Foucault: Politics, History and Discourse

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How are political ideas to be conceived and interpreted? Foucault is a critic of
standard ways of framing and analysing political ideas, just as he is a critic of
standard ways of undertaking history and the history of ideas. However, he
maintains that we cannot get at ideas by any means save that of interpreting their
history. To frame political ideas as abstract representations either of how things
are or of how things should be is, for Foucault, a misguided enterprise. Relatedly,
to consider history as either an expression of the potential of humanity, or as the
register of progress is equally misplaced. Moreover, to imagine history as a record
of the meaningful acts of individual or collective agents, which are to be
recovered by hermeneutic forms of inquiry, is to inflate the claims of self-
conscious intentionality over the discursive frameworks, in which individuals are
situated and by which reflective agency is constricted. Foucault's critique of
autonomous agency underpins his critical perspective on standard ways of reading
texts, which envisage authors to be their organising agents, who articulate ideas to
express their thoughts on selected themes. An underlying and continuous aspect
of Foucault's critique of standard intellectual operations is his challenge to
conventional notions of the efficacy of the human subject and of the collective
agency of humanity. For Foucault, the power of agents and the agency of

humanity are formulas, which standardise ways of conceptualising events and practices so that the historicity of frames of thought and action is misperceived.

In his late essay, 'What is Enlightenment?' Foucault follows Kant's lead in determining how we are to regard the present philosophical standpoint. Like Kant he urges a critical perspective on the present, and hence registers his association with Enlightenment thinking, which has been questioned by contemporary theorists.[1] Like Kant, he also takes the question of where we stand, and what we are to do to depend upon a critical engagement with the limits of our thinking. Whereas Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, frames a transcendental reading of knowledge so as to set categorical limits to its truth claims, Foucault focuses upon the historical character of the present. He observes, 'the thread that may connect us with the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude- that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.' [2] Foucault substitutes an historical critique of the claims of reason for Kant's generic transcendental account of its limits. He concludes, '…criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal values, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognise ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.'[3] Foucault radicalises the critique of the claims of reason. The limits of reason are not susceptible of a general specification, as reason and critique are both historical

[1] See, for instance, the critical reading of Foucault in J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

[2] M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in M. Foucault, P. Rabinow (ed) *The Foucault Reader* (London and New York, Penguin, 1984), p.42

[3] M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in M. Foucault, P. Rabinow (ed) *The Foucault Reader* (London and New York, Penguin, 1984), pp.45-6

and subject to limits. What we have is a present that is to be critiqued via critical readings of the past and the generation of the present. Simons notes how retrospectively Foucault can be seen to critique the present by refusing to accept how we presently are. He observes, 'Foucault's refusal to be what we are flows from analyses of the limiting conditions that subjectify us.' [4]

Foucault refuses to imagine human beings, either collectively or individually as being creators of their own destiny. On the one hand, there is no destiny, or lingering sense of fate to which a summative history of humanity can be aligned, and on the other hand, individuals are situated in practical discursive contexts that shape the ways in which they act and conceptualise their situations. Foucault, from his early study of madness to late investigations of governmentality, highlights the historicity of discourses and of affiliated ways of acting. His construction of these historical discourses allows for a critique of the present. Human beings are constituted in particular, disjointed ways by the contingent concurrence of phenomena within discontinuous discursive practices. Awareness of this contingency and the malleability of human practices and attitudes allows for a critical perspective on the present. It is submissive to frame perceptions of where and who we are via general notions of madness, punishment, discipline, sexuality and the state, which determine our conceptual world. These notions do not stand for universals that are to be understood via historically innocent philosophical analysis. Madness is a category that is created via contingent circumstances and ways of thinking, just as punishment is not an unchanging continuum of ways of regarding and dealing with delinquents. Just as Feuerbach

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[4] J. Simons, *Foucault and the Political* (London and New York, Routledge, 1995), p. 2

deployed the transformative method to substitute human beings as the active subjects of a God hitherto imagined as controlling human beings, so Foucault reverses the ways in which discursive practices are related to their objects of concern.[5] Madness does not set an ahistorical agenda for the ways in which categories of normal and abnormal people are imagined; rather, the ways in which madness is conceptualised and managed determines how people are categorised and treated. Throughout his career, Foucault, in changing theoretical idioms, identifies the historical specificity of theories and practices, which lack a generic truth outside of specific historical formulations. In his lectures on bio-politics, at the College de France in 1978-9, Foucault reflects back on his career to observe, ' You can see that all these cases (his historical studies) – whether it is the market, the confessional, the psychiatric institution, or the prison- involve taking up the history of truth from different angles…'[6]

Foucault imagines the conceptual universe of human beings to be thoroughly historical so that there is no universal measure of human activity. Theory and practice are constructed. The constructed character of theory and practice is not resolvable into intended human thought and action. Madness, its confinement to the margins of society and its susceptibility to the discursive control of medical expertise, is the product of contingent discrete phenomena, just as the history of punishment is not to be absorbed into a process of the progressively humane identification and treatment of delinquents. Knowledge is neither innocent nor universal. In an essay entitled, 'Prison talk', Foucault observes, '…it is not possible for powers to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for

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[5] L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*

[6] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics – Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979* (ed M. Senellart) (London and New ork, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 35

knowledge not to engender power.'[7] Foucault's sense of the isomorphism of knowledge and power, his distinctive readings of the development of modern institutions, practices and theoretical standpoints and his deflationary conception of the agency of authors combine to establish a particular perspective on the character and development of modern political thought. The ideas of authors such as Hobbes and Locke are to be understood as exemplifying formative discourses of the modern world and yet Hobbes and Locke are not the authors of these discourses; rather, discourses of rights and the powers of the state frame the possibilities that are imagined in their thought.

