1 Foucault’s Mapping of History

All of Foucault's major works are histories of a sort, which is enough to make him a historian of a sort. The challenge is to determine what sort of history he does and thus what kind of historian he is. It is fortunate that Foucault adopted distinctive terms for his specific approaches at different phases of his career. His early works, the ones that earned him his reputation, were called “archaeologies” and the subsequent ones “genealogies”; the volumes on the history of sexuality that appeared at the time of his death he called “problematizations.”

These approaches do not exclude each other. Rather, like successive waves breaking on the sand, each is discovered after the fact to have been an implicit interest of the earlier one, for which it served as the moving force. Thus Foucault insisted that the question of power relations, which characterizes his genealogies, was what his archaeologies were really about, and, subsequently, that the issue of truth and subjectivity, the explicit focus of his final works, had been his basic concern all along. Although these avowals reveal a greater desire for consistency and coherence than Foucault is supposed to have possessed, much less to have been able to warrant, they hypothesize a unity among the three approaches that enables us to present each in more than sequential order. Accordingly, after a survey of these three modes of “history” in their turn, I shall address four issues that give Foucault's approach to history its distinctive character, namely, the topics of nominalism, the historical event, the spatialization of reason, and the nature of problematization. I shall argue that these themes serve to criticize, respectively, Platonists, historians of culture, dialecticians, and traditional historians of
the battles-and-treaties variety. My concluding remarks will assess Foucault as a “postmodern” philosopher of history.¹

**HISTORY AS ARCHAEOLOGY**

Discounting a brief neomarxian study of psychology published in 1954² and a lengthy Introduction to the French translation of Ludwig Binswanger’s *Dream and Existence* (1954), which shows his youthful fascination with existential phenomenology,³ Foucault’s first major works were “archaeologies” of madness, clinical medicine, and the human sciences, respectively. Rather than study the “arche,” or origin, these archaeologies examine the “archive,” by which he means “systems that establish statements (énoncés) as events [with their own conditions and domain of appearance] and as things [with their own possibility and field of use]” (AK, 128). More simply put, the archive is “the set (l’ensemble) of discourses actually pronounced” (FL, 45); not just any discourses, but the set that conditions what counts as knowledge in a particular period. The archive is discourse not only as events having occurred, but as “things,” with their own economies, scarcities, and (later in his thought) strategies that continue to function, transformed through history and providing the possibility of appearing for other discourses.

This linguistic understanding of the archive is modified by reference to discursive practices, specifically, any set of basic practices that constitute the “conditions for existence” for other discursive practices. Even in what is arguably Foucault’s most “structuralist” text, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he insists that the “discursive relations” he is studying obtain “at the limit of discourse” considered as language. They pertain not to the language (langue) of discourse, but to “discourse itself as practice” (AK, 46, emphasis mine). As he explains,

my object is not language but the archive, that is to say the accumulated existence of discourse. Archaeology, as I intend it, is kin neither to geology [as analysis of the sub-soil], nor to genealogy [as descriptions of beginning and sequences]; it’s the analysis of discourse in its modality of archive. (FL, 25)

That modality is the “historical a priori” of a discourse. The contradictory form of this expression evinces the tension that Foucault’s
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position generates between relativism ("historical") and objectivity ("a priori") in archaeology. Analysis of discourse in its archival mode (archaeology) is the search for those enabling and unifying "forms" – a term he continues to use in this context in his very last works (UP, 14).

Like any original method, archaeology has its proper object, namely, discursive and nondiscursive practices, although the nondiscursive receive little attention until the genealogies. Similar to Wittgenstein’s “game,” a practice is a preconceptual, anonymous, socially sanctioned body of rules that govern one’s manner of perceiving, judging, imagining, and acting. From the vantage point of his subsequent genealogies, Foucault describes practice as “the point of linkage (enchaînement) of what one says and what one does, of the rules one prescribes to oneself and the reasons one ascribes, of projects and of evidences” (IP, 42). Neither a disposition nor an individual occurrence, a practice forms the intelligible background for actions by its twofold character as judicative and “veridicative.” That is, on the one hand, practices establish and apply norms, controls, and exclusions; on the other, they render true/false discourse possible. Thus the practice of legal punishment, for example, entails the interplay between a “code” that regulates ways of acting – such as how to discipline an inmate – and the production of true discourse that legitimates these ways of acting (IP, 47). The famous power/knowledge dyad in Foucault’s larger schema merely elaborates these judicative and veridicative dimensions of “practice.” An archive is the locus of the rules and prior practices forming the conditions of inclusion or exclusion that enable certain practices and prevent others from being accepted as “scientific,” or “moral,” or whatever other social rubric may be in use at a particular epoch. In other words, archaeologies need not be confined to the sciences. Foucault suggests possible archaeological studies of discursive practices in the ethical, the aesthetic, and the political fields (AK, 192–195). His subsequent studies pursue those suggestions.

