

*For Stuart
and
Catherine Hall*

The Politics of Truth

From Marx to Foucault

Michèle Barrett

Part III

The Politics of Truth

History, Discourse, 'Truth' and Power: Foucault's Critique of Ideology

Michel Foucault, in a much quoted response to a question posed by an interviewer, has provided a neat summary of what is wrong with the concept of ideology. Asked whether he thought that behind the concept of ideology lay 'nostalgia for a quasi-transparent form of knowledge, free from all error and illusion', Foucault replied as follows:

The notion of ideology appears to me to be difficult to make use of, for three reasons. The first is that, like it or not, it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth. Now I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false. The second drawback is that the concept of ideology refers, I think necessarily, to something of the order of a subject. Thirdly, ideology stands in a secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure, as its material, economic determinant, etc. For these three reasons, I think that this is a notion that cannot be used without circumspection.¹

These three issues will be dealt with in some detail later on in this chapter. For the moment it is enough to note that Foucault rejects the concept of ideology because (1) it is implicated, as the other side of the coin, in unacceptable truth claims, (2) it rests on a humanist understanding of the individual subject and (3) it is enmeshed in the unsatisfactory and determinist base-and-superstructure model within Marxism.

'Post-structuralist' critiques of the theory of ideology, of which Foucault's remarks have now become an exemplar, have commonly developed the concept of 'discourse' as the focus of an alternative theoretical model. Naturally, however, one cannot simply substitute

the one for the other, leaving the surrounding ideas and concepts unchallenged: to understand the scope and significance of the shift from ideology to discourse in social theory, one has to assess the developing uses of the term discourse in their broader contexts. This, it may be said, is not necessarily an easier task than that of unravelling the various and contradictory uses of the term ideology (even in the work of one writer, as chapter 1 showed for the case of Marx).

TEXTUALITY

At the outset it is important to clarify two separate tendencies in modern social and cultural theory, whose confusion and conflation has muddled the waters of these debates. For simplicity at this point I shall call these the issues of *textuality* and *discursivity*. Under the heading of *textuality* one could summon up a movement within literary and cultural theory and in philosophy towards the revaluation and revalorisation of the text as *text* rather than as pale reflection of some prior reality. An emphasis on the importance of the text – its 'writerliness', textuality, sensuality, literacy and so on – can take many forms. Many traditional, as well as recent, forms of literary, art and film criticism concern themselves principally with the object of study as a 'text' to be engaged with in its *own* terms rather than something to be explained with reference to external factors such as historical, social or biographical 'context'. The balance between, and conflicting claims of, 'text' and 'context' has been much debated in such disciplines over the years in a variety of arenas.

It would be hard to dispute that the claims of 'the text' have been raised in recent years, and the most basic point underlying this change is a new apprehension of the character of language. The key figure, as far as cultural theory is concerned, was Roland Barthes. His argument that all writing was text, despite the superficial appearances that led us to recognise 'textuality' only where it paraded itself and to ignore it in writing that claimed the spurious legitimisation of the cleric or pedagogue, has been well taken. Hence 'writerliness' (just as 'painterliness') may be a variable aspect of a text, but all forms of writing have a style.² At the root of this position lay the understanding that language is not a medium for the transmission of content – it is not 'transparent' in such a way as to convey its contents without interference: on the contrary, language is the producer of meaning. This idea has been taken to a more radical

conclusion in the work of Jacques Derrida, for whom, for example, there is 'no such thing' as a summary or a translation – merely 'another' text.³

As may readily be seen, these arguments are profoundly subversive of traditional knowledge claims, and they challenge conventional distinctions between 'academic' and 'creative' writing and between 'fact' and 'fiction'. Their influence is evident not only in literary critical studies, where the practice of textual deconstruction (unravelling the traces of meaning buried in the text's operations) has become highly popular, but also in disciplines such as philosophy and history. What is sometimes referred to as 'the linguistic turn' in history is clearly allied to the recent movement towards a greater emphasis on textuality: archives are examined as producers of historical, cultural meaning in their own right rather than as 'sources' of information about another, more social 'reality' that is the traditional goal of the historian's labours. Legal documents or medical records are scrutinised as texts in themselves, rather than as conduits to forms of knowledge that can be expressed in terms of a linear historical narrative for which such sources give the 'evidence'. This raises some interesting epistemological problems, to which I will revert later. In philosophy the issue of textuality has been equally subversive, given the conventions (in the 'Anglo' tradition particularly) of subordinating language to the role of the silent vehicle for the clearest possible expression of meaning. Against this, Derrida's philosophical works – in their positive 'untranslatability', their intricate and relentless plays of language, and the visual representation on the page of their writerliness – announce, in what is called the 'performative' aspect of writing, their textuality and hence the contingent nature of any 'truth' contained within them.

Common-sense definitions of 'discourse' An advantage of making a distinction between a new emphasis on 'textuality' and the realm of the 'discursive' as elaborated by Foucault is that it enables us to see the difficulties of regarding 'discourse' simply as the text, or spoken word, or as language in the sense of communication. These relatively 'common-sense' meanings of discourse come to mind easily from the vocabulary of a 'discourse' or 'treatise' on a particular subject. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, lists the following among the meanings of 'discourse': to talk, converse, discuss; to speak or write at length on a subject; a talk, a narrative. The French is similar – *discours* is given in the dictionary as 'talk, speech, address, dissertation, language' etc. But in relation to contemporary theoretical

debates, these historical meanings of the term are of limited use to us. The emphasis on textuality in Barthes, Derrida and other writers (sometimes wrongly or loosely invoked as 'discourse theory') is very different from the attempts that Foucault and others have made to describe a theory of discourse, or discursive formations, in a more social context – but it is important to remember that *neither* of these schools of thought use discourse in the common sense or 'dictionary' sense given above.

FOUCAULT'S CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE

Although many contemporary writers and theorists now employ a vocabulary centred on the concept of 'discourse', it is in the work of Foucault that we should look for the most original, monumental, general theory as to why this theoretical lexicon is preferable to that of ideology, social formation, class and so on. (The irony that Foucault himself would repudiate most of the words I have used above should not escape us, but I will return to this problem later.)

In direct contrast to the concerns associated with 'textuality', Foucault's use of the concept of discourse, and of what we could call *discursivity* in general, is very much related to context. Let us take one example. In drawing a distinction between language and discourse, Foucault writes in such a way as to focus our attention on a crucial aspect of context: 'The question posed by language analysis of some discursive fact or other is always: according to what rules has a particular statement been made, and consequently according to what rules could other similar statements be made? The description of the events of discourse poses a quite different question: *how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another* [my italics]?'⁴ This is, perhaps, the most important general point to grasp about Foucault's concept of a discourse: it enables us to understand how *what* is said fits into a network that has its own history and conditions of existence (albeit very different ones from the categories that historians or philosophers or other academics have traditionally used). Edward Said, summarising Foucault's work in a memorial essay, characterises it with the example that 'what enables a doctor to practise medicine or a historian to write history is not mainly a set of individual gifts, but an ability to follow rules that are taken for granted as an unconscious *a priori* by all professionals'. 'More than anyone before him,' claims Said, 'Foucault specified rules for those rules, and even more impressively, he showed how over long periods

of time the rules became epistemological enforcers of what (as well as how) people thought, lived, and spoke.⁵

Foucault's concept of discourse is formally explained in his major methodological work *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, although his arguments there will probably find more resonances in readers who are familiar with any of his remarkable historical narratives – *The Birth of the Clinic*, *Madness and Civilisation*, *Discipline and Punish*, *The History of Sexuality* and so on. Foucault begins by despatching the claims of taken-for-granted categories for thinking about discursive unities – such as book, *œuvre*, tradition, genre or discipline – and insists that the building blocks of analysis must be a 'pure description' of the discursive field, whose most significant units are 'statements', both written and spoken.⁶ Naturally there is a certain amount of discussion in the literature as to what is involved in Foucault's 'statements', and Dreyfus and Rabinow, for example, argue convincingly that Foucault is not interested in all statements (what philosophers such as Austin and Searle call everyday speech acts) but only in a subset of statements which have some autonomy and contain truth claims (akin to the notion of 'serious speech acts').⁷ Foucault's 'statements' are not propositions, or sentences, and he explains that the *enunciative function* (which is contextual) can differentiate one statement from another even where in grammatical terms its propositional content might be the same. His example of how to think of a statement is much quoted: he suggests that the letter sequence AZERT on a French typewriter keyboard is not a statement, whereas the presentation of this layout in a typing manual, as 'the alphabetical order adopted by French typewriters', is.⁸

Gilles Deleuze has satirically likened the 'Azert' discussion to a story by Gogol, casting Foucault as the 'new archivist': 'He will ignore both the vertical hierarchy of propositions which are stacked on top of one another, and the horizontal relationship established between phrases in which each seems to respond to one another. Instead he will remain mobile, skimming along in a kind of diagonal line that allows him to read what could not be apprehended before, namely statements.'⁹ One might, perhaps, gloss this to mean that although *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is a fascinating methodological essay – shot through with characteristically Foucauldian 'surprises' and challenges to the fine details of one's intellectual assumptions – there is a sense in which Foucault's own achievements when 'skimming along' and selecting some statements rather than others remain unexplained by the formal method he outlines.