Foucault's theoretical and historical perspective bears upon the question of the how the history of modern political thought is to be interpreted. It disturbs standard ways of interpreting political ideas and their development. First Foucault refuses a universal or summative history, which might serve as a frame for a general history of political thought. Throughout his career, he opposes the claims of Hegel and Marx to provide summative conceptions of the development of history. Foucault's radical edge is sharpened against totalising views and his historical perspective is set against generic views of history. His perspective accentuates discontinuities of history rather than tracing the past's on-going connections to the present. His critique of the present depends upon its contingency, which denies a teleological endpoint, and allows for the reframing of particular pathways. [8] As Butler observes, in surveying Foucault's revisiting of

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[7] M. Foucault, 'Prison talk, in C. Gordon (ed) *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton, Harvester, 1980), p.52
[8] See M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in M. Foucault, P. Rabinow (ed) *The Foucault Reader* (London and New York, Penguin, 1984),

desire in the context of the dialectic in ruins, 'Foucault contrives to unmoor the dialectic from the subject and its teleological conclusion.'[9]

If Foucault's perspectivism undermines the Hegelian dialectical supersession of otherness or even the Kantian transcendental suspension of difference, then he also challenges the autonomy of authorship and the agency of authors.[10] In his essay, 'What is an Author?' Foucault observes, 'We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, to proliferate indefinitely. The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work: the author does not precede the work; he is a certain functional principle by which in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses…'[11] For Foucault discourses do not depend upon authors, authors are aligned with discourses. Interpreting the history of political thought becomes a matter of attending to how ideas contribute to discursive practices that shape institutions and subjects, rather than recovering the meaning of authors via a close scrutiny of texts and contexts. Foucault's radicalism breaks with standard assumptions of continuities in the history of political thought. If he rejects a teleological narrative of its development, he also undermines notions of continuities in political identity. Texts are not a repertoire of alternative conceptualisations of politics, for there is no standard way of conceiving of

[9] J. Butler, *Subjects of Desire- Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1987), p.
[10] See G. Browning,
[11] M. Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in M. Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, P. Rabinow (ed), (London and New York, Penguin, 1984), pp.118-9

politics. The very identification of politics depends upon contingent discursive frameworks.

Foucault's career embraces numerous analyses of discursive practices, which are conducted in a variety of idioms and focus on a plurality of subjects, yet collectively they constitute a critique of Enlightenment notions of the centrality of an ordering reason and of its instrumentality in tackling determinate political issues. Foucault's studies of heterogeneous and contingent discourses challenges the sense that they may be comprehended by a synoptic form of reason and that issues of power are constituted within and managed by the apparatus of the state. Power, for Foucault, is discontinuous and ubiquitous and is not to be encompassed and addressed by a universal form of reason. Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment theorists such as Kant, Bentham, Hegel and Marx are as one in assuming that a general perspective on past and present may be established by means of which questions of power may be resolved. For Foucault, there is no generic form of reason, which can be applied across time and discursive frameworks. Likewise, power is neither concentrated in a single frame, such as Hegel's state, nor in a line of development, such as Marx's analysis of class divisions. Power is localised and capillary, and turns upon how subjects are imagined and framed in specific historic discourses, such as those on madness, delinquency and sexuality. Authors may produce texts on political ideas, but the idea of the political is contingent and dependent upon historic discursive frames, in which thought and politics emerge as historical and dispersed rather than universal and generic. Foucault in *Society Must be Defended* sets political theorists such as Hobbes and Rousseau within historical discursive frameworks

and expressly dismisses their claims to provide generic answers to political issues.[12]

When Foucault addresses and interprets past political thinkers, he does not take them at their word, but relates their thought to discursive practices. Hence in *Discipline and Punish* he interprets modern forms of punishment as breaking from preceding patterns of corporal punishment in providing a burgeoning set of disciplinary techniques. These techniques exemplify a Panopticism, which Foucault associates with Bentham's Panopticon, his projected architectural device to deliver multiple forms of control and surveillance. However, Bentham's design of the Panopticon is taken by Foucault to epitomise forms of disciplinary control and surveillance in ways that are not conceptualised by Bentham. Rather Bentham's ideas and projects are constituted and framed by the developing discursive practices of modernity [13] In his late lectures on governmentality, *Security, Territory and Population*, Foucault focuses expressly on the history of past political thought. He imagines ideas as tracking and reflecting discursive and institutional frameworks, Foucault exerts a crucial influence in identifying the character of changing practices that set the frame in which authorial ideas are interpreted. Hence he interprets a number of modern political theorists as articulating state policy in terms of 'reason of state', which is shown to reflect the development of an administrative, police state. The police state is a novel framework, which contrasts with a dynastic model, which underlies preceding

