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Michael S. Roth

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## FOUCAULT'S "HISTORY OF THE PRESENT"

MICHAEL S. ROTH

. . . a discourse attempting to be both empirical and critical cannot but be both positivist and eschatological.<sup>1</sup>

A pastime of growing popularity in recent years has been that of observing the often furious activity of the French intellectual scene. Fascinated by the apparently revolutionary implications of approaching the unconscious, the text, primitives, superstructure/base, and the past in the latest way, American scholars from Baltimore to Santa Cruz have been avidly following (often just a few steps behind) the many twists and turns of their colleagues across the sea. This following often takes the form of a redefinition of what the French are doing in terms that slide more easily through our own vocabularies than the terms in which the French themselves choose to define their projects. This paper will join the growing tradition in attempting a redefinition of some of the implications of Michel Foucault's historical works. It will attempt to answer the question "What is Foucault *really* doing?" by examining the relationship between "the past" and "the present" in *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things*, and *Discipline and Punish*. I shall try to make sense of what Foucault means by writing a "history of the present" by showing the connections between archaeology and criticism in these three works.

Foucault himself tried to tell his readers, in part, what he "had really been doing" in his methodological work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), and I shall make some use of his explanations in this paper. However, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* did not answer some major questions about Foucault's work; questions that have been raised generally in the philosophy of history. The relationship between the inquirer's present with the past which he is examining is placed in the foreground by Foucault's archaeological project; I shall attempt to explicate this relationship as well as briefly to distinguish it from other approaches to the writing of history.

*The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* is Foucault's account of the dramatic shift that occurs in the relationship between "doctor"

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), 320.

and "patient" in the first decades of the nineteenth century. This transformation completely altered the ways in which disease was viewed by both laymen and researchers. After 1810, disease was no longer a being with an essence hidden beneath fevers, coughs, and other "surface manifestations." Disease had become a part of the general degeneration of life; part of the inexorable movement of life toward death. Foucault describes the political, social, and scientific milieu in which this transformation occurs, and ends his book with a brief description of the ways in which the transformation in medical perception is related to the changes that occur around the same time in the "fundamental structures of experience." All of Foucault's historical works are concerned with aspects of these changes in the way persons perceived and interacted with the world in the closing years of the eighteenth century; changes which have created the structures through which we still experience the world:

In the last years of the eighteenth century, European culture outlined a structure that has not yet been unraveled; we are only just beginning to disentangle a few of the threads, which are still so unknown to us that we immediately assume them to be either marvelously new or absolutely archaic, whereas for two hundred years (not less, yet not much more) they have constituted the dark, but firm web of our experience.<sup>2</sup>

This closing sentence of *The Birth of the Clinic* is more than a rhetorical flourish — an attempt to make his detailed history of medicine "relevant." The entire book is motivated by and written through a concern with our present structures of medical perception. In the preface, Foucault speculates that it is only now possible to uncover the structures of traditional medical experience because we are on the brink of yet another transformation in these structures:

Medicine made its appearance as a clinical science in conditions which define, together with its historical possibility, the domain of its experience and the structure of its rationality. They form its concrete a priori, which it is now possible to uncover, perhaps because a new experience of disease is coming into being that will make possible a historical and critical understanding of the old experience.<sup>3</sup>

The historical and critical understanding of the traditional experience is made possible by our own position within the changes in the way persons interact with the world around them. Other historical approaches to this same subject resulted in other histories because of their own position *vis à vis* the structures of experience. In *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault poses the question how we can be sure that the doctors of the eighteenth century did not really see what they claimed to have seen. We can similarly ask how one can be sure

2. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, transl. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1973), 199.

3. *Ibid.*, 15.

that the historians of medicine before Foucault (or other than Foucault) did not find what they claim to have found. This question will bring us closer to understanding the function of the present in Foucault's histories.

