

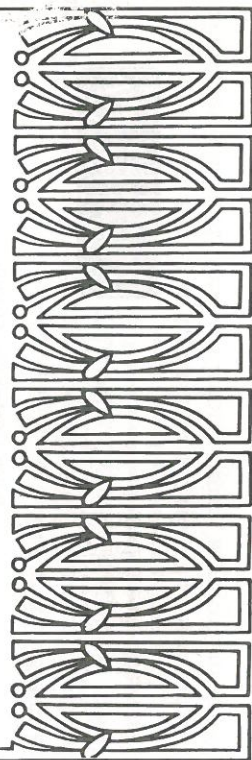
The

FOUCAULT

Reader

Edited by
Paul Rabinow

Penguin Books



The Carceral / 234

Space, Knowledge, and Power / 239

BIO-POWER / 257

Right of Death and Power over Life / 258

The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century / 273

SEX AND TRUTH / 291

We "Other Victorians" / 292

The Repressive Hypothesis / 301

PRACTICES AND SCIENCES OF THE SELF / 331

Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume II / 333

*On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in
Progress* / 340

Politics and Ethics: An Interview / 373



*Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations: An Interview
with Michel Foucault* / 381

The FOUCAULT Reader

Introduction

Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky appeared, some years ago, on a Dutch television program for a debate on the topic "Human Nature: Justice versus Power." The two thinkers never quite engaged in the agonistic sparring that such occasions are ideally supposed to produce, but some striking differences were clearly articulated. Although both men are highly critical of the current social and political order, their fundamental assumptions about the nature of human beings, about power and justice, and about how to understand such matters differ radically. Let me use this exchange as a means of introducing some of the elements of the work of Michel Foucault.

For Noam Chomsky, there is a human nature. This point is fundamental: unless there is some form of relatively fixed human nature, true scientific understanding is impossible. Starting from his own research, Chomsky asked: How is it that on the basis of a partial and fragmentary set of experiences, individuals in every culture are able not only to learn their own language, but to use it in a creative way? For Chomsky, there was only one possible answer: there must be a bio-physical structure underlying the mind which enables us, both as individuals and as a species, to deduce from the multiplicity of individual experiences a unified language. There must be, Chomsky insists, a "mass of schematisms, innate governing principles, which guide our social and intellectual and individual behavior . . . there is something biologically given, unchangeable, a foundation for whatever it is that we do with our mental capacities."¹ Chomsky's scientific career has been devoted to uncovering these structures. His aim: a testable mathematical theory of mind. His lineage: Cartesian rationality.

Michel Foucault rejects Chomsky's view of both human na-

ture and science. In a methodologically typical fashion, Foucault avoids the abstract question: Does human nature exist?, and asks instead: How has the concept of human nature functioned in our society? Taking the sciences of life during the eighteenth century as an example, Foucault draws a distinction between the actual operational categories within a specific discipline at a particular historical moment and those broad conceptual markers such as "life," or "human nature," which, in his opinion, have had very little importance in the internal changes of scientific disciplines. According to Foucault, "It is not by studying human nature that linguists discovered the laws of consonant mutation, or Freud the principles of the analysis of dreams, or cultural anthropologists the structure of myths. In the history of knowledge the notion of human nature seems to me mainly to have played the role of . . . designat[ing] certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to theology or biology or history." Foucault is highly suspicious of claims to universal truths. He doesn't refute them; instead, his consistent response is to historicize grand abstractions. In the last analysis, he doesn't take a stand on whether or not there is a human nature. Rather, he changes the subject and examines the social functions that such concepts have played in the context of practices "such as economics, technology, politics, sociology which can serve them as conditions of formation, of models, of place, etc. . . . what [it is] in social forms that makes the regularities of science possible."²

For Foucault, there is no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society. His strategy is to proceed as far as possible in his analyses without recourse to universals. His main tactic is to historicize such supposedly universal categories as human nature each time he encounters them. Foucault's aim is to understand the plurality of roles that reason, for example, has taken as a social practice in our civilization not to use it as a yardstick against which these practices can be measured. This position does not entail any preconceived reduction of knowledge to social conditions. Rather, there is a consistent imperative, played out with varying emphases, which runs through Foucault's historical studies: to dis-

cover the relations of specific scientific disciplines and particular social practices.