Reference to “epoch” is crucial, for these archives are time-bound and factual; they are discovered, not deduced; they are the locus of practices as “positivities” to be encountered, not as “documents” to be interpreted. Foucault can thus characterize the archive paradoxically as a “historical a priori.” The claim that these practices are to be registered as facts, not read as the result of intentions of
some sort, gives his archaeology its “positivist” tilt, an inclination he continued to favor.

Inspired by the work of his teacher George Canguilhem, Foucault’s early studies are archaeologies of those discursive practices that tread the borderline of the scientific. These “histories” of science are chartings of the epistemic breaks that account for the sudden appearance of new disciplines and the equally rapid demise of certain old ones. But if there is a post factum “necessity” about these breaks (“fittingness” is perhaps the better word, except that it rings too aesthetic for this stage in Foucault’s career), it is only in the sense that some areas of scientific investigation arise in precisely those spaces where earlier practices had proved weak or absent, although this could not have been predicted from the status quo ante. As Foucault explains in his programmatic Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, his intent is to restore “chance as a category in the production of events” (AK, 231). This respect for the aleatory becomes even more pronounced in his genealogies.

This early emphasis on epistemes (roughly, those conditions that constitute the “veridicative” function of a practice, its claim to the status of scientific knowledge) led many to link Foucault with the structuralists – an association he vigorously rejected. There is little doubt that the immense success of The Order of Things was due in part to its being perceived by the public as a structuralist tour de force. Although Foucault shared many concepts with the structuralists as well as a common enemy (subjectivist, humanist thought), his nominalism and “positivism,” not to mention the Nietzschean tenor of his writing overall, are clearly post-structuralist.

When one views together the four works that constitute Foucault’s archaeological period, namely, The History of Madness, The Birth of the Clinic, The Order of Things, and The Archaeology of Knowledge, one senses a curious unity-within-diversity. All four address the practices of exclusion that constitute the discourse that will bear the honorific “science.” All manifest a profound respect for the period surrounding the French Revolution and its immediate aftermath as the watershed for apparently unrelated discursive and nondiscursive practices. And they all reveal a sense of the unspoken and unspeakable relationships that the archaeologist has been the first to discover between such apparently disjointed areas as clinical medicine, medicalization of madness, and the scientific status of various social inquiries – which are pronounced to have more in common with each
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other than with their presumed precursors in traditional historical accounts.

In this sense, archaeology is both counter-history and social critique. It is counter-history because it assumes a contrapuntal relationship to traditional history, whose conclusions it more rearranges than denies and whose resources it mines for its own purposes. In The Birth of the Clinic, subtitled An Archaeology of Medical Perception, for example, Foucault offers us an alternative account of many of the same facts that anchored the received view of how anatomo-clinical medicine came to replace the “medicine of species” that had dominated thought and practice in the Classical Age. What others had taken as crucial in the history of this displacement, such as the use of corpses in pathological anatomy, Foucault argues, was symptomatic of a more basic and far-reaching change at the level of epistemology. The well-known opposition to the use of corpses in pathology, he notes, was not due to religious or moral scruples, as was commonly believed, but resulted from the epistemic conviction of classificatory medicine that cadavers would be of little use. After the epistemic break (a concept Foucault adopts from the philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard), attention focused on the surface of a lesion, the site of a disease; clinicians were now interested in “geography” rather than in “history”; their question was no longer the essentialist “What is wrong with you?,” but the nominalistic “Where does it hurt?”