When Foucault criticizes other historians of medicine, he does so by pointing to the hidden reason why they had to reconstruct their past in the way they did. For example, when discussing the belief, widespread in the nineteenth century, that the pursuit of medical investigations in the eighteenth century was hampered by a prohibition against the dissection of corpses, Foucault points out that such a prohibition was necessarily postulated (or discovered) in order to bolster the scientificity of dissection:

In the history of medicine, this illusion has a precise meaning; it functions as a retrospective justification: if the old beliefs had for so long such a prohibitive power, it was because doctors had to feel, in the depths of their scientific appetite, the repressed need to open up corpses . . . the need to know the dead must have already existed when the concern to understand the living appeared. So a dismal conjuration of dissection, an anatomical church militant and suffering, whose hidden spirit made the clinic possible before itself surfacing into the regular, authorized, diurnal practice of autopsy, was imagined out of nothing.<sup>4</sup>

He goes on to point out the "real reason" why corpses were not opened up during the eighteenth century; the method of the clinic, in which it was necessary to hear the language of symptoms, demanded living subjects; corpses did not speak. Nineteenth-century histories found continuity in the development of the scientific spirit because their own practice demanded it. In his criticism of the historical view that identifies the rise of the clinic with the development of economic and political liberalism, Foucault follows a similar strategy. That is, he points out that the way in which liberal and radical thinkers of the Revolution fought against the clinic is neatly forgotten by those historians who would like to be able (indeed, have been able) to display the association between the development of science and the development of bourgeois freedom:

It is often thought that the clinic originated in that free garden where, by common consent, doctor and patient met, where observation took place, innocent of theories, by the unaided brightness of the gaze, where, from master to disciple, experience was transmitted beneath the level of words. And to the advantage of a historical view that relates the fecundity of the clinic to a scientific, political and economic *liberalism*, one forgets that for years it was this ideological theme that prevented the organization of clinical medicine.<sup>5</sup>

To the question, then, of "how one can know whether earlier historians of medicine did not find what they said they found?" Foucault has the following reply: it is crucial to determine not whether these historians found what they claimed, but to understand why their historical-theoretical circumstances

4. *Ibid.*, 125-126. Michelet is given as an example of a writer of this type of history.

5. *Ibid.*, 52.

necessitated that they found these facts and patterns. The nineteenth-century historians of medicine "repressed" the methodology of the clinic in order to show the existence of a natural scientific curiosity that they believed themselves to possess; and the liberal historians tied the development of medicine to their own political beliefs and "forgot" the debates of the Revolution in order to justify their views about the relationships among knowledge, power, and freedom.

Foucault's inquiry, of course, is also determined by the conditions from which he writes. Although he denies writing either "in favor of one kind of medicine as against another kind of medicine, or against medicine in favor of the absence of medicine,"<sup>6</sup> he makes clear that he is self-consciously writing with the present in mind: "The research that I am undertaking here therefore involves a project that is deliberately both historical and critical, in that it is concerned — outside all prescriptive intent — with determining the conditions of possibility of medical experience in modern times."<sup>7</sup> The combination of an historical and critical approach will remain fundamental through all of Foucault's works. By situating himself at the beginning of a contemporary shift in the way we interact with the world, Foucault's histories assume a critical form inasmuch as they attempt to hasten this transition by exposing the limits of the present structures of experience.

Foucault's references to being in a transition between what he sometimes calls "positivities" are more striking in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* than in his earlier work. The "new experience of disease" he refers to in *The Birth of the Clinic* is replaced by talk about the "death of man," and a freedom from the "dogmatism of anthropologization." *The Order of Things* is a genuine *tour de force* in which Foucault examines another dramatic shift in the structures of experience, but here "experience" refers to a much wider field than it did in the work on medicine. He describes actually two such shifts: the first occurring near the close of the sixteenth century when words no longer are seen as naturally linked to things, when the beingness of language all but disappears; and at the close of the eighteenth century, when representation is seen as a field outside of which man and his desires actively exist. Through this second shift man becomes constituted as "an empirico-transcendental doublet," both a knower and an object of knowledge. Foucault is concerned with showing the historical contingency of this development which has acquired the status of a situation inherent in the natural order of things; he is concerned with showing that man is not necessary in any absolute sense for the process of knowledge, and that he has only recently acquired his place in the center of inquiry: "One thing is certain: man is

6. *Ibid.*, xix.

7. *Ibid.*

neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. . . . As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.”<sup>8</sup>

As in *The Birth of the Clinic*, in *The Order of Things* Foucault describes transformations in the structures of experience from what seems to be the brink of yet another dramatic shift: “In attempting to uncover the deepest strata of Western culture, I am restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws; and it is this same ground that is once more stirring under our feet.”<sup>9</sup> Foucault’s task, then, is not simply to clear away the dust that has accumulated on the face of history, to expose layers of events. Rather, in restoring to our soil the rifts that have gone unperceived by other historians, Foucault’s history aims at contributing to the shifts that it postulates as beginning to occur.