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[12] M. Foucault, *Society Must be defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975/6* ed. M. Bertani and A. Fontana (London, Allen Lane, 2003)

[13] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977)

political ideas, for instance, Machiavelli's *Prince*. [14] In *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault develops a subtle reading of the ways in which neo-liberalism reflects the emergence of a developing civil society that provides the conditions for market activities and individual freedoms. In doing so he identifies how the theories of Smith, Ferguson, Hobbes and Locke track and register differing forms of governmental organisation. He also identifies how German Ordo liberals and the Chicago School of neo-liberalism reflect and articulate aspects of developing discursive practices. [15]

In what follows, the ways in which Foucault challenges standard readings of the history of political thought will be reviewed. His early archaeological readings of discursive structures will be examined so as to highlight his sense of the historicity of ideas and knowledge. Thereafter his genealogical inquiries into the deployment of disciplinary techniques and the onset of sexuality as a discourse will show how forms of power and frameworks of conceptualisation are dispersed and historical rather than concentrated and generic. His late analyses of discursive conceptions of governmentality will show his distinctive engagement with express forms of political thought. Along the way, the force of Foucault's challenge to alternative forms of the history of political thought will be explored and comparisons made with contrasting modes of interpretation, for example with the Cambridge School and with Gadamer's hermeneutics. Foucault's originality resides in his form of deconstruction, which imagines political power and thought to operate in discontinuous and hetereogeneous ways that are neither reducible to

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[14] M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978* ed. M. Senellart (London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 87-115
[15] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics – Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979* (ed M. Senellart) (London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

the terms of past actors and authors nor susceptible of a dialogue between past and present

History, Discourse and Truth

Amidst Foucault's constantly changing vocabularies and theoretical paradigms, there is a consistency in his turn towards history, which, in a multiplicity of idioms, shows the historicity of theory and the lack of universal foundations for the concepts underpinning philosophical and sociological notions of truth. Thought, for Foucault, cannot be deployed as a general term, which allows for unwavering rational understanding of its objects. The scene is set by his first work on madness. In *Madness and Civilisation* Foucault neither assumes a universal notion of madness, nor a correleative notion of an essentialised reason. An emphatic way of rejecting a dichotomous reading of reason and madness is to show the changing formulations and treatments of madness, that is, to identify them as contingent expressions of discursive practices rather than to represent them as essentialist terms determining practice. Foucault destabilises notions of madness. Madness and reason are relativized. The focus of Foucault's analysis is the transition from the Renaissance to the classical period of modernity. Whereas madness in the medieval world maintains 'mad' people as part and parcel of the community while excluding lepers, in the Renaissance the 'mad' are symbolic figures, whose strangeness renders them ambivalent marginal presences, who are deemed to be capable of profound insight. The status of madness is conveyed in the mythological ship of fools, on which the mad are imagined as undertaking a spiritual journey. This ambiguous respect for the mad collapses in the classical period, in which the mad, along with other marginal types such as vagrants, are incarcerated in houses segregated from normal life. Foucault maintains that

confinement took place on an immense scale, with the Great Confinement of 1656 a heightened example of a general trend across Europe.

Following the classical period and the exclusion and confinement of 'mad' people, the 'mad' return to the human community. Initially they are the objects of a moral normalising therapy, but subsequently they become subjected to a developing discipline of professional expertise and medical techniques. This process of increasing medical objectification is also traced by Foucault s in his *The Birth of the Clinic* . [16] Whereas early psychiatrists such as Pinel are standardly seen to be humanitarian, Foucault highlights the coercive, judgmental regime to which the mad are increasingly subjected. He observes, 'The asylum in the age of positivism, which it is Pinel's glory to have founded, is not a free realm of observation, diagnosis, and therapeutics; it is a juridicial space where one is accused, judged and condemned, and from which one is never released except by the version of this trial in psychological depth- that is, by remorse.'[17] Foucault critiques the presumed authority and moral neutrality of the medical regime to which the insane are subject, and he highlights its disciplinary objectifying aspects. The presumption of scientific authority follows from the self-identification of professionals engaged in the treatment of those who are categorised as mentally ill, but it is precisely this identification that is challenged by Foucault's historical account of the mutability of categorisations of madness. Gutting observes, 'Foucault's account seems implausible only if we continue to insist that the identification of madness as mental illness is an objective scientific discovery. His history, however, suggests that the identification was, on the

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[16] M. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (New York, Vintage, 1975)
[17] M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation : A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London, Routledge, 1999)

contrary, introduced as a means of legitimating the authority of physicians...' [18]

The plausibility of Foucault's perspective derives from his imaginative destabilising of assumptions, which underpin the medical discourse. Moreover, Foucault is alert to how the dichotomisation of the mad and the rational, whereby the mad are assigned to the abnormal margins of the population, is symptomatic of modernity's marginalisation of the dissonant and different. Normalisation, for Foucault, is central to the processes of modernity, which are supported by an Enlightenment rationalism, and which presume a scientific stable discourse. Foucault's historical treatment of madness, however, highlights how disciplinary discourses of modernity constitute mutable, contingent ways of categorising and normalising subjects so that it is misconceived to imagine madness to be an enduring essential category, which is to be determined by stable scientific criteria. Foucault's account of developing forms of conceiving and dealing with 'madness' is imaginative and plausible. Gutting in 'Foucault and the History of Madness', however, recognises how Foucault's work has been criticised by historians for its lack of supporting evidence. He observes, 'But on the "object-level" of specific historical facts and interpretations, the consensus of even favourably disposed historians, is that Foucault's work is seriously wanting.' [19] Foucault's argument for dramatic and discontinuous shifts in the identification and treatment of the mentally ill lacks convincing evidential support yet contributes to his wider critique of essentialism and poses pertinent questions for the conceptualisation of mental illness.