A parallel set of differences between Chomsky and Foucault emerges in their discussion of politics. The interviewer asks each man why he is interested in politics. Chomsky answers by returning to other dimensions of universal human nature and reason. In his opinion, there is a universal human need for creative work and free inquiry. The possibility of satisfying this need is stifled in our society. Given modern technology and science, Chomsky argues, the means are currently available to overcome the alienation and drudgery of labor. If this has not been accomplished, the fault lies not in science but in the social and political organization of our society. The real problem we must confront, therefore, is a political one: how to bring about the just society in which creativity and reason would reign. Our job is to "try to create the vision of a future just society; that is to create, if you like, a humanistic social theory that is based, if possible, on some firm and humane concept of the human essence or human nature."³ For Chomsky, the end of political action is clear—or will become so—because it is guided by reason and human nature. The task of intellectuals is to use the concept of human nature as a standard against which to judge society and to use their reason to formulate a precise conceptualization of a more humane and just social order. Our political tasks can be coherently informed by the universals of reason and justice.

Foucault, typically, refuses to answer why he is interested in politics. He finds this both trivial and self-evident. Instead, he shifts the "why" question to a "how" question—how am I interested in politics? Certainly not, he parries, "by imagining an ideal social model for the functioning of our scientific or technological society." One of the hallmarks of Western political philosophy, in Foucault's interpretation, has been its devotion to such abstractions, first principles, and utopias—i.e., theory. In the West we have consistently approached the problem of political order by building models of the just social order or searching for general principles by which to evaluate existing conditions. But, Foucault claims, it is exactly this emphasis, this "will to knowledge," that has left us almost totally in the dark

about the concrete functioning of power in Western societies. Our task is to cast aside these utopian schemes, the search for first principles, and to ask instead how power actually operates in our society. "It seems to me," Foucault expounds, "that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them."⁴

But why should we fight against political violence? Again, Chomsky and Foucault differ. For Chomsky, we must struggle against the injustices of our current society in the name of a higher goal—justice. Surely, Chomsky argues, unless we have a guiding principle, we will have no way of judging the actions of others. It is perfectly possible that we may find ourselves in a situation in which a revolution turns out to be worse than the regime it replaces. Unless we have some fixed and rational standards for judging what constitutes a better society, we will be lost. This does not mean, Chomsky adds, that we have to achieve a perfect enactment of these standards, but unless we have them we will have no way to act or judge.

Foucault disagrees. And it is in this disagreement that Foucault is his most radical and disconcerting. He says: "I will be a little bit Nietzschean about this . . . it seems to me that the idea of justice in itself is an idea which in effect has been invented and put to work in different types of societies as an instrument of a certain political and economic power or as a weapon against that power . . . one can't, however regrettable it may be, put these notions forward to justify a fight which should . . . overthrow the very fundamentals of our society."⁵ Foucault is being consistent here. He is not saying that the idea of justice should never be invoked in a political struggle. But his basic metaphor is one of battle and not conversation. The point of engaging in political struggles—and Foucault thinks we are engaged in them all the time, hence his disdain for the question about the importance of politics—is to alter power relations.

For Foucault, knowledge of all sorts is thoroughly enmeshed in the clash of petty dominations, as well as in the larger battles which constitute our world. Knowledge is not external to these

fighths; it does not constitute a way out of, or above, the fray in the way Chomsky views it. Rather, for Foucault, the "will to knowledge" in our culture is simultaneously part of the danger and a tool to combat that danger. Following Nietzsche, Foucault asserts that knowledge did not "slowly detach itself from its empirical roots, the initial needs from which it arose, to become pure speculation subject only to the demands of reason. . . . Where religions once demanded the sacrifice of bodies, knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves, calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge."⁶ Foucault confronts this challenge, this threat, by refusing to separate off knowledge from power. His strategy has been to focus his work, both political and intellectual, on what he sees as the greatest threat—that strange, somewhat unlikely, mixing of the social science and social practices developed around subjectivity.

