

Abstract

Foucault, Knowledge, and History

This synthesis on Foucault's ideas and subjects (author, discourse, sexuality, madness, *technologies*, methods of writing and representing knowledge, power-knowledge etc.) presents a new way of understanding knowledge, power, history beyond academic labels stuck on Foucault's social and professional identity. I explained why Foucault saw "relations of power" in every human relationship, and I criticized some of his generalizations concerning this concept. Power *is not* everywhere...

"Problems", in Foucault's acception, include: *how power* works from the bottom to the top of societies and vice versa, from citizens to politicians and from politicians to citizens, as a circular and diffuse phenomenon; *how sexuality* became an important discourse and what implications it has for our contemporary mentality; *how madness* was defined and elaborated by socio-political powers; how and why our intellectual texts and discourses are controlled, repressed, modelled or, in extreme cases, censured and prohibited by socio-political institutions. The book has an introductory part, which explains *why* Foucault rejected the idea of the author and *how* he conceived his books as a *series* of vivid representations in which he *paints* his thoughts in *chiaroscuro* tones. Concrete examples from his works illustrate his *chiaroscuro* manner of thinking/writing.

In the chapter *Madness*, I criticized Foucault's idea that the relationship normal-abnormal-normalization is... a report which is "historically well-localized", as he said in *Madness and Civilization*. I presented how and why Foucault conceived madness as a part of our

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rational thinking. Foucault argued that madness is internal to reason and not something opposed to it. The next pages of the book debate Foucault's definition of *reason* in terms of *unreason*. The concept of 'unreason' described in the book cannot be conflated with 'madness' or 'irrationality'. I tried to depict how *reason* and *unreason* complete each other in a modern socio-political space beyond the control of political authorities.

In the third chapter *Sexuality*, I presented how sexuality as a historical and socio-political practice became "a problem" and *why* this discourse has been controlled and *modelled* by political systems. I debated how a new politics of human interrelationships is derived from this complex discursive practice called "sexuality". I described the *mechanism* of sexuality, which balances between *rational* and *irrational*. Sexuality is neither rational, nor irrational.

The fourth chapter presents the idea of power from a plural and non-ideological perspective. I describe how this concept was conceived by Foucault in opposition to Plato's ideas and I criticized Foucault's *power-knowledge* paradigm. Some solutions to the problem of this paradigmatic knowledge-power relations are also presented. I present what Foucault understood by the concept of 'technologies' and how these *technologies* were products of modern societies at the intersection of political power, individual power, self and ego. The last part focuses on the French thinker's expression 'the head of the king', pluralizing this concept for a new political philosophy. Foucault proposes a 'new way of organizing' societies, beyond 'sovereigns' and 'prohibitions'. Foucault did not want to say that it is necessary to abolish political power, but to organize it beyond the idea of sovereignty and that of prohibition. To cut off 'the head of the King' means to create a new society in which political power is organized differently and exercised beyond the centralization of power, beyond the arbitrary violence and authority.

In the chapter fifth, entitled *Written culture, the invention of ideologies, modern individualization, discourse, truth and market of ideas*, I established some connections between these *six concepts*,

depicting how modern society was developed and, at the same time, politicized. I tried to make sense to question: *Why* is the modern political state, as a valuable entity, the product of modern nations and of our political economies? I gave a historical explanation of Foucault's idea: "The modern state was born where no nation and no economy have ever existed."

The triad *discourse-truth-market of ideas* is an attempt to make sense of the relationship between the process of politicizing modern societies and these three concepts controlled by the modern state. According to Foucault, discourses *are battles* fought between citizens and socio-political technocrats in order to persuade people on a certain topic. I emphasized what are the elements and the strengths of a discourse.

The chapter *Foucault's conception of knowledge* presents some original ideas about Foucault's epistemological conception, criticizing his essential thoughts about knowledge. In my view, the ideas and thoughts offered here as a counterweight to those of the French thinker can be fruitfully explored in new humanist studies. New ideas about the concept of 'representation' are also sketched. I also continue some ideas and concepts presented in my previous book *Historical Knowledge in Western Civilization: Studies beyond the Sovereign View* (2008, 2009), in which I try to go beyond the ideas of interpretation and of representation as valuable concepts for our humanist knowledge. Will 'representations' and 'interpretations' remain the 'sovereigns' of our thinking?

The last chapter of this synthesis focuses on Foucault's constructive and original ideas about written history and historical research. I consider Foucault the most important thinker 'with history' from the 20th century. *Thinking with history*, as Carl Schorske coined this concept, is something different from *philosophy of history*. In an interview Foucault himself declared that he is a historian like any other, not a philosopher of history. He stated: "I am not Toynbee!" History requires a special understanding which cannot be provided by philosophy or by social sciences.

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The book debates cardinal ideas for humanities and history as set out in books, essays, and interviews by Foucault which have been forgotten by the most prominent scholars who wrote about his works. I argue why history is 'a structure of powers' and how this 'structure' functions among citizens and politicians and *why* and *how* written history is constructed at the crossroads of *what we know* and *what we think*.

To think and to know are different perspectives for historical knowledge, and one of the reasons that written history becomes evanescent and even 'useless' during the decades is this presence of *a certain way of thinking and knowing* in our historical books, which is over-passed by subsequent ways of thinking. I like to see written history as a painting of chiaroscuro representations derived from the historian's knowing and thinking. History is the result of choosing a certain path at the expense of others and this dialectic of power among people creates history. I also presented useful insights for going beyond the idea of dialectics.

My main purpose is 'to unify' many *Foucaults* into one natural and understandable Foucault, beyond the mystification of "postmodernism", beyond the mythology created around his personality and thinking, including the "literary theme" proposed by Hayden White, that of *Foucault – the destroyer of history*. The book is conceived as *a general "method" of understanding Foucault*, not a biased and subjective way of arguing some ideas depicted from the French thinker. The strong point is that my book explains Foucault's thinking through *his words*. This cultural synthesis offers a complex picture of contemporary historical and political theory, condensing in it the most important philosophical and historical modern ideas. It can also be regarded as a brief history of political and historical ideas of the last two hundred years, starting from Foucault's "archaeological" work. I mean his historical investigations in archives, "these places without glory," as he emphasized in *Discipline and Punish*.

Many outstanding scholars (Deleuze, Veyne, Rabinow, etc) have written about Foucault, and there are more than 200 books

dealing with Foucault's works, ideas and methods. Adopting a different approach, this book analyzes Foucault's thought from the perspective of his *themes* (madness, sexuality, power, knowledge, discourse, *historical method*) and his patterns. I consider Foucault neither an "ordinary historian", nor a philosopher, but an authentic thinker with history and philosophy. For this reason, his universe is portrayed from a historical and philosophical point of view.