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[18] G. Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), p.72

[19] G. Gutting, 'Foucault and the History of Madness', in G. Gutting (ed) The Cambridge Companion to Foucault (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.50

Foucault's early history of madness is of a piece with his general resort to history. History, for Foucault, is significant in establishing the contingency of conceptualisation, and for registering discontinuities and ruptures, which intimates the instability of the foundations of discursive formations. In *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault elaborated his theoretical interpretation of conceptual formations. He set out his archaeological conception of discursive developments by reviewing the operationalization of historic discursive formations, tracing what can be said or not said in certain historic discursive styles. *The Order of Things* consists in the study of modern thought from the end of the 17th Century to the present. It represents a focus upon the human sciences. Its focus is neither on the intentional agency of thinkers and subjects nor on the background contextual influences, which are taken up either consciously or unconsciously by thinkers. What Foucault aims at revealing is what McNay terms the positive unconscious of knowledge. [20] Foucault highlights the rules of formation of diverse discourses of a given period, which constitute what he terms *epistemes*. *Epistemes* are the unconscious forms of knowledge and rules, underlying a discourse in a specific epoch. They represent *a priori* sets of rules that are constitutive of knowledge at a given time. Unlike Kantian categories of the possibility of knowledge, these are historic categories, which allow for mutability and instability so that knowledge for Foucault is inherently historical and contingent. Foucault maintains, 'In attempting to uncover the deepest strata of Western culture, I am restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts,

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[20] L. McNay, *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994), p. 52

its instability, its flaws and it is the same ground that is once more stirring under our feet.'[21]

Epistemes are not the object or subject of critical epistemological reflection, for they are taken to be anterior to reflections on knowledge; they are what make possible knowledge. They determine what can be thought and known, functioning by a mix of informal and formal procedures that articulate knowledge in pure and practical human sciences. Characteristically Foucault's perspective does not rehearse standard categories of thought, as it transgresses against disciplinary boundaries. It neither replicates the express discursive meanings of agents nor provides a bird's eye teleological view of history. There is neither a settled set of procedures development nor a well-defined continuity leading to the truths of the present. The Enlightenment notion of a scientifically established truth is undermined by the historicity of Foucault's argument. Instead Foucault proposes discrete frames of episteme operating in historic epochs that neither lead to nor emanate from an independently established truth. Truth is a matter of contingent rules operating historically, and is subject to equally contingent epistemological breaks occurring at irregular intervals, which disqualify explanation in terms of linear developments. Foucault rejects teleology, and he also refuses to acknowledge the authority of the subject of knowledge or the author of disciplinary forms of knowledge. The subject of knowledge is removed from epistemic authority. Rather it is the impersonal discursive formation and the rules of operation of knowledge in any epoch that matters. These rules determine what can be thought and said, and how things are to be understood. For Foucault,

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[21] M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London, Routledge, 1970), p. xxvi

meaning is not to be equated with the reflective activities of a human agent operating in a self-critical spirit, which may be recovered by a historian. Given that the rules of discourse determine humanity rather than the other way round, at the close of the text we are left with the express demise of man. Foucault sets out three periods or epochs in which distinctive epsitemes are operative. An episteme that is operative until the end of the 16th Century works with the notion of resemblance. Renaissance thought operates through metaphor, and is succeeded by the classical episteme of representation, whereby the surfeit of Renaissance figurative resemblances between items, is replaced by a representative system of signs in which order is formulated and completed. The sign is severed from the object with which it corresponds. The end of the classical period is signalled by De Sade's focus upon desire, which cannot be expressed exactly, its obscurity and diffuseness registering the end of the representational system of language. The taxonomical imperative of Renaissance knowledge gives way to the latent power of forces that lurk beneath the surface. In modern forms of knowledge what matters is historicity, finitude and what cannot be represented, hence we deal with the notion of value in Ricardo and Marx, which determines the motion of prices. The intensity of this preoccupation is evident in modernist literature, notably in Proust, Joyce and Woolf, though Foucault detects at the very end of the work how the essentialist notions of 'man' and 'humanism' are receding.[22]

The question that is begged by Foucault's notion of a discursive formation in The Order of Things is whether the rules of the discursive formation actually do limit what is capable of being said. These rules are only accessible via what is expressed in discourse,