If 'statements' are the molecular unit, what creates the discursive

unity of statements that Foucault would want to call a 'discourse' or, more precisely, a 'discursive formation'? In general, Foucault theorises the discursive field as characterised by 'systems of dispersion' and it is the systematicity of these dispersions that forms the basis of the discursive regularities that he wishes to study. This is explained with reference to the example of a group of statements conventionally called 'medicine', 'economics' or 'grammar'. Foucault speculates about where their unity as a group of statements lies – what makes a statement belong to one group rather than another. He rejects various possibilities – there are no well-defined objects, or definite normative statements, or continuous themes – and concludes that one finds instead various incompatible themes, series with gaps in them, heterogeneous levels of analysis and so on. And hence, he says, follows the idea of studying these dispersions themselves, to discover whether 'one cannot discern a regularity: an order in their successive appearance, correlations in their simultaneity, assignable positions in a common space, a reciprocal functioning, linked and hierarchised transformations'. It is in the discovery of regularities in the dispersions of statements in a discursive field that Foucault locates the concept of 'discursive formation' (often cast more simply as 'discourses'). To quote: 'Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functions, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation*.'¹⁰

It is worth emphasising at this point that although Foucault begins from a critique of conventional 'unities of discourse', stressing the dispersion and discontinuities to be found in the discursive field, ultimately his project was to expose and redraw *different* unities and regularities – as indeed can be seen from the influence his work has had on historical understanding of mental illness, punishment, sexuality and so forth. He is not a theorist of dispersion, contingency and heterogeneity *tout court* and described himself as 'flabbergasted' when the French reference book *Petit Larousse* defined him as 'a philosopher who founds his theory of history on discontinuity'. ('No doubt,' he reflected, 'I didn't make myself sufficiently clear ...')¹¹ Perhaps one might also add at this point that there is a world of difference between the detailed historical researches that Foucault himself undertook when seeking to recast our understanding of particular discourses (medical, penal, sexual etc.) and the extremely

superficial relabelling that often goes on in which, for example, sociology becomes 'sociological discourse' without any substantive elaboration of what the discursive ordering and regularities might be.

Foucault's concept of discourse is embedded in a theoretical system (however anti-systematic) that has at one and the same time involved the explicit rejection of the categories of classical Marxism – particularly the vexed concept of ideology – and offered the most fully elaborated, and deployed, alternative. It is impossible to get the measure of his concept of discourse without relating it to these broader issues, which I propose to treat here under the following headings: (1) issues concerned with the sociological and historical context of discourse, particularly the problem of determinism, (2) issues concerned with epistemology, and the question of knowledge, truth and power, and (3) issues concerned with the definition of the subject, agency, the self and ethics.

It is, of course, no coincidence that these headings take us back (as I shall show) to the specific objections Foucault himself raised against the concept of ideology and it can be seen that this shift from ideology to discourse lies at the heart of a much broader theoretical transformation.

Foucault and the problem of determination

DISCOURSE AND THE NON-DISCURSIVE

Initially, in considering Foucault's position on the issue of determinism, it is clearest to look at an essay where, in response to questions generated by *The Order of Things* (as the English translation of *Mots et les Choses* is entitled), he makes a crisp differentiation between three aspects of 'the play of dependencies'. Foucault there distinguishes dependencies which are:

intradiscursive (between the objects, operations, concepts within one discursive formation);

interdiscursive (between different discursive formations, for example, the correlations discussed in *The Order of Things* between natural history, grammar etc.);

extradiscursive (between discursive and non-discursive transformations, for example, the correlations studied in *Madness and Civilisation*

and in *The Birth of the Clinic* between medical discourse and a whole play of economic, political and social changes').

In an obvious reference to the determinist base/superstructure model in Marxism, Foucault adds: 'I would like to substitute this whole play of dependencies for the uniform, simple notion of assigning a causality; and by suspending the indefinitely extended privilege of the cause, in order to render apparent the polymorphous cluster of correlations.'¹² Foucault believed that the concept of ideology was irretrievably contaminated by the unilinear economic determinism characteristic of Marxism.

To those who see all forms of 'post-structuralism' as a rampant idealism in which all non-discursive social phenomena are obliterated, one should emphasise here the unequivocal distinction Foucault made between discourse and extradiscursive social practices. The way in which he thought of the relations between the discursive and the non-discursive, and the values he attached to them, are, however, profoundly different from the conventions of Marxism. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* he elaborated a view that one might summarise, a little polemically, as the production of 'things' by 'words'. Discourses are composed of signs, but they do more than designate things, for they are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. In a neat reversal of the classical materialist hierarchy Foucault says that the rules of discursive practice 'define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects'.¹³ He wishes to shift attention away from 'things' 'the referent', ('the dumb existence of a reality') and – standing the causal presumption of materialism on its proverbial head – 'To substitute for the enigmatic treasure of "things" anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. To define these objects without reference to the *ground*, the *foundation of things*, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance'.¹⁴

Thus Foucault describes his claim that the 'tight embrace' between words and things can be loosened by attending to the processes that govern the construction of objects in discourse. This is the level of analysis he needs to address problems such as how criminality could become an object of medical expertise, or how sexual deviance an object of psychiatric discourse. To take another example, he differentiates between the 'primary' (or 'real' – a curious

regression) relations between family and judiciary in the nineteenth century, the objects of psychiatric discourse, and a third question: what nineteenth-century psychiatrists *could say* about the relations between the family and criminality. This point is drawn out rather nicely in an interview where Foucault was asked whether it would not be useful to create an archaeology of sexual fantasies rather than *The History of Sexuality*. He replied: 'I try to make an archaeology of discourse about sexuality which is really the relationship between what we do, what we are obliged to do, what we are allowed to do, what we are forbidden to do in the field of sexuality and what we are allowed, forbidden, or obliged to say about our sexual behaviour. That's the point. It's not a problem of fantasy; it's a problem of verbalisation.'¹⁵

There are a number of questions that one might take up with regard to Foucault's concept of discourse. We should note, first, his radical questioning of the hierarchy of determinism found in Marxism. Foucault saw determination as polymorphous rather than unilinear, and he wanted to claim the determinative powers of discourse in constituting practices that are intimately responsible for – as Said put it – 'how people thought, lived and spoke'. Foucault also wanted to challenge the materialist mind-set that sees value only in the mute, grey world of the pre-discursive and treats with disregard the productive creations of discourse. Secondly, it is worth noting at this point that Foucault opposed at every turn the conception of social structure so powerfully present in Marxism, and – of course – restricted it to the role of social class as the backbone of that structure. Foucault developed another and equally general concept, to which I shall return below – that of power. And, in general, the discourses he tended to analyse – medical, legal, sexual and so on – led to considerations quite other than those of class.

HISTORY AND GENEALOGY

Before looking at how the concept of discourse meshes with Foucault's general focus on power, it is important to clarify the links between his rejection of the 'primacy' of the material (as in Marxism) and his rejection of the primacy of a search for 'origins' in history. Just as he elaborated a theory of discourse to repudiate the one, so his concepts of archaeology and then genealogy were designed to repudiate the other. Foucault argues, in the opening pages of *The*

Archaeology of Knowledge, that 'total' history was constituted around a set of linked, and mistaken, assumptions: that one could reconstitute the overall form of a civilisation or principle of a society; that all the phenomena of a period had a shared significance with underlying laws accounting for their cohesion; that systems of homogeneity relations could be established; that networks of causality could be identified; and that the same form of historicity operates across the boundaries of economic, social, mental, technical or political phenomena. 'These are the postulates that are challenged,' wrote the grand mover of this challenge, 'by the new history when it speaks of series, divisions, limits, differences of level, shifts, chronological specificities, particular forms of rehandling, possible types of relation.'¹⁶ A total, or totalising, history tends to draw all phenomena to a single centre; whereas what Foucault calls 'general' history deploys the space of dispersion.