An important facet of the way that these rifts are restored is by tracing what Foucault calls the “historical a priori” of a period;<sup>10</sup> that is, by delineating the paradigm through which a thinker operated, and by which the firm limits to his perception were set. Foucault rails against those who ignore these limits either by writing a history of ideas using terms of the present, or by trying to show that the subject of their inquiry utilized concepts that were developed in much earlier times: “The men of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries do not think of wealth, nature, or languages in terms that had been bequeathed to them by preceding ages or in forms that presaged what was soon to be discovered. . . .”<sup>11</sup>

Archaeology is an attempt to give an account of the existence of various systems of thought, of the possibilities of development that lie within the paradigms from which they originated: “The history of knowledge can be written only on the basis of what was contemporaneous with it, and certainly not in terms of reciprocal influence, but in terms of *a priori*s established in time.”<sup>12</sup>

Once the historical a priori has been laid bare, hitherto opposing modes of thought can be seen to share the same basic bed of assumptions. Thus, Marx and Comte are placed side by side (as are Marx and Ricardo), and the conflict between the Physiocrats and the Utilitarians is seen as merely one

8. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 386. Paul Veyne has commented insightfully on Foucault as an inquirer into historical relations, in contradistinction to an inquirer into natural things, in “Foucault révolutionne l’histoire,” *Comment on écrit l’histoire* (Paris, 1978), 201-242.

9. *Ibid.*, xxiv.

10. The words “archive” and “episteme” seem to refer more or less to the same thing as “historical a priori.” The relationship among these terms is discussed by Francois Russo in “L’Archéologie du savoir de Michel Foucault,” in *Archives de Philosophie* 36 (1973), 80-84.

11. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 208.

12. *Ibid.*

of inverse hierarchical principles.<sup>13</sup> Conflicts that for many years have provided the substance for historical research are relegated to the realm of the epiphenomenal, dependent on the more fundamental paradigms discovered by the archaeologist. Thus, the question of whether the Physiocrats were led to their views on the primacy of land by their interests in agriculture is called a question of opinion, and the "controversies" between Marxist and liberal economists are labeled "storms in a children's paddling pool."<sup>14</sup>

Contrasted with this realm of the epiphenomenal is the object of archaeological inquiry: the conditions enabling the various systems to be thought at all. In his "Discourse on Language" Foucault gives a concise account of the archaeologist's subject: "I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose rule is to avert its power and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to avoid its ponderous, awesome materiality."<sup>15</sup> In describing these procedures Foucault believes himself to be doing something more fundamental than the conventional way of doing the history of ideas. In *The Order of Things* it remains unclear whether Foucault conceives his project as supplanting other types of history, or if he sees his work as another way of doing history that can coexist with more traditional forms: "archaeology can give an account of the *existence* of a general grammar, a natural history, and an analysis of wealth, and thus open up a free, undivided area in which the history of the sciences, the history of ideas, and the history of opinions can, if they wish, frolic at ease."<sup>16</sup>

Whereas in *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault characterized historians of medicine as creators of myths about the past that justified their own present, in *The Order of Things* he claims that the work of other historians has concentrated on the epiphenomenal without getting down to the really fundamental structures of experience, the historical a priori. In neither book is he engaged in a rigorous criticism of the evidence of other historians, nor does he make a systematic comparison between their work and his own. Indeed, Foucault would probably claim that such a comparison is impossible since other historians were looking at objects different from his, even when they seemed to be examining the same period. This explains perhaps the confusion whether Foucault's work can be seen as a part of conventional historical inquiry: his work cannot be compared with that of other historians to determine which is "closer to the facts," nor does it render their work

13. *Ibid.*, 199.

14. *Ibid.*, 262. Foucault employs a similar strategy in his treatment of sexual repression vs. sexual liberation in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, transl. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978).

15. Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, transl. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), 216.

16. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 208.

obsolete by doing what they attempted to do in a more complete way. We cannot, from Foucault's perspective, be sure that other historians did not really find what they claim to have found. We can only come to see why it was necessary for them to find the things which they did.

In *The Birth of the Clinic* the point is made that other historians of medicine used their own present to create a past that would satisfy their desires. This criticism is repeated in *The Order of Things*, but is complicated by the claim that archaeology is more fundamental than conventional history because it gets to the base of knowledge without the bias of contemporary science. How is this claim to be reconciled with the idea that Foucault is self-consciously writing a history of the present? that his work finds its place near the beginning of a dramatic shift in the structures of experience?