Foucault calls this attempt to locate historically and analyze the strands of discourse and practices dealing with the subject, knowledge, and power "the genealogy of the modern subject." What is distinctive about Western culture is that we have given so much importance to the problem of the subject in our social, political, economic, legal, philosophical, and scientific traditions. Foucault's most general aim is to "discover the point at which these practices became coherent reflective techniques with definite goals, the point at which a particular discourse emerged from these techniques and came to be seen as true, the point at which they are linked with the obligation of searching for the truth and telling the truth."⁷

The Problem of the Subject

Let us follow Foucault in a recent self-characterization in which he says, "the goal of my work during the last twenty years has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects."⁸ His schema of three modes of objectification of the subject provides a convenient means to present briefly the main themes of his work.

The first mode of objectification of the subject is somewhat

cryptically called "dividing practices." The most famous examples from Foucault's work are the isolation of lepers during the Middle Ages; the confinement of the poor, the insane, and vagabonds in the great catch-all Hôpital Général in Paris in 1656; the new classifications of disease and the associated practices of clinical medicine in early-nineteenth-century France; the rise of modern psychiatry and its entry into the hospitals, prisons, and clinics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and finally the medicalization, stigmatization, and normalization of sexual deviance in modern Europe.

In different fashions, using diverse procedures, and with a highly variable efficiency in each case, "the subject is objectified by a process of division either within himself or from others."⁹ In this process of social objectification and categorization, human beings are given both a social and a personal identity. Essentially "dividing practices" are modes of manipulation that combine the mediation of a science (or pseudo-science) and the practice of exclusion—usually in a spatial sense, but always in a social one. These dividing practices form a substantial part of the subject matter of Foucault's earlier books, *Madness and Civilization* and *The Birth of the Clinic*, as well as later ones like *Discipline and Punish*. The main topics here are: the objectification of individuals drawn first from a rather undifferentiated mass (e.g., the vagabond populations in Paris in the seventeenth century), and later from more highly preselected populations (delinquents from working-class quarters); the interconnections of dividing practices with the formation and increasingly sophisticated elaboration of the social sciences; the historical relationship of these modes of classification, control, and containment to a distinctive tradition of humanitarian rhetoric on reform and progress; the increasingly efficient and diverse applications of these combined procedures of power and knowledge mainly, although not exclusively, to dominated groups or to groups formed and given an identity through the dividing practices.

The second mode for turning human beings into objectified subjects is related to, but independent from, the first. Let us call it "scientific classification." It arises from "the modes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of sciences; for example, the objectivizing of the speaking subject in *grammaire*

générale, philology, and linguistics . . . [or] the objectivizing of the productive subject, the subject who labors, in the analysis of wealth and of economics. Or . . . the objectivizing of the sheer fact of being alive in natural history or biology."¹⁰ This list constitutes a concise summary of the contents of Foucault's most controversial but also most well-received book, *The Order of Things*. In this dense and erudite study, Foucault shows how the discourses of life, labor, and language were structured into disciplines; how in this manner they achieved a high degree of internal autonomy and coherence; and how these disciplines of life, labor, and language—which we tend to view as dealing with universals of human social life and as therefore progressing logically and refining themselves in the course of history (as in the natural sciences)—changed abruptly at several junctures, displaying a conceptual discontinuity from the disciplines that had immediately preceded them.

The historical breaks that set off the classical age (roughly from the middle of the seventeenth century to the French Revolution) are characteristic hallmarks in all of Foucault's writings. Given French history, there is nothing particularly surprising about this chronology. Indeed, Foucault has often mistakenly been seen as a philosopher of discontinuity. The fault is partially his own; works such as *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things* certainly do emphasize abrupt changes in the structures of discourse of the human sciences. But Foucault has also stressed, in other contexts, the longer-range continuities in cultural practices. The sharp lines of discursive discontinuity in the human sciences and the longer lines of continuity in non-discursive practices provide Foucault with a powerful and flexible grid of interpretation with which to approach relations of knowledge and power. It should be underlined, however, that this is not a philosophy of history which for some mysterious reason glorifies discontinuity.