This theme underlies Foucault's appropriation of the Nietzschean notion of a genealogy, which he saw as a form of decentring that would in opposition to 'the search for an original foundation that would make rationality the *telos* of mankind'.¹⁷ In his essay 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', Foucault elaborates the significance of his argument that Nietzsche's concept of genealogy 'opposes itself to the search for origins'. He likens the 'chimeras of the origin' to calling in a philosopher when what one needs is a doctor: 'History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin.'¹⁸

The essay considers critically the usage of various German words by Nietzsche at different times which, while often all translated as 'origin', properly refer to descent (*Herkunft*) and emergence (*Entstehung*) as well as the more usual term for origin – *Ursprung*. Foucault's discussions of these terms illuminate the gulf between his own genealogical historiography and the concerns of a traditional, origins-oriented approach. Recasting origins as 'descent' enables one to think of difference rather than resemblance, of beginnings rather than a beginning, of exterior accident rather than internal truth. Searching for descent is, according to Foucault, the opposite of erecting foundations; it is to disturb the immobile, fragment the unified and show the heterogeneity of what was thought to be consistent. And, finally, the domain of descent is the domain of the body and genealogy is thus situated within the 'articulation' of the body and history.¹⁹ The concept of 'emergence' is equally at odds with the

received perspective of origins. Emergence, Foucault says, is not the culmination of historical process (even if things appear so) but merely the 'current episodes' of a series. We should not read a teleological motive into the present moment and thus genealogy seeks to establish not the 'anticipatory power of meaning' but the hazardous play of dominations. Quoting Nietzsche: 'the iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance'.²⁰

This theme of hazard or chance is not an easy one to incorporate into a philosophy of history, and few historiographers take on that particular challenge. Foucault, however, in his inaugural lecture (as 'professor of the history of systems of thought') at the Collège de France, noted what he called 'the absence of a theory enabling us to think the relation between chance and thought'. He added the following rider to his exposition of his characteristic approach to the examination of 'discontinuous systematicities': 'Finally, though it is true that these discontinuous discursive series each have, within certain limits, their regularity, it is undoubtedly no longer possible to establish links of mechanical causality or of ideal necessity between the elements which constitute them. We must accept the introduction of the alea [chance] as a category in the production of events.'²¹

Foucault continued by suggesting that chance, the discontinuous and materiality were three elements one needed to include in a history of discourses – allowing a connection between the history of systems of thought and the practice of historians – but commented that for some historians these constituted a 'triple peril' which had to be exorcised by casting history as the unravelling of necessity.²² Foucault's position has proved extremely contentious among professional historians, not surprisingly perhaps. For he has pushed home a fundamental challenge to the conventions of western historiography, and has had an enormous influence on many younger historians and indeed on a much broader constituency of readers than historical studies usually command. A typical remark in an interview will show the qualities in Foucault which made him so irritating to many historians, whilst at the same time being *right*: 'A few years ago, historians were very proud to discover that they could write not only the history of battles, of kings and institutions but also of the economy; now they are all amazed because the shrewdest among them have learned that it was also possible to write the history of feelings, behaviour and the body. Soon, they will understand that the history of the West cannot be dissociated from the way its "truth" is produced and produces its effects.'²³ The concept of discourse, for Foucault, was closely connected with his concepts of

truth, knowledge and power. Let us turn first to Foucault's concept of power and the role this plays in his system of thought as a whole.

POWER

For our purposes here, considering Foucault's work as a critique and alternative to the way determination has been conceptualised in Marxist theories of ideology, the concept of power is an important one. For Foucault developed a concept of power that was truly in sympathy with his concern with the polymorphous play of dependencies mentioned at the beginning of this section. As we shall see, he developed a concept of power that did not locate it in agencies (whether the state, individuals, economic forces etc.) but saw it in terms of 'micro' operations of power and by means of strategies and technologies of power. In general terms, his concept of power is probably the element of his system that is least compatible not only with Marxism but with most modern social science in which paradigms of a determining social structure exist. Hence to understand the significance of what Foucault was challenging with this new concept of power, one has to take on board a background of what Giddens has called the traditional 'skewing' in sociology towards the structure side of a structure/agency duality.²⁴

A further difficulty is that Foucault's own development, methodologically speaking, is most complex around that question of power. If there is a significant 'break' in Foucault's work, it is to be located after *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow suggest that this text, where Foucault reflects on his earlier works (particularly *Folie et déraison: l'histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* – abridged in English as *Madness and Civilisation* – *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Words and Things*), is a methodological failure from which Foucault developed in a somewhat new direction. They argue a set of complex related theses on this point, bringing into play a series of debates such as whether Foucault had ever been influenced by 'structuralism', from which one can perhaps extract as central the following points. Foucault, they note, began by understanding discourses as epistemic regimes, in favour of which social and institutional practices were analytically subordinated; this tended to weight theory over practice and, not surprisingly, to cast the 'archaeologist' as phenomenologically and epistemologically detached from the discursive formations studied. But Foucault's subsequent major works, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, are predicated

upon favouring practice over theory and understand discourse in a framework of 'organised and organising' practices; in this perspective archaeology has given way to genealogy as the principal method and the writer no longer regards himself as detached from the social practices he is studying.²⁵

Another way of looking at this shift in Foucault's point of view is simply to say that he discovered the concept of power. As he put it himself: 'When I think back now, I ask myself what else it was that I was talking about, in *Madness and Civilisation* or *The Birth of the Clinic*, but power? Yet I'm perfectly aware that I scarcely ever used the word and never had such a field of analyses at my disposal.'²⁶ His own explanation for his difficulty in formulating the problem of power is a classically Foucauldian one: 'this was an incapacity linked undoubtedly with the political situation we found ourselves in'. Thus the political situation, in terms of his own model of discursive formations, plays a part in what can be thought and said in a theoretical discourse such as his own as much as in political discourse as such. Here, as in many other contexts, it is clear how marked Foucault was by and against the left orthodoxies of his subculture in post-war to 1968 Paris. He suggested many times that the Marxist insistence on the dominance of economic considerations tends to systematically exclude or occlude other considerations of power. Relating this to his own concerns he says: 'To put it very simply, psychiatric internment, the mental normalisation of individuals, and penal institutions have no doubt a fairly limited importance if one is only looking for their economic significance. On the other hand, they are undoubtedly essential to the general functioning of the wheels of power. So long as the posing of the question of power was kept subordinate to the economic instance and the system of interests which this served, there was a tendency to regard these problems as of small importance.'²⁷

Foucault's concept of power was, in significant measure, developed as a critique of Marxism's theory of power as an instrument of a class dominance that was understood to originate from economic interest. Foucault saw power, on the contrary, as something that is exercised rather than possessed; it is not attached to agents and interests but is incorporated in numerous practices. Power can thus work from the 'bottom up', and Foucault uses the notion of the capillary to describe the operations of power at a micro level. Power is not exclusively negative, either, but produces pleasure and meaning as well as more coercive dimensions – why else, asks Foucault, would power be so seductive and powerful?