*The Order of Things* makes crucial use of this concept of an emerging shift. The book is in part a polemic against what Foucault calls the "anthropologization" of knowledge. It points to signs of the disappearance of man from our thinking, and tries to show the transitory nature of man to hasten that disappearance. The book is an attempt to define the space in which modern thought exists, so that we can see that we are approaching its limit:

And yet the impression of fulfillment and of end, the muffled feeling that carries and animates our thought, and perhaps lulls it to sleep with the facility of its premises, and makes us believe that something new is about to begin, something that we glimpse only as a thin line low on the horizon — that feeling and that impression are perhaps not ill founded.<sup>17</sup>

The thin line of light on the horizon must penetrate the darkness of our "anthropologization" in order to be seen. In labeling "anthropologization" the "new dogmatism," Foucault sets himself the task of awakening modern man from his new slumbers. In other words, he sets himself the task of being the Kant of modern thought:

Anthropology constitutes the fundamental arrangement that governed and controlled the path of philosophic thought from Kant until our own day. This arrangement is essential, since it forms part of our history; but it is disintegrating before our eyes, since we are beginning to recognize and denounce in it, in a critical mode, both the forgetfulness of the opening that made it possible and a stubborn obstacle standing obstinately in the way of an imminent form of thought.<sup>18</sup>

As Kant had succeeded in withdrawing knowledge and thought from the space of representation,<sup>19</sup> Foucault would withdraw knowledge and thought from the tyranny of man as the knower and the known. His archaeology is an uncovering of the opening through which Kant's transcendental idealism entered: an uncovering whose goal is the destruction of the limits of anthro-

17. *Ibid.*, 384.

18. *Ibid.*, 342.

19. As Foucault describes Kant: *ibid.*, 242.

pologization, as Kant's goal was the destruction of the limits to knowledge that had been forged in Ideology by representation.<sup>20</sup>

Foucault's work, like Kant's, is critical and not merely expository. *The Order of Things* is a history that attempts to contribute to freeing thought from the tyranny of the past, a "curative history."<sup>21</sup> Our structures of experience and the place of man in the process of knowing are shown to be creations of the modern period, not eternal elements in the development of the sciences. Although he says that we are imprisoned within our own language, and that we cannot describe our own archive, Foucault's project is centered on the belief that a new beam of light is beginning to shine into this prison. As a perceiver of this new dawn, as an archaeologist who can place this light in relation to the limits of the past and present structures of experience, Foucault appears to have one foot in the modern world, and one foot in whatever world will follow. As he charts Kant's earlier project on the site of history, Foucault places his own work in the space of a transition — in that place where the "earth moves under our feet," and from which some new type of knowing will begin to emerge.<sup>22</sup>

Probably the most fundamental question that can present itself to philosophy, then, concerns the relation between these two forms of reflection [mathesis and interpretation]. It is certainly not within the province of archaeology to say whether this relation is possible, or how it could be provided with a new foundation; but archaeology can designate the region in which this relation seeks to exist, in what area of the *episteme* modern philosophy attempts to find its unity, in what point of knowledge it discovers its broadest domain.<sup>23</sup>

The relationship between criticism and archaeology is not fully revealed by Foucault's own Kant-like relation to the dogmatism of anthropologization, which is similar to his relation to modern medical practice in *The Birth of the Clinic*. Although in *The Order of Things* Foucault stresses the "inseparable connection between theory and practice," he does not talk about the competition of theories in terms of power relations. The role of power in the formation and consolidation of discourses will be a central concern of Foucault in his later work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. In this book the factor of power complicates the task of archaeology as well as the way in which Foucault sees his own work in relation to the modern and possible postmodern structures of experience.

Some of these complications are explored in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Here Foucault discusses the relation of his work to other histories, and the

20. Compare the descriptions of Kant's project and his own, on pages 242 and 342 respectively.

21. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 131.

22. Foucault's discussions of psychoanalysis, ethnography, and especially linguistics, point to the relationship of his work to some dramatic transition.

23. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 207.

task of his work *vis à vis* potential changes in the way persons interact with the world. As in *The Birth of the Clinic*, in *The Archaeology* Foucault points to the function of conventional history in relation to the principles within the discourse of a particular period. In the latter work he generalizes this critique of historical reflection to include the modern period as a whole:

Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject; the guarantee that everything that has eluded him will be restored to him. . . . Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are two sides of the same system of thought. In this system, time is conceived in terms of totalization and revolutions are never more than moments of consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

Foucault, of course, denies the “founding function of the subject,” and attacks the notion of a continuous history. He tells the reader that “I cannot be satisfied until I have cut myself off from the ‘history of ideas,’” and he bitterly attacks the “conservative zeal” of its practitioners.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, Foucault also says in *The Archaeology* that his own methods are another way of getting at the past, and may be even complemented by more conventional forms of historical inquiry. Thus, he is careful to point out that archaeological analysis is not an attempt to “guarantee the sovereign, sole, independence of discourse,” but that it must be deployed “in the dimension of a general history.” Similarly he does not exclude the possibility of writing a “history of the referent,” but only wants to carve out a space for the legitimate operation of his own methods of investigation and description.<sup>26</sup>

The diminished virulence of the attacks on other modes of history in *The Archaeology* is paralleled by the reduction in the rhetoric of transformation that played a role in *The Birth of the Clinic*, and especially in *The Order of Things*. In *The Archaeology* Foucault explains that he has been engaged in the “establishment of difference”; in the cleansing of the history of thought from all “transcendental narcissism.” Although he does not talk in apocalyptic tones about the “earth moving under our feet,” he does identify a crisis in our age between “advancing structuralisms,” and the “arrière garde” of transcendental thought. A new element, though, is added to his critique of the latter: transcendental thought, by concentrating on consciousness and intentionality beneath the surface of discourse, is avoiding the crises of the present. This avoidance is viewed not only in terms of a limit to a segment of the modern *episteme*, but it is now seen as a facet of a struggle between competing forms of knowledge, competing practices. The appearance of dis-

24. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 12.

25. *Ibid.*, 136, 138.

26. *Ibid.*, 47, 108, 115, 205-208.

course now poses questions of power and political struggle;<sup>27</sup> the suppression of difference and discontinuity by the "transcendental narcissist" is now seen as a political suppression. Foucault questions his "conventional historian" near the end of a dialogue in *The Archaeology*:

What is that fear which makes you reply in terms of consciousness when someone talks to you about a practice, its conditions, its rules, and its historical transformations? What is that fear that makes you seek, beyond all boundaries, ruptures, shifts and divisions, the great historico-transcendental destiny of the Occident?

It seems to me that the only reply to this question is a political one.<sup>28</sup>

*Discipline and Punish* provides a reply to this question, or at least some commentaries on it. The avoidance or mystification of practice is shown to have served definite power constellations in the development of the penal system. Accordingly, the unmasking of this practice — or as Foucault more frequently puts it, the creation of cracks in what was regarded as a secure foundation — is itself an activity on behalf of a type of power relationship. *Discipline and Punish* seems to be a more political book than Foucault's earlier works, because it is a book about the power of discourse and purposefully enters the domain of discourse as a domain of power relations. Foucault asserts that knowledge should not be regarded as the pristine product of a relationship from which power has been excluded:

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.<sup>29</sup>

This link between power and knowledge, so crucial to *Discipline and Punish*, was implicit in the ways in which Foucault dealt with other historians in *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things*. In the former work he tried to show that the nineteenth-century approach to the history of medicine was to postulate a scientific spirit, always latent within man, that slowly manifested itself in progressively more productive ways. Thus, the particular interests of nineteenth-century science were served by a history that found science slowly overcoming resistances, and, through the power of truth, emerging from the darkness of the past. In the latter work, he tried to show that other historians of science had failed to investigate the really fundamental levels of experience. This is somewhat of a departure from regarding historical reflection as a practice serving a particular power, a point made in both *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*. *The Order of Things* is, however, deeply linked to *Discipline and Punish*. Both of these

27. *Ibid.*, 120.

28. *Ibid.*, 209.