But archaeology is social critique as well. It radicalizes our sense of the contingency of our dearest biases and most accepted necessities, thereby opening up a space for change. In its appeal to discursive practices, it underlines the close link between perceiving, conceiving, saying, and doing. It is not that Classical physicians had refused to admit the evidence that lay before them; they simply perceived the object differently from their modern successors. Indeed, this epistemic shift would result in the emergence of a new object for their investigation. Foucault will make a similar claim for the rise of the delinquent in the face of a science of criminology. In both instances traditional accounts, by trying to get “beneath” the surface of the positivities in question, confused the conditioned with its conditions.

In viewing the archaeologies, one notes a pattern in Foucault’s approach to historical topics that will continue throughout the next phases of his career. He begins with a powerful image, an iconic
statement of the thesis he intends to unveil: the *Narrenschiff* with its cargo of madmen; Pomme treating a hysteric with baths, ten or twelve hours a day for ten months; Velasquez attempting to depict representation. One could call this the “phenomenological” or descriptive moment in his method. This is followed by a bold claim that counters the received opinion. Then begins the rearrangement of the evidence into a new configuration. The result is an alternative reading that yields new insights: Enlightenment reason, far from liberating madness, confines it; Classical medicine is blind to the individual cases it studies; nineteenth-century political economy is shown to have more in common epistemically with biology and philology of the same period than with eighteenth-century analyses of wealth.

Whether these alternatives are intended to replace or simply to complement the standard accounts is unclear. In an interview with a group of historians, Foucault asserts the latter [*IP*, 41], but his vigorous advocacy of epistemic shifts in *The Order of Things*, for example, suggests the former. In fact, his claims regarding the extent of epistemic or archival boundaries become more modest as time goes on. Thus, in *The Order of Things* he insists there is only one episteme for a given epoch [*OT*, 168], whereas in the Foreword to the English edition of that same work four years later, he cautions that the work is “a strictly ‘regional’ study” and that such terms as “thought” or “Classical science” refer “practically always to the particular discipline under consideration” [*OT*, x]. He exemplifies the latter view by locating the epistemological break for the life sciences, economics, and language analysis at the beginning of the nineteenth century and that for history and politics at the middle [*FL*, 15]. He is explicit in distinguishing his episteme from a Kantian category and insists that the term simply denotes “all those relationships which existed between the various sectors of science during a given epoch” [*FL*, 76].

**Genealogies of the Present**

No more than archaeology is genealogy a return to origins, a project that Foucault associates with Platonic essentialism. Rather, its concern is the descent [*Herkunft*] of practices as a series of events. Unlike the continuities of a theory of origins, genealogy underscores the jolts and surprises of history, the chance occurrences, in order to
"maintain passing events in their proper dispersion" \(LCP, 146\). To this extent it resembles archaeology.

It moves beyond the earlier method in its explicit focus on power and bodies. Genealogy "poses the problem of power and of the body \([\text{of bodies}], \text{indeed, its problems begin from the imposition of power upon bodies.}\)\) As Foucault notes, "The body – and everything that touches it: diet, climate, and soil – is the domain of the \text{Herkunft [genealogy]}\) \(LCP, 148\). This emphasis on the body as the object of discipline and control gives Foucault’s genealogical studies of the practice of punishment \(\text{Discipline and Punish}\) and of sexuality \(\text{History of Sexuality, I}\) their distinctive character. His genealogy of the carceral system centers on the way “the body as the major target of penal repression disappeared” at a certain point in history \(DP, 8\), only to be subjected to more subtle control by the “normalizing” techniques of the human sciences in the nineteenth century. And the first volume of his genealogy of sexuality reveals “the encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures” that the Victorian proliferation of “perversions” produced \(HS, 48\). As we should now expect, this focus on the body continues in his subsequent work. A chapter in the second volume of his history of sexuality, which appeared just before he died, is entitled “Dietetics” to underscore the greater concern of the classical Greeks for sex in the context of diet and physical regimen than with sex as primarily a moral matter.

Power relations underwrite all Foucault’s genealogies. This translates “history” from a project of meaning and communication toward a “micro-physics of power,” in Foucault’s telling phrase \(DP, 139\). It likewise shifts the model for historical understanding from Marxist science and ideology, or from hermeneutical text and interpretation, to strategy and tactics. “The history which bears and determines us,” he writes, “has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning” \(P/K, 114\).