This analysis of power is not clear unless fitted into what is now more generally discussed as the critique of 'essentialism' in social theory (discussed earlier in this book in relation to the arguments put forward by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe). For Foucault, 'power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network'.²⁸ We are all already regulated, already participants in networks of power, already constituted within the operations of power – and notions such as the 'free individual', on whom power descends from above – are completely meaningless. Foucault did not believe that this position entailed 'seeing power everywhere' or reducing everything to power, just as Marxism had reduced everything to economics, although this criticism is frequently made of his work. He suggested instead that the problem was to understand *how* power operated in specific methods and strategies, *how* major shifts such as the increased disciplining of individuals in modern western society had taken place, and *how* one could show the political and economic dimensions of changes in power.²⁹

The word *how* is the key to Foucault's concept of power. He considered that the question of power, in modern western societies where the issue of poverty (and the claims of the economic) had ceased to be of primary importance, had assumed a fundamental status. Yet questions of power – Who is making decisions for me? Who is preventing me from doing this and telling me to do that? – are questions that can *only* be answered when the question *how does it happen* is resolved. Thus, for Foucault, we can only study the 'who' of power – who exercises power – in conjunction with the 'how': 'the strategies, networks, the mechanisms, all those techniques by which a decision is accepted and by which that decision could not but be taken in the way it was'.³⁰ Foucault suggested that his 'little question' of *what happens?*, the 'flat and empirical' *how* of power, does not pose any ultimate challenge to the metaphysics or ontology of power and is hence not attempting to eliminate the what, who and why of power: it simply allows a critical investigation of the *thematics* of power. The object of analysis changes from power as an absolute, or in itself, to power in terms of *power relations*.³¹

In examining the 'how' of power, Foucault developed complex, and shifting, distinctions between programmes, strategies and technologies of power.³² It is, however, because of his brilliant substantive histories of discipline, normalisation and the 'carceral society' that these theoretical elaborations have come to life. *Discipline and Punish*, for example, deals with the extension of the operations of

power in Western Europe that can be seen in a change from punishment by exemplary torture to punishment by surveillance. Foucault describes (in gory detail) the tortures, public executions and so on of the period up until the eighteenth century not as barbarism but as a technique of power that was increasingly perceived as inefficient and costly. In its place there developed techniques of surveillance, of which the most quoted example is Bentham's panopticon, a model for the organisation of institutions such as prisons, but also informing the design and philosophy of other institutions such as schools, hospitals, reformatories and so on. The principle was, at its simplest, to expose the prisoner to the gaze of surveillance: 'the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer's gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness'.³³ *Discipline and Punish* explores many themes which have subsequently become more salient and it would be hard to overestimate the influence of this book on a wide range of work. Foucault shows how an internalisation of the surveillance develops, how space becomes recognised as a political problem, how power relations can be heterogeneous rather than simply adversarial and so on.

Most importantly for the present discussion, Foucault shows how the body thought of in Marxism as the 'productive body' – as labour – is *only* that when *also* the 'subjected body' of a system of power: 'it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used)'.³⁴ Presaging the themes of 'bio-power' that were to be formulated in his later work, Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish* for an analysis of the 'political technology of the body'. In discussions of the implications of his approach, Foucault agreed that his conception of power took it to be 'constituted' with the forces of production, as opposed to 'super-structural', and this may readily be seen in terms of Foucault's disagreement with the determinist ethos of Marxism. At this point it would be useful to attempt to characterise this in such a way as to focus the issues at stake in the ideology/discourse conflict.

FOUCAULT AND MARXISM

Foucault is the most obliging of the post-structuralists on this question, in the sense that in his books, and even more so in the many

interviews in which he clarified and explained the theses of his major studies, he often refers back to his disagreements with Marxism. (One frequently voiced complaint against Derrida, for example, is that his 'encounter' with Marxism seems to be being indefinitely deferred.) In a late interview Foucault expressed the desire that there might be an 'unburdening and liberation of Marx in relation to party dogma, which has constrained it, touted it and brandished it for so long.' In response to the question as to whether Marx was 'at work in your own methodology' Foucault added more fuel to the fire of the dispute as to the 'compatibility' between Marxism and his own perspective. With a certain nonchalance in regard to scholarly convention, he replied: 'Yes, absolutely. You see, given the period in which I wrote those books, it was good form (in order to be viewed favourably by the institutional Left) to cite Marx in the footnotes. So I was careful to steer clear of that.'³⁵

More seriously, Foucault's disagreements with Marx were profound and extensive. As we shall see in the next section of this chapter, he rejected entirely the 'realist' epistemology on which the ideology/science distinction and the construal of ideology as critique or illusion has been founded. He also rejected outright the notion of the subject, both individual agent and class subject, which Marxism has presumed. In relation to the whole problematic of determinism – and we might here remember Stuart Hall's 'When we leave the terrain of "determinations", we desert, not just this or that stage in Marx's thought, but his whole problematic'³⁶ – his position is unequivocally challenging. He sidelines the social structures – social class, the state – on which the determinist model is built, stripping their powers of agency away and arguing that 'production' and 'labour' go hand in hand with politics and subjection. Hence one would say that Foucault is working outside the Marxist problematic of determinism, rather than seeking to retrieve a polymorphous model of causality within it. In particular, as we saw earlier, Foucault does not defer to the 'dumb reality' of the pre-discursive. His model of power is not commensurate with the topographical metaphor of base and superstructure in Marxism, which has proved intractable and difficult to dislodge without bringing down the whole theoretical edifice as well. As David Couzens Hoy has interestingly observed: 'In fact, the top-bottom metaphor is unusable, for there is no absolute top or bottom, but rather a grid or network. A linguistic model comes closer to capturing Foucault's conception than a causal, materialist model. Foucault tends to think of the network as being like a grammar, which conditions what can be uttered in a

language but does not determine which actual utterances emerge (and when).'³⁷

Here we might say, perhaps, that the issue of determinism, posed within the framework of Marxist materialism, is one that is most firmly entangled with the intellectual climate at the time and place of the birth and consolidation of Marxist perspective. Increasingly it is clear – to put it very simply – that the materialist (in practice economic reductionist) premises of Marxism are inadequate as a basis for thinking about political, cultural and social life in a late twentieth-century society whose 'determinations' are so different from those of mid nineteenth-century manufacturing capitalism. Foucault's work is irritating to many Marxists precisely because it draws attention to what is assumed in Marxist theory – to the historical conditions in which Marxism emerged as a discourse – and this is in and of itself subversive of Marxism's claims to 'truth'. Alan Sheridan, indicating the degree of iconoclasm that Foucault has to go in for against the Marxist left orthodoxy prevailing at the time he was writing, quotes from the polemical passage in *The Order of Things*: 'Marxism exists in nineteenth-century thought like a fish in water; that is, it is unable to breathe anywhere else.'³⁸ As Sheridan observes, Foucault makes clear in that book that 'Marxist thought is irredeemably confined by an *épistémè* that is coming to an end'.³⁹

Most importantly of all for the specific concerns of this book, Foucault's concepts of discourse and power – and the intimate relation between them – were consistently and repeatedly elaborated as a critique of the concept of ideology. Frequently he moved straight to the issue of ideology when the general question of Marxism was raised. In 1975, for example, he said: 'As regards Marxism, I'm not one of those who try to elicit the effects of power at the level of ideology. ... Marxism considered as an historical reality has had a terrible tendency to occlude the question of the body, in favour of consciousness and ideology.'⁴⁰ Perhaps we could summarise his position by connecting both his critique of ideology and his arguments about *discourse* and *power* to his notion of truth. For part of his emphasis on power was, precisely, on what he called 'the politics of truth'. It was essential for and integral to Foucault's constitution of 'the politics of truth' as an object of study that he dismantle Marxism's obsessive interest in ideology or 'the economics of untruth'. Another quotation from Foucault in generalising, if somewhat flippant, mode about his life's work will make the connection abundantly clear: 'If I wanted to pose and drape myself in a slightly fictional style, I would say that this has always been my problem: the

effects of power and the production of "truth". I have always felt uncomfortable with this ideological notion which has been used in recent years. It has been used to explain errors or illusions, or to analyse presentations – in short, everything that impedes the formation of true discourse. It has also been used to show the relation between what goes on in people's heads and their place in the conditions of production. *In sum, the economics of untruth. My problem is the politics of truth* [my italics]. I have spent a lot of time dealing with it.⁴¹

Foucault thus replaces Marxism's concern with 'the economics of untruth' with his own examinations of 'the politics of truth'. Taking this focus, one of the most interesting discussions of Foucault's relationship to Marxism is that of Barry Smart, who suggests that Foucault's project was – although of course Foucault himself did not use this vocabulary – to show 'the complex multiple processes from which the strategic constitution of forms of hegemony may emerge'.⁴² The background to Smart's recent article on the question of Foucault and hegemony lies in his earlier book *Foucault, Marxism and Critique*, in which he sketches out the conceptual limitations of the Marxist model and discusses the possibility that Gramsci's work offers solutions that go beyond the limitations of Marxism.⁴³ The question as to whether Gramsci can be read as departing from or constrained by the precepts of 'classical Marxism' is a heavily contested one, and the discussion of chapter 4 of this book considered this from the point of view of a detailed commentary on the break Laclau and Mouffe eventually made with Gramsci in developing a model of hegemony that was not class reductionist or essentialist. This is a discussion where there is still considerable room for interpretation; to me the attempt to lift Gramsci out of the classical Marxist tradition, making him the standard-bearer of a non-reductionist Marxism, is looking increasingly strained.