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[22] M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London, Routledge, 1970), p. 422

so the thought occurs, at least to me, if we can take the rules to dictate the identity of a discourse. More likely the rules merely reflect how things are said. In The Archaeology of Knowledge Foucault replaces the notion of episteme with that of archive, so as to allow flexibility, in that an archive informs several and developing discourses. However, Foucault's perspective remains the same in that the rules of discourse are primary, and their expression by individual subjects secondary. Again, he sees himself as breaking decisively from supervening teleologies of progress. Archives of a given period comprise the discourses underpinning fields of knowledge, such as political economy and grammar. An archive encompasses practice and social activities, and its formal rules constituting a discursive unity, determine discourse . These rules are held to be the rules underlying systems of dispersion, which collectively constitute a discursive formation. They govern how objects are considered, how strategies are devised and how projects are formulated. They also constitute enunciative modalities, which position individual subjects in terms of the discursive statements that they are capable of uttering. Foucault imagines his perspective to fit with new histories that accentuate discontinuities rather than continuities in history, and to undermine the idea of continuity in history by destabilising notions of the subject and meaning. He observes, 'Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the folding function of the subject- in the form of the historical consciousness.' 23 Foucault highlights how his method serves as an antidote to teleology, observing, '…the series described (in the Archaeology of Knowledge), the limits fixed, the comparisons and correlations made are based not on the old philosophies of history, but are intended to question teleologies and totalizations.' 24

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23 M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London, Tavistock Publications, 1995), p. 12
24 M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London, Tavistock Publications, 1995), pp. 15-16

If Foucault rejects history as a series of meaningful actions initiated by subjects, he also repudiates summative history, which sums up and thereby reduces the diversity of historical phenomena. He observes, 'My aim is decidedly not to use the categories of cultural totalities (whiter world views, ideal types, the particular spirit of an age) in order to impose on history, despite itself, the forms of structural analysis.' [25] He warns against the contemporary turn to anthropologise Marx so as to render him a humanist . [26] If Foucault avoids totalising history then it is less clear that he avoids the pitfalls of a schematic structuralism. He provides an explanation of discourses via rules that he takes to govern discourse, but these rules can only be ascertained via analysis of the patterns of discourse and may amount to nothing more than contingent symmetries. Foucault concentrates on the formal, but does not rule out more concrete historical explanations, but he neither offers a convincing account of discursive change, nor

explains relations between formal sets of rules and material phenomena. The upshot is that his conception of discursive formations appears unduly formal and does not get to grips with how the formal and the concrete operate in practice. [27] Foucault is set on explaining discourse without relying upon either intended meanings of agents or general theories of historical development, but his recourse to formalism appears to abandon the concrete historical world of Madness and Civilisation without providing convincing links between formal rules and material practice.

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[25] M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London, Tavistock Publications, 1995), p. 15
[26] M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London, Tavistock Publications, 1995), p. 12
[27] For perceptive critique see L. McNay, *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994)

Discipline and Punish is a departure for Foucault in that he switches his attention from

formal connections within a discourse to a substantive account of institutions and

practices. Its engagement with the practical world is emphasised in its opening

description of the torture and public execution of the regicide, Damiens, in 1757.[28] The

opening sets up a rhetorical contrast between cruel corporeal punishment inflicted in

the name of the royal authority to a more considered, scientific and apparently humane

forms of punishment, which is recounted in the rest of the book. Foucault, though,

highlights how the succeeding forms of punishment, while less overtly cruel are

insidious in their use of mechanisms of control to monitor and discipline sections of the

population. Foucault's approach to history changes along with the change in his object

of study. He dispenses with the preceding paraphernalia of formal structural historical

explanations to adopt a genealogical explanation, which tracks the exertion of power

over bodies. In his essay, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', Foucault observes how a

genealogy identifies contingent changes, without assuming an origin or goal to the

historical process. He remarks, '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 its

origin.'[29] In Discipline and Punish Foucault shows how the body serves as the site of

social discipline and the transmission of power. Power, is identified expressly as

operative in social practice, whereas its role was merely implicit in the Archaeology of

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[28] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991), p.3.
[29] M. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in , in M. Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, P. Rabinow (ed), (London and New York, Penguin, 1984), p. 80

Knowledge. Foucault remains opposed to totalizing explanations . Consequently

Discipline and Punish imagines the development of large-scale disciplinary formations in

modern Western Society as occurring via a coalescence of contingent factors. The

resulting disciplinary society In which reason and science is applied to controlling

populations moulds and constitutes bodies systemically rendering them docile in the

process. 30 Foucault's focus on prisons is supplemented by his recognition of the

simultaneous processes of disciplinary mechanisms being applied in medical asylums

and hospitals, in schools and in military establishments. Foucault conceives of the

operations of power as assuming local and multiple forms rather than following from

central generic planning. A disciplinary society emerges via local overlapping forms of

control, in which surveillance and discipline are exercised so as to exclude dissonance

and difference in producing normalised individuals. What Foucault terms the

microphysics of power relations are constituted by its capillary and internalised forms,

which circulate in modern society, and which demand an historical attentiveness to

detail and contingency. A symbol of the disciplinary society is the Panopticon,

Bentham's multi-purpose disciplinary institution, which is a paradigm of cost-efficient

architecture, which lends itself to maximum surveillance by a minimum of guards.

Disciplinary control was to be optimised by an institutional design that was transferrable

across the borders of a range of practices, such as education, poor law relief and

punishment.