Given the major role that the concept plays in Foucault’s genealogies, it is unfortunate that he offers no definition of “power” as such other than describing it as “action on the action of others” \(EW 3:341\). Of course, as befits a historical nominalist, he insists that “power” does not exist, that there are only individual relations of domination and control. Moreover, he cautions us, “power” should not be taken in a pejorative sense. It is in fact a positive concept,
functioning in our divisions of the true and the false, the good and the evil, as well as in the distinction and control of ourselves and one another. He is particularly intent on unmasking the prevalent legalistic understanding of “power.”

This inevitability of power relations led critics such as Jürgen Habermas to list Foucault among the “neoconservatives.” Although it is true that this usage figures in his anti-utopian thinking and that its stark realism, if that’s the word, separates him from Marxist and other optimists, his claim that every exercise of power is accompanied by or gives rise to resistance opens a space for possibility and freedom in any context. This stance leaves him remarkably close to Jean-Paul Sartre, whose maxim was that we can always make something out of what we have been made into. The historical (not to mention the ethical) problem is what role genealogy, much less archeology, leaves for individual initiative in these matters. In fact, it seems to leave very little. The genealogies operate on strategies without a strategist. The “dialectic of emancipation” that Foucault sees at work in Enlightenment theories of history, including those of Marx and the Marxists, has no place in a postmodern account – a point to which we shall return in conclusion.

There is an archeological dimension to his genealogy of the modern penal system. It consists in uncovering those discursive and nondiscursive practices that make it possible, indeed natural, to speak of surveillance, re-education, and training – words from the military and scholastic vocabulary – in the context of judicial punishment. The descriptive aspect of his enterprise reveals a rapid and widespread change in the penal practices of the European and North American communities between 1791 and 1810. Prior to that, governments inflicted on criminals any of a vast array of punishments, most of them corporal. These ranged from flogging and the pillory to the gruesome torture and execution of a would-be regicide, an account of which opens Foucault’s book. Yet within two decades this multiplicity of punishments had been reduced to one: detention. Foucault asks why.

In addressing this question, he adopts Lord Acton’s distinction between the history of a period and that of a problem. The former would address the ideological movements, economic changes, social conditions, and, of course, the individual agents that fashioned this dramatic shift in practice. It is a work of erudition. Foucault’s focus, however, is on the problem: What made this transformation
possible? Description has revealed a radical break, the kind that interests the archaeologist, who will analyze it to discover a transformation and displacement of discursive and nondiscursive practices. What genealogy adds to this inquiry is a specific interest in the new economy of power relations at work in this practice of high-minded penal reform. As genealogist, Foucault thus joins Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as a “master of suspicion,” uncovering the unsavory provenance (pudenda origo) of ostensibly noble enterprises.

Two terms that recur at crucial junctures throughout Foucault’s histories are “transformation” and “displacement.” In The Archaeology of Knowledge, he points out that he “held in suspense the general, empty category of [historical] change in order to reveal transformations at different levels” (AK, 200). His opposition to traditional history is in part the rejection of a uniform model of temporalization. Discipline and Punish, for example, superimposes on the standard history of nineteenth-century penal practices the transformation in the way the body is related to power, a real but unconscious shift in what he terms the “political technology of the body” (DP, 24). This “radical event,” in the language of Archaeology, is not attributable to any individual, such as a founder or a reformer, and yet its temporal parameters can be charted with relative precision.

Foucault follows his former teacher Louis Althusser in adopting the Freudian term “displacement” to characterize this new “economy of power.” It is significant that this is a spatial, not a temporal, term. The vocabulary and the very objects of practical and theoretical concern in the realm of punishment, even if retained in the new dispensation, are altered in meaning and use by the “punitive reason” that becomes operative in the early nineteenth century and the “carceral system” it serves to legitimate. What he calls the “technology of power” mediates the humanization of punishment and the rise of the human sciences – a new perspective on the archaeological thesis of The Order of Things. As before the displacement, the object is ostensibly the body of the criminal, but now that body is confined for the sake of discipline. It is the individual’s body as a social instrument that must be rendered a docile and pliable tool of economic productivity. This, rather than the vengeance of the sovereign, is the goal of the “reformed” techniques of punishment.

The architectural emblem for this displacement of punishment is Bentham’s Panopticon. Symbol and instrument of constant surveillance, it assured the automatic application of power by
rendering the prisoner perpetually visible; since the overseers could not be seen, the inmates became their own guards – the ideal of a carceral society. Panopticism, Foucault concludes, “is the general principle of this new ‘political anatomy’ whose object and end are not the relations of sovereignty [as before the break] but the relations of discipline” (DP, 208).