In both *The Order of Things* and in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault's only attempt at a systematic theoretical analysis abstracted from the historical dissection that constitutes the subject matter of his other books), discourse is bracketed off from the social practices and institutions in which it is embedded. This bracketing has also caused some confusion. Although

Foucault was temporarily caught up in some of the structuralist vocabulary of the moment, he never intended to isolate discourse from the social practices that surround it. Rather, he was experimenting to see how much autonomy could legitimately be claimed for discursive formations. His aim, then as now, was to avoid analyses of discourse (or ideology) as reflections, no matter how sophisticatedly mediated, of something supposedly "deeper" and more "real." In this sense, Foucault has been consistently materialist. In asking, "How does discourse function?" his aim has been to isolate techniques of power exactly in those places where this kind of analysis is rarely done. But to achieve this, he at first overemphasized the inner articulations and seemingly self-enclosed nature of social scientific discourses. Although Foucault has preserved the majority of his "archaeological" systematizations of the formation of concepts, objects, subjects, and strategies of discourse in the human sciences, he has now explicitly widened his analysis to show how these disciplines have played an effective part in a historical field that includes other types of nondiscursive practice.

Foucault has been consistently interested in the shifting ways that the body and the social institutions related to it have entered into political relations. In the first mode of objectification (the dividing practices), the constituted subject can be seen as a victim caught in the processes of objectification and constraint—most obviously the case for prisoners and mental patients. Although there are parallel developments associated with the second mode of objectification (scientific classification), the relation to domination is more oblique. For example, in *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault demonstrates how the body was increasingly treated as a thing during the nineteenth century, and how this objectification was paralleled and complemented by the dividing practices instituted in the clinic's spatial, temporal, and social compartmentalizations. But the two dimensions—dividing practices and scientific classification—are not the same thing; nor are they orchestrated together by some unseen actor. Foucault offers no casual explanations for these changes, leaving his readers somewhat at sea with regard to how he evaluates the interplay of intentional action, socioeconomic changes, particular interests, and accidents.

Foucault's third mode of objectification represents his most

original contribution. Let us call it "subjectification." It concerns the "way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject."¹¹ This process differs in significant ways from the other two modes and represents an important new direction in Foucault's work. The dividing practices, broadly speaking, are techniques of domination and have been applied mainly to vagabond populations, the working classes, those defined as marginal, etc. The interplay between these modes of domination and various social scientific forms of classification, although given new clarity and power by Foucault's analysis and historical studies, has been recognized by other thinkers. In both instances, the person who is put into a cell or whose dossier is being compiled is basically in a passive, constrained position. In contrast, with the third mode—"subjectification"—Foucault looks at those processes of self-formation in which the person is active. His published analyses have focused on the dominant classes, in particular the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie; work in progress examines Greek citizens and the early Christian ascetics and Church Fathers. In these analyses, Foucault is primarily concerned with isolating those techniques through which the person initiates an active self-formation. This self-formation has a long and complicated genealogy; it takes place through a variety of "operations on [people's] own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct."¹² These operations characteristically entail a process of self-understanding but one which is mediated by an external authority figure, be he confessor or psychoanalyst. Foucault shows us, for example, how during the nineteenth century there was a vast proliferation of scientific discourses about "sex," in part because sex was seen as holding the key to self-understanding; this line culminated in Freud. Foucault also points to a growing obsession with sexuality, the health of the individual and the race, the growth of medical discourses about sexuality, and so forth. The individual and the race were thereby joined in a common set of concerns. It is important here not to draw too sharp a line between these processes of subjectification and, say, dividing practices. As Foucault shows in *The History of Sexuality* and in *Discipline and Punish*, the two can be effectively combined, although they are analytically distinguishable.