Barry Smart, rightly I think, contrasts Gramsci and Foucault in this regard, closing the balance sheet firmly in Foucault's favour: 'Although it may be argued that Gramsci was sensitive to the limits and limitations of Marxist analysis arising from the cornerstone principle of economic-determination-in-the-final-instance and sought through the conception of hegemony to develop a new approach to the problem of politics and power, ultimately the analysis remains at best ambiguous on the problem of economism and virtually silent on the complex matter of the establishment of forms of hegemony. In contrast, Foucault by virtue of his critical distance from the limits and limitations of the Marxist problematic has been able to transform

the terms of debate from a preoccupation with the ambiguous concept of "ideology" and its effects to a consideration of the relations of "truth" and "power" which are constitutive of hegemony.⁴⁴

Whether or not Smart is right to recast Foucault's project in terms of the language of hegemony (given the mixture of resonances now carried by the term), we can agree with the underlying theme of his interpretation: Foucault made a clean exit from the conceptual logjam where the concept of ideology is stuck in Marxism but developed an approach to 'the politics of truth' that was, in a different way, critical rather than neutral.

Foucault and the problems of epistemology

In this section I want to revert briefly, with regard to the Foucauldian critique of the concept of ideology, to some of the themes that were considered at the beginning of the book as part of the 'classical disputes' within Marxism. These concern the nature of knowledge: there was the debate as to whether ideology should be regarded as critical or neutral – whether one could adopt the so-called epistemological definition of ideology, and the question of whether a distinction could be drawn between ideology and science. In some ways, Foucault is an extreme 'position' to select here as he is so far from the epistemological security that the original debates within Marxism rested on. Anyone who can describe his project in terms of the relationship between truth on the one hand and reflexivity and the self on the other must be found on the sharply 'conventionalist' side of the debate between realism and conventionalism in epistemology: 'my own problem has always been the question of truth, of telling the truth, the *wahr-sagen* – what it is to tell the truth – and the relation between "telling the truth" and forms of reflexivity, of self upon self'.⁴⁵ Anyone who formulates his first objection to the concept of ideology as the problem of 'drawing a line' between scientificity and truth must be such a complete relativist as to make the issue scarcely worth discussing. Anyone whose own project is to see historically 'how effects of truth are produced within discourses which are themselves neither true nor false' is, perhaps, beyond the pale of debates about epistemology. Yet there are, too, reasons why Foucault cannot be 'written off' in this way: in the first place he offers a theory of *knowledge*, and the relations between truth and

power and, also, because there is considerable tension between Foucault's polemical general statements about epistemology and the obvious epistemological claims of his more specific essays and historical studies.

Foucault's lecture 'The Order of Discourse' is perhaps the best place to find a serious and sustained consideration of knowledge, discourse, truth and power. There Foucault describes the results of his many years of work researching 'the three great exclusions which forge discourse' in post-medieval western society.⁴⁶ These are, first, the *prohibitions* on what we can speak about, on who may speak and when, which interact in complex ways to form what Foucault calls a grid, with looser and tighter controls and exclusions (currently notable in sexuality, and politics, for example) that teach us that discourse is not simply a translation of domination into language but is itself a *power* to be seized. Secondly, Foucault refers to the opposition between reason and madness as another great principle of exclusion, not in this case a prohibition but a division and a rejection. Sheridan summarises Foucault's thesis as to what had occurred between Montaigne and Descartes: '*Man* may become mad, but *thought*, as the exercise of a sovereign subject duty-bound to observe the true, cannot be insane. The experience, so familiar to the Renaissance, of an unreasonable Reason and a reasonable Unreason, is now precluded.'⁴⁷ A third principle of exclusion, which Foucault calls the 'will to know' or the 'will to truth', was also historically constituted, in his view, since its emergence can be located in pre-Platonic Greek thought. It involved a shift from seeing truth as a given property of the discourse of those in power to seeing truth as a property of the referent of discourse. From this, argued Foucault, sprang the entire western ethos in which the will to truth is reinforced and renewed, whether in scientific 'discoveries' or the valorisation of the 'vraisemblable' in literature, in the practices and institutions of education, publishing and so on. As a modern example, Foucault gives the case of legal discourse, which has increasingly abandoned a theory of justice as its justification, and moved towards the externally guaranteed 'truth' of sociological or medical knowledge: 'it is as if even the work of law could no longer be authorised, in our society, except by a discourse of truth'.⁴⁸

In this context Foucault gives an account of the role of 'disciplines' in the management of truth, using Canguilhem's distinction between truth and being 'in the true'. No doubt for many readers evoking Kuhn's account of how paradigms shift, Foucault writes: 'Mendel spoke the truth, but he was not "within the true" of the biological

discourse of his time' Disciplines operate within certain rules: 'Within its own limits, each discipline recognises true and false propositions; but it pushes back a whole teratology of knowledge beyond its margins.'⁴⁹ For Foucault, science has become institutionalised as *power*, and the 'will to truth' is a key dimension of that historical process.

In considering these arguments a whole range of questions arise. In one sense, Foucault is not disputing the existence of absolute or scientific truth, merely stating his interest in the processes by which effects of truth are secured – which is a different issue. How else can we interpret the following sentence? 'It is always possible that one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exteriority, but one is "in the true" only by obeying the rules of a discursive "policing" which one has to reactivate in each of one's discourses.'⁵⁰ But, in another sense, the concession that one could speak the truth outside discourse is fundamentally at odds with his general thesis. On another general question, one might ask what would be preferable to the 'will to truth', of which Foucault is so critical, when its predecessor – according to him – was the assignment of 'truth' on the basis of social power (scarcely a more desirable relationship between discourse, truth and power). Or again, how do we address the 'desirability' of truth? Foucault was asked by an interviewer the blunt question 'Doesn't science produce "truths" to which we submit?' and his reply is characteristically irritating from a rational point of view and yet also provocative in a productive way. He began by linking science and power and then added rather demurely: 'I am only taking up one of the fundamental problems of Western philosophy when it poses these questions: Why, in fact, are we attached to the truth? Why the truth rather than lies? Why the truth rather than myth? Why the truth rather than illusion? And I think that, instead of trying to find out what truth, as opposed to error, is, it might be interesting to take up the problem posed by Nietzsche: how is it that, in our societies, "the truth" has been given this value, thus placing us absolutely under its thrall?'⁵¹ If we go beyond the initial spluttering rationalist response, there are interesting questions to consider. In what circumstances do we choose to tell lies? Use myths? Prefer illusions to the truth? (No doubt even the most rigorous of rationalist philosophers in the Anglo-American school colluded at times with Father Christmas or the tooth fairy.)