PROBLEMATIZATIONS

In an interview with his research assistant François Ewald, published shortly before his death, Foucault characterizes his current work as “problematization.” The term denotes “the ensemble of discursive and nondiscursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and the false and constitutes it an object of thought [whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis or the like].” The mention of practices and of epistemic value (the true and the false) harkens back to archaeology, and talk of control of self and others (elsewhere in the interview) indicates that genealogy is still at work here. But reference to play and, specifically, to “truth games” (les jeux de vérité) introduces a new phase of his approach to history and affords yet another perspective on his previous work. What truth game is the person playing, for example, who regards himself as insane or sick? As a living, speaking, working being? As a criminal or the subject of sexual desire? Each of Foucault’s successive books is now seen as addressing these questions.

The change occurred during the eight-year gap between the first and the next two volumes of his History of Sexuality. As Foucault explains in a lengthy Introduction to volume two, his previous investigations were the fruit of “theoretical shifts” by which he analyzed the cognitive and the normative relations of “experience” in modern Western society. These are the “veridicative” and judicative dimensions mentioned earlier as the domains of archaeology and genealogy, respectively. It is worth noting, however, that they are now described as dimensions of “experience,” not simply of “discourse” nor of discursive practice:

It appeared that I now had to undertake a third shift in order to analyze what is termed “the subject.” It seemed appropriate to look for the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself qua subject. (UP, 6)
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How one constitutes oneself and is constituted the subject of sexuality (or a political subject) – what he calls “subjectivation” – now becomes his concern. In this work he asks why sexual conduct became an object of moral solicitude. Why this “problematization”?

Typically, he rereads his previous work in light of this question. His archaeologies are said to have examined the forms of problematization; the genealogies enabled him to examine the practices involved in their formation. Now he wishes to focus on the problematizing of sexual activity and pleasure via “practices of the self” by appeal to the criteria of an “aesthetic of existence.” He acknowledges both an archaeological and a genealogical dimension to the experience he analyzes. But the distinctive question is the problematizing of sexual activity in the constitution of the moral self. He studies the relation between “technologies of the self” and the regulation of sexual practices and (later) desires in the context of the “truth games” being played by the relevant participants.

Problematization, in effect, is an important complement to the other two approaches to an historical issue, the charting of the experience in question along a third axis. Foucault insists that none of the axes along which he plots the events in question is the complete story. Indeed, there is no such thing as the “whole” picture. There is simply a multiplication of events (and presumably of axes as well), which elsewhere he terms a “polyhedron of intelligibility,” to mix spatial metaphors, the number of whose sides is indefinite.

Foucault’s Historical Cartography

To chart Foucault’s distinctive approach to history, it will help to select four coordinates that lend a certain coherence to what might better be termed a philosophical “style” à la Nietzsche than a theory. Rather than circumscribe the work of so polymorphous a thinker, these topics designate four overlapping fields on which he simultaneously pursued his investigations. Their superimposition should clarify the kind of history that Foucault was engaged in.

Historical Nominalism

Foucault’s method is radically anti-Platonic and individualistic. His sympathy with the Sophists, Cynics, and other philosophical “outsiders” is based on a profound distrust of essences, natures, and other
kinds of unifying, totalizing, and exclusionary thought that threaten individual freedom and creativity. That is to say, his misgivings are moral (in the broad sense) as well as epistemological, as becomes clear from his numerous remarks about an “aesthetic of existence” toward the end of his life.

What Foucault calls his “nominalism” is a form of methodological individualism. It treats such abstractions as “man” and “power” as reducible for purposes of explanation to the individuals that comprise them. This is the context of his claim, for example, that “power does not exist,” that there are only individual instances of domination, manipulation, edification, control, and the like. His infamous assertion that “man” did not exist before the nineteenth century, even when tempered by appeal to the human sciences that generated the category (which, in turn, served to legitimate them), must be interpreted in the additional sense that “man” is a mere flatus vocis even for the human sciences. Failure to respect Foucault’s underlying nominalism has frustrated the critics who have complained about the elusive character of his concept of power.