29. *Ibid.*, 27.

works clearly speak in the service of a particular power: the attack on the dogmatism of anthropologization and the mechanisms of normalization respectively. Whereas *The Birth of the Clinic* declared in its preface that it was written neither for nor against a particular kind of medicine, nor for the absence of medicine, *Discipline and Punish* makes clear that its fundamental presuppositions were learned from modern prison revolts and the responses to them; or, as Foucault puts it, “not so much from history as from the present.”<sup>30</sup>

And it is with the present that Foucault is primarily concerned in *Discipline and Punish*. History serves the concerns of the present. This was, as was seen above, the criticism that was leveled at the nineteenth-century historians of medicine in *The Birth of the Clinic*. Now Foucault adopts the position that he criticized in the earlier work. By identifying the mechanisms of normalization as the major component of the modern prison and of our social apparatus generally, Foucault is able to understand the birth and development of the prison as the development of these mechanisms. From the discovery in the eighteenth century of the “humanity” within the criminal, to the psychologization of our entire system of justice and the fabric of everyday life, the division of abnormal and normal grows into its familiar (present) form:

The constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected, brings us back to our own time, by applying the binary branding and exile of the leper to quite different objects; the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms to which the fear of the plague gave rise. All the mechanisms of power which, even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him, are composed of those two forms from which they distantly derive.<sup>31</sup>

*Discipline and Punish* consistently attempts to “bring us back to our own time” so that we will engage in what it labels as the “overall political issue around the prison.”<sup>32</sup> That is not to say that in this work Foucault is any less concerned with history than he was in his earlier projects.<sup>33</sup> He is concerned with showing that the discovery of the humanity within the criminal

30. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, transl. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), 31.

31. *Ibid.*, 199-200.

32. *Ibid.*, 306.

33. Allan Megill has made this argument by saying that Foucault becomes increasingly Dionysian in his later work, and that he does not attempt to portray “the past itself.” Megill sees Foucault’s later work renouncing “the attempt to plumb the reality of social life.” Real historians, of course, are plumbers of “the past itself.” “Foucault, Structuralism, and the Ends of History,” *Journal of Modern History* 51 (1979), 451-503. Vincent Descombes has discussed Foucault’s work in connection with the wider critique in France of the concept of history in *Le Même et l’autre: quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933-1978)* (Paris, 1979), 131-139.

is part of a definite historical period, and has not been an eternal observation (similar to his point in *The Order of Things* about the appearance of man); and that the techniques of observing and understanding the prisoner coincide with the development of particular ideologies (similar to his point in *The Birth of the Clinic* about the relation of the hospital to the politics of the Revolution). In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault labels his task as follows:

I would like to write the history of this prison, with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing a history of the present.<sup>34</sup>

Writing a history of the present means writing a history *in* the present; self-consciously writing in a field of power relations and political struggle. The genealogy of the present form of the prison is a criticism of this form because it undermines the claims of the ideology of the prison to being concerned with eternal problems, and because it uncovers the prison's links with practices it seemed to have left behind. By exposing the relationships of the prison to the mechanisms of normalization, Foucault has placed the sciences of criminality into the domain of power, and thus cut them off from any field which would have had some pristine access to Truth.<sup>35</sup> He achieves this placement as his own discourse is seen to fall in this domain of power.

Now a crucial difference can be seen between Foucault's use of the present and the technique which he criticized Michelet for using in constituting the history of medicine in the image of his own time. Foucault, in all the works discussed in this paper, is writing a history of the present in order to make that present into a past. Writing from the brink of a dramatic shift in the structures of our experience is essential to Foucault's task because this enables him to conceive of the present as that which is itself almost history. Michelet and the nineteenth-century historians of medicine wrote their histories in order to extend their present both forward and backward in time. Their history attempted to preserve the contemporary sensibility by showing it to be essentially the same through time. Foucault's critical history attempts to negate the possibility of such preservation by exposing the gaps among the various types of experiencing and knowing the world; and, through this exposition, destabilizing our own experience, so that the rupture of yet another gap may occur. Foucault expresses this difference as one between the search for foundations and the fragmentation of what was thought to be the same: "The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary,

34. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 30-31.

35. Foucault does not think that any science would have some relationship to truth that would be independent of all considerations of power. See, for example, "Les jeux du pouvoir entretien avec Michel Foucault," in *Politiques de la philosophie*, ed. D. Grisoni (Paris, 1976), 172.

it disturbs what was previously thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself."<sup>36</sup>

Foucault's critical history can be portrayed as an antihistory because it is attempting to make the present into a past which we leave behind, and not into a history which we tightly embrace as our own. Hayden White's term for this project, a "*disremembrance of things past*," is an accurate one.<sup>37</sup> Foucault uncovers the past to rupture the present into a future that will leave the very function of history behind it; a future that will have no need of a past to be endlessly recaptured, but that will be situated merely "in the scattering of the profound stream of time."