Foucault's originality in the history of ideas resides in a willingness to imagine familiar

stories from an alternative perspective. The narrative of a progressively more humane

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30 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London, Routledge, 1970), pp.35-69

system of punishment is standard and reassuring to the modern Western world. After all it is what sets the West apart from Orientalist practices. Yet this story is complicated by Foucault's disconcerting genealogy. Foucault rejects a view of progress. His narrative reveals the incommensurability of systems of punishment, so that the brutality of the past is not superseded progressively modern more humane regimes. The mechanisms of organisational control alter, and punishment assumes a distinct and incommensurable form in its regulation of docile normalised behaviour. There is no common scale. Foucault's narrative identifies the contingency and the peculiarity of the forms of power exerted in contemporary disciplinary regimes . Throughout his career, Foucault is a critic of an Enlightenment view of progress, and he offers interpretive narratives that disturb standard liberal readings of liberal practices. In Discipline and Punish the circulatory forms of disciplinary power are linked to the institutional production of docility, via systemic forms of control over the body. Discipline and Punishment serves Foucault's agenda of dismantling unthinking contemporary attitudes to punishment by unsettling familiar notions of its provenance. Whereas Bentham provides a rationalist account of how a liberal regime might promote maximal utility, Foucault's interpretive practice yields unintended consequences of the enlightened application of technology to sections of the population, so that an image of a disciplinary and normalised society emerges rather than a rational and utility-maximising one. Likewise Mill's suspicions of a mass society, which demands vigilance and planning on the part of the individual to ensure their liberty, are reconstituted if heightened by Foucault's genealogical survey of the unheralded but restrictive operations of a disciplinary society.

In lectures and interviews close to the publication of Discipline and Punish Foucault distils from his historical analysis of forms of disciplinary power a more general notion of

power. He articulates a theory of the extensive and contingent operations of technologies of power, which act directly upon the body and exert control over the biological aspects of existence. They exemplify, what he terms bio-power, which is conceptualised as at once a productive and repressive force. In the first volume of his genealogical analysis of modern forms of sex and sexuality, the History of Sexuality, Foucault shows how the developing discourse of sexuality shapes productively the possibilities of sexual awareness and conduct.31 In a characteristically disturbing move he undermines contemporary self-images of the present as well as standard representations of the past, by critiquing the prevalent notion that the Victorian era was closed to discourse on sex and sexuality whereas the freewheeling contemporary era is free in its unfettered exploration of sexuality. Foucault highlights how the Victorian era produced an explosion of interest in sex and sexuality, generating proliferating discourses, which created the very perversions that its monitoring and disciplinary perspective sought to repress. Discursive interest in sex is creative in framing the terms in which sex is explored, even if the express focus of the Victorian attitude is on the repression of sexual phenomena at variance with bio-political normalising requirements of heterosexuality and the reproduction of procreative norms. In reviewing nineteenth century bourgeois society Foucault remarks, 'It did not set boundaries for sexuality; it extended the various forms of sexuality, pursuing them according to lines of indefinite penetration.'32

Foucault attends to the simultaneous creative and repressive aspects of power, which produce the creates the very vices and perversions that are to be repressed. The History

[31] M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality:1- The Will to Knowledge* (London, Penguin, 1978)
[32] M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality:1- The Will to Knowledge* (London, Penguin, 1978), p.47

of Sexuality shows convincingly, if contentiously, how the monitoring and regulating processes of normalisation to which individuals are subjected, conduce to the production of subjects, whose agency is directed towards the acquisition of appropriate sexual attitudes and conduct. In his narrative of this development of sexual norms, Foucault articulates a more convincing conceptualisation of subjectivity than he had provided previously. Preceding forms of analysis had assumed either a formal structural determination of an individual's discursive repertoire of expressions or the sheer domination of the body by disciplinary interventions.

Foucault's accommodation of the production of forms of agential subjectivity in the first volume of later exploration of the History of Sexuality is accompanied in its later volumes by analysis of agonistic forms of resistance to normalising procedures.33 In these later volumes individual subjects are seen as possessing the means to develop forms of resistance by exercising a care for the self, exemplary exercises, which are accessed by an analysis of the ethics of the Ancient world.34

In his late analysis of governmentality in his Lectures at the College de France Foucault offers historical analyses on the nature of conduct and the conduct of conduct, in which power is taken to to be exercised via forms of historically constructed forms of subjectivity. In these lectures Foucault provides his most express commentary on forms of the history of political thought. While Foucault attends closely to texts, their meaning is not assimilated to authorial perspectives but are interpreted in the light of theoretically delineated ways of conceiving of historic forms of economy, politics, society and the operation of power. In Society Must be Defended- Lectures at the

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33 See L. McNay, *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994), p.
34 See L. McNay, *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994)