It is the historian’s task to uncover discursive and nondiscursive practices in their plurality and contingency in order to reveal the fields that render intelligible an otherwise heterogeneous collection of events. There is no foundational principle, no originating or final cause. Such words as “influence” and “author” dissolve under nominalistic scrutiny. “History,” as Foucault writes it, is the articulation of the series of practices [archive, historical a priori] that accounts for our current practices, where “account” means assigning the relevant transformations [differentials] and displacements or charting the practice along an axis of power, knowledge, or “subjectivation.” Thus Foucault’s program offers the “new historians” too much and too little: too many diverse relations, too many lines of analysis, but not enough unitary necessity. We are left with a plethora of intelligibilities and a lack of necessity. But he resolutely refuses, as he puts it, to place himself “under the sign of unique necessity” (IP, 46).\(^9\)

The Event

In selecting this topic, we can assess Foucault in terms of the controversy that arose among historians during the 1960s and
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1970s regarding the comparative merits of “history of events” (histoire événementielle) and “non-event-oriented history” (histoire nonévénementielle). Defenders of the former, traditional approach considered themselves humanists, employing hermeneutical methods in ascertaining the meaning of documents; whereas those in the latter camp were closer to the social sciences, favoring comparativist or structuralist insights, statistical arguments, and computer techniques. Foucault, who criticized the “confused, understructured, and ill-structured domain of the history of ideas” (BC, 195), was commonly linked with the latter, and his “histories” were judged to be “structuralist” attacks on humanist values.

It is not by accident, therefore, that he chose to make the concept of event the center of his historical analyses. But his peculiar use of “event” serves to distinguish him from old and new historians alike. Practices are events in the Foucaultian sense; so, too, are statements. The famous epistemological breaks of his archaeologies are events, as are the “micro” exercises of power in the “capillaries” of the body politic. Appeal to “event” enables Foucault to avoid such “magical” concepts as historical “influence” and vague notions like “continuity” by proliferating events without number. An event, he explains,

is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked “other.” (LCP, 154)

It is precisely “the singular randomness of events” that enables him to reintroduce the central role of chance into historical discourse. His ironic defense against “structuralist” charges is that no one favors the history of events more than he! In fact, a close reading of his work reveals that the concept of event broadens to bridge the gap between these two schools of historiography.10

Spatialization of Reason

Foucault’s spatialized thinking extends far beyond his well-known use of spatial metaphors to include the use of lists, tables, geometrical configurations, and illustrations. These are not merely ancillary to his approach, but pertain to the core of his historical method,
which is “diagnostic” and, as such, comparatist and differential. He seems to have adopted as a general rule what he characterized in The Birth of the Clinic as “the diacritical principle of medical observation,” namely, that “the only pathological fact is a comparative fact” (BC, 134). What we described earlier as “counter” history is Foucault’s use of a comparatist and differential method. This not only frees him from historical “realism” that seeks to ascertain the truth “as it actually happened,” but also liberates him from the confines of dialectical thinking. His shift from time to space as the paradigm guiding his approach to historical topics counters the totalizing, teleological method favored by standard histories of ideas, with their appeal to individual and collective consciousness and to a “tangled network of influences” (OT, 63).

The best-known examples of Foucault’s spatialized thinking are his analyses of Velasquez’s Las Meninas in The Order of Things and of Bentham’s Panopticon in Discipline and Punish. In the former, like an art critic, he leads us along the path of argument by repeatedly calling our attention to the singular image before us. We are drawn to the graphic conclusion that representation cannot represent itself, that “the very being of that which is represented is now going to fall outside representation itself” (OT, 240). By a powerful iconic argument, Foucault shows that “representation has lost the power...for the links that can join its various elements together” (OT, 238–239). That connection will next be sought in “man” and, failing that, in the very differential that Foucault, as postmodern historian, both practices and preaches.