The question remains whether this critical element in Foucault's work has any relation to his archaeological project other than one of juxtaposition. In other words, although I have shown that the critical element has played an important role in three of Foucault's archaeological works, I have not shown that it plays a necessary role. Is the critical element in archaeology merely the symptom of the occasionally active social conscience of its originator, or does it play a fundamental role in the inquiry as a whole?

These questions in a sense shift the ground of this paper, which has offered an explanation of what Foucault is doing in writing a "history of the present." Asking whether the critical element in archaeology can be left out is asking whether Foucault could do something else and still be (more or less) Foucault. The critical element does seem to be necessary for an archaeology that is attempting to define the limits of the modern period, the period in which the archaeologist writes. Foucault's stance of having one foot in our own time and one foot in whatever time will follow is necessary for the archaeologist who wants to talk about the placement of his own epoch. To borrow a metaphor from Foucault: the new dawn that illuminates the beginning of a new epoch also illuminates the limits of our own. In defining these limits the archaeologist of the modern period is necessarily critical because he is exposing the finitude of what had seemed to be essential attributes of humanity, and hence he is challenging some of the fundamental assumptions of his time.

Foucault's stance on the brink of what seems to him to be another transition in the structures of experience raises another question about the critical element of archaeology. That is, although he can be applauded for challenging radically the basic assumptions of modernity, he can be attacked neatly for

36. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice*, transl. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, 1977), 147.

37. Hayden White, "Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground," *History and Theory* 12 (1973), 23-54, reprinted in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), 233.

having no "principle of determination," or of engaging in "self-indulgent radical chic."<sup>38</sup> Both of these criticisms amount to saying that Foucault's challenge has no content to it; that it merely attacks existing power relations without proposing an alternative politics, or even a vision of the future. As Foucault himself has put it, the future beginning to be seen is absolutely empty: "*une expérience est en train de naître où il y va de notre pensée; son imminence, déjà visible mais vide absolument ne peut encore être nommée.*"<sup>39</sup>

Foucault's "failure" in this regard is only a failure according to the very terms he has rejected. Foucault does not propose an alternative politics because he has exposed the limits of what our conceptions of "politics" can mean. Foucault's straddling of the structures of experience provides him with the means for a critical exposition of what has occurred — of what has appeared in discourse — but it does not allow him to detail any alternative for the future because such an alternative cannot as yet be spoken of. At least this would be the sort of defense I would expect Foucault to make. His attempts, on the other hand, to semi-identify with certain Marxist groups seem to me to be analogous to his attempts to develop a "theory of discontinuous systematisation" on which to ground archaeology. Foucault more consistently unmasks the attempt at such a grounding, as he more consistently unmasks the limits within which Marxism must continue to speak. For Foucault, then, there can be no alternative system of politics in the sense in which Marxism can be seen as an alternative to liberalism. Instead "to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system."<sup>40</sup>

Writing a "history of the present" is a challenge to some of our basic ideas about writing a history at all. As antihistory, or counter-memory, Foucault's work contains a deeply critical element. But the shaky position of straddling the San Andreas Fault of our experience is comfortable for Foucault only in his demarcation of the limits of modern discourse, and he puts both feet firmly in our own archive when asked about alternatives to existing power relations. Foucault's appearance to some on both the left and the right as a "self-indulgent" political actor stems in part from his uncanny ability to see the limits of our present discourse from a point sometimes beyond it and his inability, or refusal, to enunciate a praxis appropriate to that beyond. However, the challenge that Foucault's work makes to the word-thing-power constellation of appropriateness that makes its way into all requests for a

38. Dominique Lecourt makes the former criticism in *Pour une critique de l'épistémologie* (Bachelard, Canguilhem, Foucault) (Paris, 1972), and suggests that Foucault integrate a class analysis into his inquiry. The latter criticism was made by Richard Rorty in an unpublished paper.

39. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris, 1972), 582.

40. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice*, 230.

new politics remains a deep one. It recognizes that such requests are usually a part of the search for some new morality, and an essence beneath the action of uncovering the layers of the past. Foucault rejects the eternal necessity for this search, and although his work may leave one unsure of what a future anything will be like, archaeology offers an important diagnosis of what the history of the present contains.

*Princeton University*

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### [Footnotes]

<sup>33</sup> **Foucault, Structuralism, and the Ends of History**

Allan Megill

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<sup>37</sup> **Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground**

Hayden V. White

*History and Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 1. (1973), pp. 23-54.

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