College de France 1975-76 Foucault reviews retrospectively his histories of madness, sexuality and punishment as rehearsing local, capillary forms of power, which differ from standard assumptions of political theory, which conceptualise power and its operations via analysis of the state.35 The contrast is between perceiving power to emanate from a central body, which presumes that, if it is to be limited, then a framework of right must be established to circumscribe central authority, and imagining a dispersion of power that, in turn, demands engagement with local practices of administration, such as prison and health authorities if conditions are to be altered. In Society Must be Defended Foucault contrasts kingly central power and juridical authority from an alternative historico-political discourse in which there is a contest or war of domination and counter-domination. The latter agonistic battle for power is visible in the English Civil War and more generally in early modern Europe. It is distinct from and is not presented ideologically in juridico-legal terms. The new form of politics is a departure from theories of politics, articulated by Machiavelli and Hobbes, which assume the centrality of the state and legal expressions of power. Foucault observes, '… we think of Machiavelli and we think of Hobbes. I would like to show that they have nothing to do with it, that this (new) historico-political discourse cannot be that of the Prince's politics or, obviously that of absolute power…This is basically a discourse that cuts off the king's head.'36   Foucault highlights the difference between the new historico-political discourse and the preceding juridico-legal discourse by reviewing Hobbes's Leviathan. In our succeeding chapter on Hobbes we will examine Foucault's interpretation of Hobbes in the light of a critical review of the dichotomy he establishes between the two discourses. Foucault is perceptive in observing the tactical and

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35 M. Foucault, *Society Must be Defended lectures at the College de France 1975-76* (London and New York, Penguin, 2003)

36 M. Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975-76* (London and New York, Penguin, 2003), p.59

strategic behaviour of Hobbesian individuals, but the observation does not in itself

undermine the cogency of Hobbes's argument.

In his subsequent lectures on governmentality, Security, Territory Population and The

Birth of Biopolitics Foucault reflects on historical examples of the arts of government.37

Governmentality, for Foucault, is a term, which avoids essentialising the state or a

particular frame of politics. Just as madness, sexuality and punishment are generic

conceptual terms that are deconstructed by Foucault's historical analyses, so his late

studies of political thought offer contingent changing frameworks of governmentality,

which situate forms of political thinking that succeed statist notions in the modern era.

Foucault, throughout his career, is opposed to framing a generic theory of state power,

either as a way of analysing power or as a context for examining theories of society and

politics.   In Security, Territory Population Foucault analyses the art of government as it

is developed in post-Renaissance forms of political theory. Whereas Machiavelli had

focused upon how a prince might secure a principality by taking appropriate steps to

secure his grip on juridical sovereignty, Foucault sees subsequent theorists of the

classical age to be occupied by the wider administration of 'things' pertaining to the

biopolitical welfare of the territory and people over whom power is exercised. These

theorists are not concentrating narrowly upon the power of a prince to control his state.

The point of this subsequent form of governmentality is to influence the conduct of the

population so as to maximise the development of a territory. In the process of

promoting biopolitical development, power is exercised via control over the behaviour

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37 M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-78*
(Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics:
Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79* (Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan,
2008)

of subjects. The conduct of these subjects is influenced in turn by pastoral processes

and institutions, notably by the Church, and politics becomes a way of utilising

processes of persuasion and influence. Individual subjects internalise schemes for

conduct. Foucault emphasises how politics is not a universal process of exerting power

as it responds to and shapes the ways in which politics itself is enacted. In highlighting

the historicity of forms of political power, he observes, 'But the state, doubtless no

more today than in the past, does not have this unity, individuality and rigorous

functionality, nor I would go so far as to say, this importance. After all, maybe the state

is only a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction whose importance is much less

than we think. What is important for our modernity, that is to say, our present, is not

then the state's takeover of society, so much as what I would call the

"governmentalisation" of the state.'38

In The Birth of Biopolitics interprets the rise of the discourse of political economy and

the concomitant idea of the conceptual separation of a sphere of the 'economy' from

non-economic social and political phenomena as allowing for a new and hitherto

undeveloped from of political theory, namely liberalism. Liberalism operates as a

particular style of governmentality, in that it presumes and fosters a natural sphere of

society, where the market and purely economic operations can take place. This idea of a

separate or natural sphere of the economy is susceptible to multiple associations and it

is not to be assimilated to a primitive or prior condition. What is natural about market

operations is neither a condition that precedes an elaborated social and political state

nor an acultural condition. Liberalism is a multivalent ideology that invokes multiple

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38 M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-78*
(Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 109

forms of rhetorical justification. On the one hand, liberal politics is aligned with and justified by a pre-existing juridico-political analysis of politics, whereby the centrality of political authority is assumed. Politics is assumed to be about the state and its authority and yet in a liberal formulation state power is subjected to a critical discourse, whereby, as in Locke's proto-liberal argument , governmental power is limited by the presumption that it must be aligned to natural rights. 39 In contrast to the Lockean standpoint, there is what can be termed a utilitarian perspective, in which the rights of subjects are not invoked and naturalised, but rather, the interests of society are identified and asserted so as to highlight the direction in which government should be turned. Government is about maximising social utility, which is articulated in terms of the promotion of social interests. Foucault maintains,' In short, this approach consists in the analysis of government: its practice, its de facto limits, and its desirable limits…The question addressed to government at every moment of its action and with regard to each of its institutions, old or new is: Is it useful? This is not the original, the revolutionary question: What are my original rights and how can I assert them against any sovereign? But it is the radical question. The question of English radicalism; the problem English radicalism is the problem of utility.'40 Foucault imagines liberalism to support a programme of governmentality that operates with a realm of interests in society, which are taken to be distinct from government, but which are enabled and promoted by the arts of liberal government. Liberals are taken to standardly maintain that government

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[39] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79* (Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008),

[40] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79* (Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.40

can and should provide conditions of security, which are central to the flourishing of market conditions.