Foucault’s famous description of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon relates power and knowledge, norm and surveillance, in an interplay of architecture and social science to reveal the self-custodial nature of modern society, where “prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons” (DP, 228). Again the demonstrative force of his analyses depends on the spatial organization of the institutions he discusses. As with the Velasquez painting, one is constantly referred back to the visual evidence, to the plans, the prospects, the models. But now the line of sight is strategic, not just descriptive; the contours inscribe the relations of control, not just forms of intelligibility. The space has become genealogical.13
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Problematization

Foucault’s interest in contrast and difference does not imply commitment to an underlying unity. This was evident in his focus on the event. The redescription of his histories as problematizations and their linkage with differential or spatialized thought emphasizes this fact:

The freeing of difference requires thought without contradiction, without dialectics, without negation; thought that accepts divergence, affirmative thought whose instrument is disjunction; thought of the multiple – of the nomadic and dispersed multiplicity that is not limited or confined by the constraints of similarity. … What is the answer to the question? The problem. How is the problem resolved? By displacing the question. … We must think problematically rather than question and answer dialectically. ([LCP, 185–186])

We have seen how writing the history of a “problem” rather than of a “period” frees Foucault from the obligation to exhaustive research of the historical sources. Not that he can ignore the “facts”; rather, he is warranted to consider only those events that are relevant to the problem at issue, its transformation and displacement, the strategies it exhibits, and the truth games it involves. This also relieves him of the need to “totalize” or “synthesize” in the Sartrean and Hegelian senses, respectively. Such an approach, he insists, would be considered anti-historical only by “those who confuse history with the old schemas of evolution, living continuity, organic development, the progress of consciousness or the project of existence” ([PK, 70]).

POSTMODERN HISTORY

Although we could speak of “post-structuralist” history just as easily,¹² “postmodern” seems the more appropriate term to designate the histories of someone who drew sharp epistemic lines between modernity, its predecessor, and its successor, and then proceeded to fill in all three spaces with description and analysis. Like the term “existentialist,” the use and abuse of which it is coming to resemble, “postmodern” is notoriously difficult to define. Prudence counsels that we fashion a cluster of themes and concepts whose criss-crossing and overlapping will reveal a family resemblance among the uses of
the term. In Foucault’s case, this postmodern cluster includes the four topics just discussed.

His nominalism is not of itself distinctive. The historian Paul Veyne reads Henri Irénée Marrou as supporting Foucault’s claim that “nothing is more reasonable than a nominalist conception of history.” In this respect, both share what was probably Aristotle’s view of the profession. But the radicalization of this position to the point of evacuating the historical subject, coupled with a Nietzschean appeal to relations of power and resistance, gives Foucaultian history an “agonistic” character that Jean-François Lyotard considers characteristic of “postmodern” logic.

The dispersion of events and multiplicity of lines of “explanation” is another feature of the postmodern. In this regard, Lyotard speaks of the end of “master narratives” like the Marxist and the evolutionary. Foucault’s “polyhedron of intelligibility” and his exclusion of any “dialectic of emancipation,” such as Enlightenment thinking is supposed to have bequeathed us, are rightly seen as postmodern in spirit. This is obviously the case if one takes the Habermasian defense of modernity as paradigmatic of the genre.

What is most distinctive of Foucault as a postmodern thinker is what I have called his “spatialization of reason” as studied in his histories and exhibited in his writings. His implicit appeal to space, with its transformations and displacements as well as its comparative and diacritical method, rather than to time as the model for historical explanation undermines the telic nature of traditional historical accounts, even as it restores the dispersive, “Dionysian” character to time, which had been tamed by existentialists and other narrativists.

Foucault’s focus on problematization supports numerous regional studies and discourages larger undertakings. His more limited understanding of “episteme,” as well as his nominalist use of “power,” has a similar, particularizing effect. In fact, his writings consistently counter the Aristotelian prohibition against a “science of the singular” by appeal to the case study method of modern medicine, which he employs throughout his histories.

Finally, his move away from explanation toward diagnosis is typically postmodern in its eschewal of foundations, origins, ultimates, and grand theories in favor of practical, moral [in the broad sense] concerns. Assuming the demise of representational thinking, which
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he subjected to a profound critique in *The Order of Things*, Foucault has no intention of grasping the event-fact “as it actually occurred.” Rather, he writes a “history of the present” that, in effect, seeks to diagnose and suggest alternative avenues of behavior, or at least their possibility. Such is his postmodern understanding of history, which “has more in common with [modern] medicine than [modern] philosophy” (*LCP*, 156).

Given the breadth and boldness of Foucault’s approach, it is liable to criticism from a variety of quarters. There is something of the poet in his easy way with striking examples at the price of tedious factual corroboration. Indeed, in a famous phrase he once avowed, “I am well aware that I have not written anything but fictions,” but then hastened to add, “which is not to say they have nothing to do with the truth” (*P/K*, 193). Professional historians, for example, who specialize in the fields he covers, have been quick to take issue with his list of historical facts.16 The price of being an historian *suo modo* seems to be that he is not entirely at home either with professional historians or with philosophers. His greatest influence appears to have been on scholars working in literature and in the social sciences.