Foucault is difficult to 'pin down' on such issues, and partly because he completely eschews the style of the Cartesian tradition, albeit in a less flamboyant manner than Derrida. One aspect of this is

the question of textuality, or the 'writerliness' of Foucault's texts and the effects this has on the way in which his ideas are read. His essay 'What Is An Author?' carries, in its discussion of the 'author function', a different argument from that of Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the Author', but some parallels can obviously be made.⁵² Foucault has made it clear that his 'texts' are not to be regarded as correct for all time, they are instead a process of work. Hence he on numerous occasions recorded his awareness of changing his mind, moving on, refusing to be caught under the searchlight of consistency. In a much quoted remark at the end of the Introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and one which, typically, irks those who think a writer should 'stand by' their earlier work but endears him to a new generation of readers, he wrote: 'Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.'⁵³ Another infraction of the conventions of scholarly texts might be seen in Foucault's remarks about the relationship of his books' titles to their content. Asked if this was a 'game' with the reader, Foucault replied that there was often a 'gap' between a title he chose at the beginning and a new problem he was able to formulate at the end of the book: he described this as the distance he effected in the course of writing.⁵⁴

These issues of writerliness and authorship are not of purely incidental interest – they mark a new style of work and a contempt for the sovereign I of traditional academic writing. The other side of this particular coin – where Foucault writes at length in exegesis of another thinker but is read as speaking for himself – has already caused a certain amount of confusion. Gary Gutting, for example, has pointed out that various critiques (including that of Habermas) of Foucault's supposed relativism are based on passages where 'Foucault is not speaking in his own name' but is giving a lengthy exposition of others.⁵⁵

These issues about 'style' can be formulated in an even more significant way, as they affect the process of argument profoundly. Perhaps we need an epistemology of style. One example of this is the interesting exchange that has arisen over Charles Taylor's critique of Foucault. Paul Bové, in an impassioned Foreword (which is entitled 'The Foucault Phenomenon: The Problematics of Style') to Deleuze's book on Foucault, casts a shadow over Taylor's unremitting and to some highly convincing critique of Foucault's ideas about power, freedom and truth. Bové shows how the passages of Taylor's piece that strike one as most dismissive – Taylor claims that Foucault

'does not make sense', is 'driven by contradictory positions', has 'obscured the issues which count by his mode of expression' and so on – spring precisely from Taylor's own disciplinary truth apparatus. Bové suggests that 'it is naïve for Taylor to approach the text of a leading theoretician of writing, language, literature and style as if his writing were merely a failed attempt at transparently presenting "positions", something merely unfortunately obscure'.⁵⁶ Bové also 'interprets' the critique of Foucault found in Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* in terms of Jameson's anxiety not to see the implications of Foucault's critique of academic disciplines. It results, claims Bové, in 'the politically motivated, too hasty dismissal of Foucault at the cost of what he has to teach us about the positions of intellectuals within power'.⁵⁷

Leaving this aside, we can agree with Richard Rorty that there is a major ambiguity in Foucault on the question of epistemology. He is not relativist in any way – contrary to some misreadings of his work – and his statements about epistemology and truth are themselves loaded to the brim with truth claims. Equally, his historical accounts – of mental illness, crime, sexuality, the rise of the social and so on – manifestly present themselves as claims for a better historical knowledge of their objects. As Rorty puts it: 'he is not content simply to give a genealogy of epistemology, to show us how this genre came into being (something he does very well). Rather, he wants to do something like epistemology.'⁵⁸ The same issue can be put in the form of Gary Gutting's question: 'Is Foucault's critique of reason self-refuting?' Gutting concludes that it is not, and that Foucault offers a conception of philosophy which, while shorn of the foundationalism and a priorism of traditional philosophy, provides an important intellectual tool for working on normative judgments arrived at elsewhere.⁵⁹ For Rorty, Foucault's work was both more troubling and more visionary: 'reaching for speculative possibilities that exceed our present grasp, but may nevertheless be our future'.⁶⁰

Foucault and the problems of the subject

As we have seen at the beginning of this book, the 'problem of the subject' did not exist in classical Marxism's theories of ideology; but it has certainly compensated for its late arrival on the scene in terms

of the interest it currently engenders. At stake here are a number of related issues, some of which (the critique of the Cartesian subject, the problem of humanism and so on) were discussed at some length in chapter 5. As far as Foucault is concerned, he insisted that the subject should be thought of as constituted rather than a given, and his interest in the practices constituting that subject (discursive, social and so on) was much broader than that of many other modern theorists. Foucault's approach to subjectivity tended to focus on conscious material, particularly what can be verbalised, but (despite his antipathy to psychoanalysis) he also dealt with that which is not brought to consciousness. It is scarcely necessary to add that Foucault's interest in subjectivity was not primarily oriented towards social class, for indeed his central interest was in other forms of identity. ('I have tried to show how we have indirectly constituted ourselves through the exclusion of some others: criminals, mad people and so on.')⁶¹

Foucault's perspective on 'the subject' changed over the years partly, perhaps, in response to the charge that his earlier position left little room for 'resistance'. Considerable debate still takes place over this issue with regard to his work, and to the related problem of humanism and anti-humanism. Before looking at these issues in more detail, it is worth remarking that the combination of Foucault's displacement of social class from the theorisation of subjectivity, and his implacable critique of the 'sovereign' subject of humanist discourse, have made him into a post-structuralist whose work has been much used, applied and debated within feminism. As Biddy Martin has appositely remarked about Foucault's critique of humanism: 'feminist analyses demonstrate ever more convincingly that women's silence and exclusion from struggles over representation have been the condition of possibility for humanist thought: the position of woman has indeed been that of an internal exclusion within Western culture, a particularly well-suited point from which to expose the workings of power in the will to truth and identity'.⁶² The implications of Foucault's work for feminist analysis will be considered shortly.

In the meanwhile, it is perhaps worth adding that in these debates – about both subjectivity and the correct conception of 'the subject' – there can be no adversarial logic in which if Foucault is wrong the Marxist theory of ideology might be right. The glaring weaknesses of Marxism in this area suggest that should Foucault turn out to offer us no more, even, than what I have described as the 'sorry legacy' of Althusserianism, the classical Marxist problematic will still be

woefully inadequate, causing us to look elsewhere for a better approach.

FOUCAULT, THE SUBJECT AND THE SELF

Foucault's changing approach to these questions is often referred to as something like 'the return of the subject in late Foucault'. Towards the end of his life he expressed an increasing interest in the self, and this is seen by many (although not entirely with justification) as some kind of repudiation of his earlier position. Whether or not one wants to make a grand *coupure* or break in his thought is not clear: one can also see continuities and coherences in these succeeding concerns.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault addressed the way in which he thought of the relationship between the subject and discourse, and in one particular passage he clarified eloquently the importance of understanding the discursive construction of the subject – as against the conception of discourse as something appropriated by a fully fledged or *given* subject. He wrote: 'discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined. ... it is neither by recourse to a transcendental subject nor by recourse to a psychological subjectivity that the regulation of its enunciations should be defined.'⁶³

Foucault's critique of the 'transcendental' or Cartesian subject was completely bound into his critique of humanism. In fact, he *defined* humanism as 'subjected sovereignties', saying that 'By humanism I mean the totality of discourse through which Western man is told: "Even though you don't exercise power you can still be a ruler. Better yet, the more you deny yourself the exercise of power, the more you submit to those in power, the more this increases your sovereignty."'⁶⁴ Foucault went on to explain that humanism was institutionalised in western civilisation through Roman law which, in an 'elegant exchange', required the property owner to submit to the laws supporting his claim to property whilst at the same time fixing the right to property as the possession of those in power. According to Foucault, the sovereign subject of western culture is thus in reality – and here lies the meaning of 'humanism' – a *pseudosovereign*.⁶⁴ Another example of Foucault's 'deconstruction' of humanism can be given from the same interview. Speaking of the superficiality of

dealing with 'rights' of prisoners, he argued that the radical aim of the group in which he was active – GIP (Information Group on Prisons) – was to challenge the distinction between guilt and innocence. 'Our action ... isn't concerned with the soul or the man behind the convict, but seeks to obliterate the deep division that lies between innocence and guilt.' This position he contrasts with the characteristic response of humanism to the problem of prisons: 'Confronted by the penal system, the humanist would say: "The guilty are guilty and the innocent are innocent. Nevertheless, the convict is a man like any other and society must respect what is human in him: consequently, flush toilets!"'⁶⁵ (Although Foucault is manifestly right about the toilets – currently a topic of much official concern in Britain – his own position is a curiously 'sixties' one.) The article from which I have been drawing was, interestingly, a discussion between Foucault and a group of *lycée* students published in the French magazine *Actuel*. Even in 1971, with Foucault taking a pro-drugs position, carefully explaining to the students that the police campaign against drugs was 'the indirect exaltation of the normal, rational, conscientious, and well-adjusted individual', those bright sixth-formers were much more sober: young 'Serge' thought that drug use was only for drop-outs, and certainly not for politicised students.⁶⁶