Foucault's conception of the dyadic nature of liberal forms of ideological justification is contextualised by an interpretation of the development of modern society and politics. Liberalism appears when markets are seen to operate via an autonomous logic and to be linked to social interests, as is theorised by the political economy of Smith. Foucault's interpretation of liberalism and his related reading of its contextual conditions by which society and politics are conceived as susceptible to distinct and context-dependent forms of political logic, highlights how he locates and interprets political theorists in specific historical frames or discourses. Foucault's contextualism is formulated retrospectively in terms that are distinct from those that are maintained by past theorists themselves. In The Birth of Biopolitics Foucault also sets out an historical understanding of the development of forms of neo-liberalism. He connects the discourse of neo-liberalism, which was developing in the late 1970s, to the arguments of the ordoliberals, a group of political economists and social theorists, who were centred around the University of Freiburg during the Weimar Republic. The dark times of inter-war Germany served as the context of theorists, who reflected on the nature of markets and considered ways to revive markets and society, which floundered under the impact of successive events, reparations, hyper- inflation and subsequently depression . Foucault identifies the impact of the ordo-liberals upon Erhard and the constitutive political rhetoric of the West German Constitution in 1949. The continuing influence of the ordo-liberals is also traced to the anarcho-liberalism of Chicago via and via the emigration of its members to the USA.

The ordoliberals were responding to conditions, which had been produced by an increasing activity of government, which was intent upon forestalling the contemporary threats of socialism and fascism. The activity of government, its impact upon economic and social practices, was diagnosed as impairing and clogging markets, rather than achieving its intended outcomes of protecting and fostering markets. The ordo-liberals, according to Foucault, perceived Nazism not to represent an aberrant and hyper mixture of ill-assorted ingredients but as maintaining and concentrating prevalent general features of public policy. Nazism, and the elements of current public policy, which it adopted, are taken to be fatal to liberalism. The concoction of Keynsianism, planning, state-power, the dismantling of juridical checks on state power, the reduction of individuals to component parts of a national social community are all diagnosed as undermining the tenets of liberalism.[41] These elements of public policy, which were concentrated in Nazism, were problematic individually, but collectively they demanded a radical rethinking of society and liberalism. The ordoliberals imagine Nazism as dramatizing the defects of counter-liberal measures, which depend upon the application of technologies to the economy and society. The conclusion of ordo-liberal reflection is that the enhancement of state power has to be reversed, because, or so it is maintained, market society has never been allowed to flourish. Ameliorative measures, which reverse the trend towards the heightening of state powers, are demanded. What must be achieved, in Foucault's interpretation of ordo-liberal thinking, is '… a state under the supervision of the market rather than a market supervised by the state.'[42] In re-imagining society and market operations ordoliberals identify competition rather

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[41] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79* (Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 112-116

[42] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79* (Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 116

than exchange to serve as the crucial underlying principle of market behaviour. It is not enough for exchange to take place, and for governments to operate so as to release transactions from governmental interference. Markets are not simply imagined to operate maximally by governments exercising restraint and adopting laissez faire policies. Competition is crucial and is to be cultivated. It is imagined according to its formal properties so that the force of competition will integrate and co-ordinate society. Competition, on this neo-liberal reading, is vital and is to be enabled by governmental policy that releases the restraints of monopoly, which are diagnosed as arising not from market failure but from political interventions. Again, governmental engagement with society is to be

market but suppotting it. A transfer of income might happen but not to fundamentally change things. Likewise individuals shoul be enabled to take responsibility for provision of their care. mere exchangepon state power such as Locke invoked the rights of man to stand against an overly powerful central political power. Utility…be

What Foucault offers to the history of political ideas is a challenge to the temptations of conventional treatments that assimilate the past to the present either by taking terms such as politics, punishment, sexuality, power and reason at face value or by seeing past forms as leading inexorably to the present. Foucault highlighted the relativity of terms and he opposed reading ideas as straightforwardly representing the intentional views of authors. In his 'What is an Author?' he characteristically historicises authorship in reviewing the historicity of the term whereas pre-modern science celebrates the individual author of treaties and sees literary forms as embedded within traditions, modern notions of science highlight the co-operative movement of science while individual literary authors are lionised. Foucault's perspective certainly offers directions in which historians of political thought can go to challenge received notions. If Hegel's

historical teleology embraces all forms of political thinking in the embrace of a supervening coherence, Foucault smashes at the door of the absolute, reminding readers of the changing and incommensurable ways in which power has been exercised. If Locke and Kant celebrate the man of wisdom, Foucault makes us look at the constructed nature of sexual identity and the dichotomous reading of reason an unreason that leaves the mad in the wilderness of the asylum or lost in the 'community.' Moreover, Derrida's reading of texts is challenged by Foucault's analysis of the micro-physics of power evident in the wider social sphere. Again Marx's focus upon the determination of social and political power via class and economic dominance in the productive process is challenged by the focus upon a wider set of discursive processes. And Gadamer's confidence in a dialogue between interpretation of particular historic texts and tradition is shown to be vulnerable to Gadamer's own critique of Enlightenment notions of univocal forms of reason.