Many philosophers will question the tenability of Foucault’s radically nominalistic claims. This is an ancient quarrel, which need not be rehearsed here. But its central role in his philosophy demands a defense or at least an explicit discussion, which is never forthcoming. If nominalism fails, so, too, do many of Foucault’s assertions about power, truth, and subjectivation.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the spatialization of history is its freeing of the discipline from its moorings in philosophical anthropology, the famous “death of man” thesis that caused so much ink to spill after the appearance of *The Order of Things*. Speaking of archaeology as “diagnosis,” Foucault claims that it “does not establish the fact of our identity by the play of distinctions.” Rather, “it establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks.” That difference, he concludes, “far from being the forgotten and recovered origin, is this dispersion that we are and make” (*AK*, 131). A condition of the existence of this dispersion is spatialized language that dissolves the unity of the self, dissipates projects by chance events, and multiplies rationalities.17 But
this, of course, also generates a “counter-anthropology” to undergrid Foucault’s counter-history. And the ethical implications of that position were just beginning to be worked out at the time of Foucault’s death. Whether it can advance beyond a certain aestheticism is not yet clear.

But the chief difficulty with the Foucaultian project as history arises from the fact that, to speak like a nominalist, the lived, experienced time of the responsible agent is too firmly entrenched; it is, to use more comfortable terms, an essential ingredient in our human condition. As exhibited in our ability to recount and follow narratives, this experience lies at the heart of what we call “history,” whether of the agents and forces that condition it or of the historians who fashion its form. No doubt Foucault indicated the inadequacy of any simple narrative account, although he did so with great rhetorical [narrative] skill. Doubtless, too, he chastened those who would look for a single meaning-direction to history or who wish to single out its atomic agents or root causes. But his suspicions have not rooted out the experiential basis of historical narrative. Indeed, his own narratives have served to underscore its inevitability.18

It has been said that the kind of music aestheticians analyze is the kind no one can hear. *Mutatis mutandis*, might not something similar be said of Foucault’s “postmodern” history?

NOTES

1 The following abbreviations are used in citing Foucault’s writings. Full references are given in the Bibliography of this volume.

AK: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*
BC: *The Birth of the Clinic*
DP: *Discipline and Punish*
EW: *Essential Works*, by volume and page
FL: *Foucault Live*
HS: *History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*
IP: *L’Impossible Prison*
LCP: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*
OT: *The Order of Things*
P/K: *Power/Knowledge*
UP: *The Use of Pleasure*

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5 I have since come to recognize that Foucault leaves more space for individual initiative than has been commonly acknowledged (see my Sartre, Foucault and Historical Reason, vol. 2 A Poststructuralist Mapping of History [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005], 162–63; hereafter PMH).

6 In this, too, he is remarkably close to the later Sartre, who saw the possibility of “totalization without a totalizer” as the question about the meaning of history.


9 For a development of this argument, see my “Foucault and Historical Nominalism,” in H. A. Durfee and D. F. T. Rodier, eds., Phenomenology and Beyond: The Self and Its Language [Netherlands: Kluwer, 1989], 134–147. Portions of this essay have been included here with permission. See also PMH, ch. 2.

10 An extended discussion of this topic occurs in my “Foucault and the Career of the Historical Event,” in Bernard P. Dauenhauer, ed., At the Nexus of Philosophy and History [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987], 178–200. Portions of this piece have been used here with permission. See also PMH, ch. 3.


12 See Derek Attridge et al., eds., Post-Structuralism and the Question of History [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987]. Foucault, in fact, observes: “While I see clearly that behind what was known as structuralism, there was a certain problem – broadly speaking, that of the subject and the recasting of the subject – I do not understand what kind of problem is common to the people we call post-modern or post-structuralist” [PPC, 34].


15 See, for example, Richard J. Bernstein, ed., Habermas and Modernity [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985].
See, for example, Jacques Proust et al., “Entretiens sur Foucault,” La Pensée 137 [February 1968]: 4–37, as well as Gary Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 175–179.

These and similar objections are developed at length in Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988), and in David Carr, Time, Narrative, and History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).