's universal pragmatics, Foucault's ethics are more akin to Rorty's 'private self-sublimation,' for both Foucault and Rorty think modernity's universalizing tendencies in ethical discourse are self-defeatingly to the detriment of humanity's moral improvement.

Before Foucault's ethical turn is dismissed as irrelevant to social analysis, it should be

---

76 Foucault, *Ethics*, p. 177.
77 This is more Nietzschean than Wesleyian.
remembered that Foucault posits the practice of the self as a basic type of power arrangements. The significance for social theory is a new understanding of ethics that exceeds the typical analysis of mores and moralities, how morality is merely the product of socialization upon individuals by institutional norms. Foucault plots a social theory within the self—the self is a complex set of relations and technologies. Against other non-Kierkegaardian metaphysical definitions of the self that posit the subject as a substance, an essentialist identity, Foucault argues that the self is not one, or that the self is not self-same, so to speak:

What I wanted to try to show was how the subject constituted itself, in one specific form or another, as a mad or a healthy subject, as a delinquent or nondelinquent subject, through certain practices that were also games of truth, practices of power, and so on....[the subject] is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself...one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself. And it is precisely the historical constitution of these various forms of the subject in relation to the games of truth which interests me.”

By challenging the stable identity of the self, Foucault locates the self as a nexus of social dynamism. Once again, we are reminded of Kierkegaard who, in his aesthetics, so persuasively describes the human habit of donning masks. The self chooses among possibilities of many potential selves, continuously through life, in repeated but not determined patterns. In some sense, this 'choice' is originary for Foucault: “freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection.” Intentionally conflating ethics with personal aesthetics, Foucault exposits the ethical agency of the self in a non-reductive way, that is, irreducible to a science of the self as an object—as the modern human sciences do. In the passage quoted above, Foucault demonstrates the sociological interests at stake in understanding the practice of the self, namely how the individual constitution of the subject is still historically influenced, as to whether one is defined as insane, criminal, etc. Such subjectivations exemplify Foucault's remark, quoted above, on the constant overlapping between the four techniques.

78 Ibid., p. 290.
79 Ibid., p. 284.
Judith Butler, a feminist philosopher and frequent follower of Foucault, shares my interpretation on the relevance of Foucault's theory of the subject for sociology. In discussion of Foucault, she writes, "when the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist."\(^\text{80}\) In her recent book *Giving An Account of Oneself*, she compares final Foucault with Nietzsche on the process of subject formation. For Nietzsche, self-reflexivity emerges from the threat of legal punishment, which produces the 'bad conscience'—like early Foucault here, the ethical self is an effect of power-relations. But final Foucault examines the subject in a new way, *i.e.* as partially self-constituting. In contrast to Nietzsche, the reflexivity of the subject now emerges when one aesthetically and ethically relates oneself to the established truths of one's context and its codes of conducts. Thus there is a distance, an 'opening' between the self and institutions or discourse, a space that enables the ethical posture of critique. Butler writes, Foucault "insists that the relation to the self is a social and public relation, one that is inevitably sustained in the context of norms that regulate reflexive relations."\(^\text{81}\) The freedom of the self consists in its capacity to challenge these quasi-transcendental regulatory norms.\(^\text{82}\) For this, Foucault envisions as a radical self-questioning, happening in full awareness of the subject's opacity to itself due to its grounding in a complex social formation. The logical tension here is between a *disciplined self*, which is subjectified by social norms, and the *ethical self*, which intentionally resists those norms, or at least, is not reducible to them.

In some of his final interviews, Foucault seems to be providing a new self-description of his oeuvre in its entirety. For one who formerly refused to consign a methodological coherence to his work, he now offers an extremely useful hermeneutical key for processing all his writings: they are studies in subjectivity, what the subject experiences (as mad), how a body is subjectified (as a criminal), and how

---


\(^{81}\) Ibid., p. 114.

\(^{82}\) 'Quasi-transcendental' here is nearly synonymous with the category of social conditions.
a subject can relate to its self (as an ethical individual). Largely due to the influence of Habermas, Foucault becomes capable of giving his writings a comprehensive topology, though the interpretive key is Foucault's unique contribution to ethical theory: the practice of the subject. Foucault subdivides his work according to three interrelated 'axes' of subjectivity that overlap with the four techniques of power:

Three domains of genealogy are possible. First, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents. Each domain corresponds to a period of publication in Foucault's life: i. subjects of knowledge applies to *History of Madness* and *The Order of Things*; ii. subjects acting on others corresponds to *Discipline and Punishment* and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*; iii. subjects constituting ourselves as moral agents includes final Foucault's interviews and latter two volumes in the History of Sexuality. In a Habermasian topology, subjects of knowledge overlaps with the first two techniques (instrumental reasoning and communication); the second historical ontology concerns questions of power and domination; and lastly, ethics is Foucault's principal addition to the Habermasian scheme: the technology of the subject. Thus, the two terms that bridge Foucault's oeuvre are i. forms of subjectivity; and ii. 'historical ontology.'

Methodologically, this second category of analysis should be conceived both genealogically and archaeologically. Historical ontology is the study of how power-relations in the past continue to affect the present and how they constitute subjectivities in contingent configuration, while enabling subjects to practice ethics and resistance for a destabilization of immobile power-relations. According to the common academic categorization of things, historical ontology agrees well with the concerns and methods of social theory. I have shown how Michel Foucault presents a viable poststructuralist social

---

83 Ibid., p. 262.
theory for the future of both critical philosophy and sociological research.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources

A. General:


**B. Social Theorists Engaging Foucault:**


Game, Ann. *Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology*. Toronto: University of