In any event, the burden of Foucault's earlier works was undoubtedly to 'ruin the sovereignty of the subject'. In his later work – and the turning-point comes after he had begun the project of *The History of Sexuality* – Foucault became interested in what he termed 'subjectivation', or 'the procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject'.⁶⁷ And although most of his previous work had been located in the post-medieval European context, this new interest was to take Foucault back to the writings of Greek and Roman antiquity. Foucault explained that after he had written the first volume of the proposed 'History', he had intended to write a historical sequence going from the sixteenth century onwards but was stopped in his tracks by it 'not working out'. The problem that remained unanswered was to do with morality: 'why had we made sexuality into a moral experience?' The answer he eventually came up with concerned both the moralising of sexual experience in Christianity and a concomitant appropriation of morality by a theory of the subject. In comparison, the ethic of antiquity was one that did not moralise sexuality but took much greater 'care of the self'. And in so far, suggested Foucault, as the package of moralised sexuality and the pseudosovereign ('a moral experience essentially centred on

the subject') was no longer satisfactory to us today, certain questions 'pose themselves to us in the same terms as they were posed in antiquity'.⁶⁸

It is these questions that led Foucault to his work on the ethics of the self: 'the kind of relationship that you ought to have with yourself, *rapport à soi*, which I call ethics, and which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own action'. As Ian Hacking has unpretentiously put it: 'the sheer stuff that you worry about if you are a moral agent'.⁶⁹ Hacking gives a very clear account of the significance of Foucault's move: 'The knowledge/power story has been elaborately illustrated in Foucault's books, but those are outer-directed narratives – what we say about others, say to others, have said to ourselves by others, do to others or have done to ourselves. They leave out the inner monologue, what I say to myself. They leave out self-discipline, what I do to myself. Thus they omit the permanent heartland of subjectivity.' Hacking then notes that 'There is nothing private about this ... The cunning of conscience and self-knowledge is to make it feel private'.⁷⁰ Foucault's *The Care of the Self* is perhaps the most interesting elaboration of these new themes: a fascinating discussion of the representation of sexuality in the writings of 'the early centuries of our era' (that is, Greek and Roman texts of various kinds), where Foucault shows the increasing moralisation and anxiety around sex that develops within antiquity and is carried forward in the Christian epoch.⁷¹

In *Technologies of the Self* Foucault suggested that there are four major types of technologies: technologies of *production*, *sign systems*, *power* and *the self* and that he 'wanted to show both their specific nature and their constant interaction'. He argued that the first two – technologies of production and of sign systems – had been most studied elsewhere, whilst his own interest had lain with power and, latterly, technologies of the self.⁷² It is important to note that Foucault's approach to the question of the subject and the self is thus one that arises in a very broad context. John Rajchman has elegantly pinpointed the sense in which Foucault's rejection of the myth of the transcendental subject, his anti-humanism and his analysis of individualisation in modern society is quite different from Derridian and Lacanian post-structuralism: 'Foucault preserves one idea: that the subject is constituted. But he rejects the Lacanian thesis that the subject is constituted in *language*.'⁷³

This broad perspective, which effectively means that Foucault's insights can be set to work across a whole spectrum of work in

historical, textual, sociological and critical debates, is one reason for his popularity. Comparatively speaking, and with some notable exceptions, the influence of Derrida and Lacan has been overwhelmingly concentrated in the areas of literary and film textual criticism, and the attempt to 'import' these thinkers into, for example, history or sociology has been much more vexed than the reception of Foucault ('patchy' even though that has been).⁷⁴

FOUCAULT, FEMINISM, THE BODY AND POLITICS

It is, though, in feminism and in work on sexuality that Foucault's ideas have recently 'taken off'. This is partly because of his emphasis on 'the body', which *again* Foucault contextualises in criticism of the concept of ideology. 'I wonder whether, before one poses the question of ideology, it wouldn't be more materialist to study first the question of the body and the effects of power on it.'⁷⁵ The reasons why 'the body' has ceased to be something taken for granted and shot to prominence as an object of social analysis are complex. As I have suggested elsewhere, they are particularly acute issues in feminism, partly because of the importance of the politics of biology (including the implications of recent medical/technological developments) to feminist struggles.⁷⁶

Foucault's focus on 'the body', and the characteristic manner in which he has recast many people's thinking about sexuality, has coalesced with both a major surge of interest in sexual identity and preference (particularly in gay and lesbian studies) and a period of major development in feminist thought. A central aspect of this is the issue of 'essentialism'. As Biddy Martin has pointed out, Foucault's demolition of the notion of 'repression' assisted the resistance of some feminists both to the ontologising of woman as essentially superior to man and to the deference to the 'truth' of women's confessed experience that was at that point becoming popular in feminism.⁷⁷ Foucault's work ties in usefully with the tendency within feminism towards an anti-essentialist position, just as it offers a much more sophisticated methodology for providing an account of sexual identity than the traditional 'social construction of gender' models on which feminists have tended to rely.

In saying this, however, one is immediately drawn into the political weaknesses of a Foucauldian approach. The entire burden of Foucault's work is to delegitimise the hypostatizing of social structures such as 'the gender order' or 'patriarchy' as explanations but

rather to uncover the complex strategies and operations of power, within and beyond the discursive, that result (with some deference to the role of chance) in what we see has emerged. Yet, and this is a repeated criticism of Foucault that I would not want to endorse in the general and vituperative terms in which it is often made, there are difficulties with failing to position *oneself* on these questions. It is one consequence of the tension in Foucault between (as Rorty put it) giving a critical history of how epistemology is as it is, and wanting to do epistemology oneself. Foucault errs on the side of implying that the position from which he speaks, as historian principally, is a neutral one. This can be dealt with by the letter of the law, as in Charles Taylor's claims that Foucault does not 'make sense'.⁷⁸ Or Fraser has done in showing, for example, how Foucault's intrinsic anti-humanism at a theoretical level is belied by the argument of *Discipline and Punish*, which 'even as it indicts humanist reform for complicity in disciplinary power, depends for its *own* critical force on the reader's familiarity with and commitment to the modern ideals of autonomy, reciprocity, dignity and human rights.'⁷⁹

This curious tension has some odd consequences, some serious, and others of perhaps more anecdotal interest. Biddy Martin suggests that 'To speak from a position of abstract correctness, rather than grounding oneself within the limitations of one's own material and ideological reality, is a privilege that can only reproduce the time in the apparent form of the "Not-I".'⁸⁰ Martin's comment arose with reference to Foucault's view that rape should be regarded as assault rather than a specifically sexual crime – a view which has been roundly criticised by some feminists, notably Monique Plaza.⁸¹ Foucault's remarks, on this as well as on other matters of policy and law relating to sexuality, are strangely naïve. In the notorious discussion of rape, where Foucault floated the idea that rape should be treated like 'a punch in the face', he keeps reverting with surprise to the reaction of the women present: 'both of you, as women, were immediately upset [indeed, they became incoherent] at the idea that one should say: rape belongs to the realm of physical violence and must simply be treated as such.'⁸² Foucault's position does have a respectable feminist pedigree, in fact (in the demystification of rape as a 'sexual' crime rather than one of power and violence), but he expressed it simplistically and without questioning the position from which he spoke – as a man. Similarly, he was very naïve in his speculations around the issue of the age of consent, the sexuality of

children and paedophilia: 'the child may be trusted to say whether or not he was subjected to violence' seems particularly feeble given what we now know about the question of power and the sexual abuse of children.⁸³

Another aspect of the 'false universalising' of which Foucault seemed strangely unaware is the lack of reflection as to what he meant by 'our culture', 'our civilisation', 'western society' and so on. As Edward Said bluntly put it: 'his Eurocentrism was almost total'. Said points out that this has a substantive bearing on the purchase of Foucault's analyses: 'he does not seem interested in the fact that history is not a homogeneous French speaking territory ... He seems unaware of the extent to which the ideas of discourse and discipline are assertively European and how ... discipline was also used to administer, study and reconstruct - then subsequently to occupy, rule and exploit - almost the whole of the non-European world.'⁸⁴

