<div align="center">**Foucaultian Critique of Power**</div>

Do you use language, or does language use you? If you are at all suspicious that language itself might be in the driver's seat, you may be sympathetic to an enormously influential form of criticism that has developed since the 1960s on the basis of the work of French philosopher and historian of ideas, Michel Foucault (1926–84).

Archaeological method

In texts like *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *The Order of Things* (1966) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault undertook to show how our words and concepts have fitted into historical layers of thinking and acting (sometimes called 'discursive formations') that in many ways order our lives and thinking. This view has challenged those who believe that it is the other way around – that it is we who consciously order and control those structures. In short, Foucaultian theory diminishes the importance (perhaps even the very existence) of the individual, human agent and self.

Foucault's view has also been controversial in its claim that it is through these multifarious discursive formations that power is exercised. Hence through the concept of 'madness', seventeenth- and eighteenth-century social formations laying claim to 'rationality' excluded those who didn't fit into them. In the nineteenth century the concept of 'madness' was also deployed against those who did not adhere to norms of bourgeois morality, such as the promiscuous. How might other concepts and institutions of practice – such as family, woman, chastity, school, beauty, virtue, truth – serve as instruments of social order and control? Whom do they oppress or exclude or diminish in power?

Genealogical method

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Foucault tried to show how the concepts clustering around 'criminality' and the techniques of managing those called 'criminal' have changed over time. In tracing out the history of a concept, its changes, and the purposes behind them, Foucault develops what Friedrich Nietzsche called a 'genealogical' method – a method Nietzsche used to explore the concepts and practices of Christian morality. The method, however, is not simply historical. It is also subversive, for it aims to uncover the trivial, petty, arbitrary and sometimes nasty, purposes and effects of what it investigates. While, for example, many have seen changes in the criminal justice system as efforts to become more humane, Foucault argues that those changes have, rather, been organized around developing new, more effective techniques of social control. (Along similar lines, he later undertook a genealogy of concepts and practices of sexuality; *History of Sexuality* [1976, 1984].)

If we were to examine throughout history the motives, purposes and struggles that determined the origin and development of apparently innocent and even widely admired concepts, institutions and practices, would we find repellent devices for control, manipulation and oppression?

Microphysics of power

Unlike other forms of social critique, however (such as Marxism and psychoanalysis), Foucault maintains that there is no comprehensive system of social order (e.g., "capitalism"). Rather, Foucault argues that there are many, many different power systems interweaving and operating simultaneously, not always in consistent ways. Hence he himself eschews developing a single complete system of social and conceptual dynamics, instead calling his project a 'microphysics of power'.

Among the most famous objects of Foucault's scrutiny was philosopher Jeremy Bentham's plan for a modern prison called a 'panopticon'. (One has actually been built and put into use in Cuba.) The prison has no cells with bars. Instead it is constructed so that prisoners come to believe they always are or may be under the surveillance of the guards – and as a result, they come to discipline themselves.

Foucault challenges us to ask in what ways we live in panopticons of our own making. How do credit cards, government and company records, phone logs, computers, security cameras and various managerial techniques place us under constant surveillance (including self-surveillance) or the fear of constant surveillance? And how does this affect how we think, act and feel?

Normalization

Another powerful tool of Foucaultian critique is the analysis of 'normalization'. Foucault argues that in various ways orders of power seek to diminish the range of human possibility by privileging certain beliefs and practices as 'normal'. Hence sexual practices, family structures,

religions, ways of speaking and acting that differ from the 'normal' are called 'deviant' and through various oppressive techniques are quashed, reducing individuals to the 'docile bodies' needed to serve modern industrial and post-industrial society.

Foucault, then, offers us a number of powerful additions to our toolkit. When assessing a theory, idea or practice, Foucault enjoins us to ask ourselves what power games might be lurking there – for power is subtle. He also cautions us not to rely on any single system of critique – for power faces us in many different guises, using many different techniques.

READING

Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?' *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie* 63.3 (1969), 73–104
*David Hoy, *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (1991)
*Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault* (2000)
*Gary Gutting, *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (2005)