HUMANISM AND THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY

A somewhat different inflection of these problems can be seen in relation to the place of affect and feeling in Foucault's work, on which a number of comments might be made. Probably everyone notices, as they read Foucault, the imposition of complete silence about emotion or, more accurately, a refusal on Foucault's part to verbalise the emotional content of what is being discussed. Mark Poster refers to 'the great lacuna of Foucault's history of sexuality: a relative and remarkable absence of discussion about the affective nuances of sexual relations'; he also suggests that Foucault's treatment of the family is inadequate because it concentrates on the action of discourses external to the family and ignores the internal constitution of the family, notably through the emotional interaction of its members.⁸⁵ Poster attributes this problem to Foucault's antipathy to psychoanalysis in particular and the psychological level of explanation in general, and this no doubt plays a part in the matter. Some aspects of this are illuminated in the rare personal interview Foucault gave, published under the salient title of 'The Minimalist Self'.⁸⁶ It is notable, however, that many contemporary anti-humanists suffer from the same syndrome - as if to be caught speaking of emotion would involve a dubious subjectivism. The desire to avoid formulations that smack of vulgar humanism leads to the extraordinarily cerebral and skeletal character of 'the body' in this new discourse.⁸⁷

Terry Eagleton (a recent convert to the relative merits of the humanist legacy as a weapon against the politically yet worse forces of post-modernism) reads Foucault's emotional flatness as another sign of his conservatism. In a scorching attack on Foucault's ethics of the self he accuses him of completing 'his long trek from the hymning of madness to the public school virtues'.⁸⁸

It is possible, however, to make a less tendentious connection between Foucault's self-denying ordinance in the realm of affect and a more general set of problems with his work on the question of agency. Here it is clear that agency has to be considered in relation to both the agency of individuals and that of groups. Anthony Giddens has described what can be seen as a link between the epistemological ambiguities of Foucault's work and the tortured positions he arrives at in addressing questions of agency. 'Foucault's history tends to have no active subjects at all. It is history with the agency removed. The individuals who appear in Foucault's analyses seem impotent to determine their own destinies. Moreover, that reflexive appropriation of history basic to history in modern culture does not appear at the level of the agents themselves. The historian is a reflective being, aware of the influence of the writing of history upon the determination of the present. But this quality of self-understanding is seemingly not extended to historical agents themselves.'⁸⁹

Foucault's odd conception of agency hangs on his theory and vocabulary of power - programmes, strategies, technologies. Of these, it is Foucault's notion of strategy that is most vexing. One can see why Foucault uses the term 'effects', which is initially paradoxical in a thinker who is so deconstructive of the notion of 'cause', by attending to the plurality rather than singularity of effects and to Foucault's insistence on the role of chance - and unintended effects - in his account of history. But Foucault's notion of strategy is more fundamentally puzzling, since the received meaning of strategy (from the Greek *strategos*: commander or magistrate) derives so unambiguously from the orders of an individual. For Foucault, however, the central aspect of strategy is caught in an apparently oxymoronic statement quoted by Charles Taylor: 'que les relations de pouvoir sont à la fois intentionnelles et non subjectives' (power relations are both intentional and non-subjective). Foucault expands on this theme as follows: 'there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject; let us not look for the headquarters that presides over its rationality; neither the caste which governs, nor the groups which control the state apparatus, nor

those who make the most important economic decisions direct the entire network of power that functions in a society ... the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them.⁹⁰

Within Marxism, this phenomenon has been dealt with through the proposition that people act in their objectively given interests and where these (as specified in theory) do not coincide with their actual behaviour then the notion of ideology is brought in to bridge the gap. For Foucault, of course, that whole package is a non-starter; but in his own theses on power it is undoubtedly the issue of agency that causes the most scepticism as to whether he has offered a plausible alternative. Charles Taylor comments that 'there are obviously lots of aspects of social life in which this reciprocal play of micro-practice and global structures, each producing (largely unintended) consequences for the other, is the right explanatory model. The problem arises only when one combines this with Foucault's very strong claims to systematicity, in the idea that there are pervasive *strategies* afoot which condition the battle in each micro-context, that "power" can "retreat" or "re-organise its forces". These can only be combined via some account of how actions concatenate systematically. ... But Foucault doesn't even try.⁹¹

But the problem for Taylor is that although one would expect him to be right, and certainly he is 'within the true' of modern rationalist social theory in what he says, such concatenations do not necessarily have to be explicable in terms of one of his models. (What logic can be invoked to explain the hideous concatenations of circumstance that pile up in a Thomas Hardy novel but yet have some resemblance to what is possible?) Without lapsing into irrationalism one can still see if we examine the social world in a different way large movements in society that have a systematicity without a clear motive or logic. This is partly because although social theory may traditionally be locked within a rationalist tradition, people do not necessarily behave in a rational way all the time. This is clearest perhaps in considering mainstream economics (and, indeed, the much newer 'rational choice theory'), where one can easily point out that the so-called 'rational individual' which is the methodological cornerstone of the model is subject to many contradictory pressures on his/her behaviour. One could take many examples, from the trivial to the major, of social changes that are hard to 'explain' in a systematic way but within themselves have a certain force and coherence. How does one 'explain' world-cup fever? Why is illegitimacy not the social

stigma it was? How has religious fundamentalism become articulated as of major political significance in relatively secularised countries like Britain? One way of illustrating the point is to think about the effects of groups and crowds, which often result in individuals behaving in ways they retrospectively regret or – at least – can be very surprised by. The power of example, of a pressure to conform, is legendary. In contemporary politics we can see that politicians have now learnt the lessons of the theorists of hegemony – issues are taken up and run with for just as far as they will go, electorally speaking, and dropped when the tide of opinion starts to drift against them. Banal as some of these points are, they address a sense of the predictable/unpredictable element in movement in history. Although Foucault's views about agency were undoubtedly curious, they none the less reveal the weaknesses of the comforting assumptions about historical necessity made in 'total' history; equally, he insisted on the existence of patterns of power and tendencies of historical movement, against those who constitute everything in terms of chance and the logic of contingency.

Foucault: discourse and the critique of ideology

Let us revert to Foucault's objections to the concept of ideology in the light of his own arguments about society and history. On the issue of determinism, Foucault is right to side with those who see the whole topographical base-and-superstructure model of Marxism as unhelpful, and he is right to displace the primacy of social class and the economic in his conceptualisation of power in society. In addition to making arguments analogous to the 'post-Marxism' of Laclau and Mouffe, Foucault has provided his own provocative and illuminating analyses – limited by his Eurocentrism it is true – of power in just the areas (insanity, medicine, sexuality etc.) where Marxism has been so weak and in which many of us are now so interested. As far as epistemology is concerned, Foucault's arguments are merely another nail in the coffin of the scientific definition of ideology; his own focus on the politics of truth a positive improvement on Marxism's obsession with the illusions of 'the economics of untruth'. On the third count – that of ideology presupposing the notion of a 'subject' – the legacy of Foucault is more problematic and remains the source of

continuing debate. Undoubtedly his insistence on the materiality of the body has led one way forward; his account of technologies of the self and the ethics of selfhood can be appropriated in a variety of ways; his thinking about agency remains contentious and puzzling. Underlying some of these difficulties, as I shall suggest in the final chapter, is the unresolved problem of humanism.

7

Conclusion: Post-Marxism and the Concept of Ideology

It makes sense to begin these concluding remarks by reverting to the original themes of the book, and recapitulating the arguments elaborated in earlier chapters. The first part of the book looked at how classical Marxism had formulated the issues around a theory of ideology. Chapter 1 surveyed the varying, and not entirely compatible, ways in which Marx himself had used the concept of ideology. Although it is a theory of enormous resonance and power – such that often it is scarcely possible to think of another word to put in the place of ideology – the root of the main problems with the Marxist theory of ideology could be said to lie in Marx's somewhat chaotic formulations: ideology as illusion, ideology as base and superstructure, ideology as commodity fetishism and so on. Of the various meanings of the term in Marx, the one of most general usefulness is that of mystification. At the beginning of the book I suggested that a consensual definition of ideology in Marxism (and beyond, to some extent) would be that of 'mystification that serves class interests'; I shall suggest below that the problem with this arises not so much with the general idea of mystification, but with the exclusive and functional connection to social class.

Marx's various formulations about ideology set the pattern for a debate, within the classical Marxist tradition, whose boundaries were extraordinarily wide. Chapters 2 and 3 of this book sought to show just how little consensus there had been on the fundamental issues on which the usefulness of the theory of ideology would depend. In practice, the most important has been the issue of whether to think of ideology in a critical or a neutral sense: to think of ideology as by definition involving an element of illusion or distortion (as being ineluctably opposed to truth or knowledge) or whether to see ideology as the expression of a historical consciousness whose strengths and limitations would be understood outside the ideological. 'Classical