

INTRODUCTION

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Michel Foucault died in June of 1984. He left behind a body of work that has been published around the world, and is a source of inspiration for many thinkers, and the subject of a multitude of interpretations.

The man lived up to his work: he was a complex person with a number of apparent contradictions. He was a radical militant, yet a professor at the tradition-bound Collège de France; politically involved, yet a studious philosopher, happy living on the edge, though concerned with his central standing in well-known French institutions. He was a brilliant, incisive, iconoclastic figure. Speaking both in the classroom and in the street, he helped create the figure of the intellectual in tune with his times, using his personal experience to reflect on reality. He went far beyond his era and his country to become the authoritative thinker he is today.

Michel Foucault never sacrificed the gritty reality of his life

for the world of ideas. The pathways he took display overflowing vitality and an appetite for constant renewal. We need to keep in mind the many facets of his life, from his arrival in Paris at the end of the 1940s, when the young man from the provinces began attending the highly-ranked École normale supérieure on the rue d'Ulm, to 1984, when the world-renowned thinker died of AIDS. These three-plus decades take us to university libraries in Sweden and Poland, revolt in Tunisia and student agitation at the Université de Vincennes in Paris, his classes at the prestigious Collège de France, and the fight alongside Jean-Paul Sartre and the French Maoists, not to mention American campuses, and gay enclaves in California.

Throughout his tumultuous existence, he built a methodology of thought, subject to variations and even refutation, moving from one discipline to the next, changing perspective and centers of interest, but always working in a coherent direction. Over thirty years, Michel Foucault's work traveled in different directions and took on different subjects, with an originality recognized by all and probably unequaled.

Foucault against Himself—or how a major twentieth-century thinker succeeded in avoiding any single definition of himself and his work.

Four movements will help us understand who Foucault really was. They are like waves, or musical phrases. They situate the contrasting faces of the man and his work inside fertile relationships, and contribute to a portrait of incompleteness, constant reevaluation, and adjustments orchestrated by Foucault himself. This perspective is not the result of a sudden decision or judgment made from without. These are movements that Foucault could easily be in tune with, and they confirm his taste for change and his rejection of certainty.

Variations on Power

The first movement concerns the question of power. The issue is central, not because Foucault makes it into a stated object of research, but because it keeps returning in different formulations. The question of power seems to outstrip his intentions by reappearing throughout his work and forcing itself on him. The issue persists.

“Variations on Power”: this first movement applies to nearly all Foucault’s works. We see how the issue of power is transformed, how it moves and takes on new forms through most of the research he did across disciplines, through philosophy, history, psychiatry, and prisons. There is no need to look at everything, since two of his books will serve the purpose: *Madness and Civilization* and *The Will to Knowledge*. In both

works, Foucault renews his analysis of power, which includes turning it inside out and inverting it in its presuppositions and consequences.

In *Madness and Civilization*, which first appeared in French in 1961, the idea of exclusion holds sway. Power pushes aside, rejects, and marginalizes the different figures that denature social order: the mad, vagabonds, prostitutes, and homosexuals. Inaugurating the classical age, the “big imprisonment” displays the power of the negative, of darkness. A living part of society is suddenly silenced, excluded, forgotten behind its walls. In its decision-making function, power cuts off and separates.

Fifteen years later, in 1976, inclusion seems to inform *The Will to Knowledge*. Analyzing the role of sexuality in the West, Foucault describes, on the contrary, a kind of power with a positive aspect, the power to incite. It was apparently wrong to believe that sexuality was censored, repressed, and made taboo—instead, it was encouraged. Power does not forbid sex; it encourages its formulation via confession and admission, and it organizes constant speech and produces statements of truth. Power doesn't exclude; it constitutes.

From *Madness and Civilization* to *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault changes his point of view and assigns new ways of functioning to the apparatuses of control. From one book to the other, the issue of power varies and returns in renewed fashion.

The Thinker and the Militant

A second movement, concerned with Foucault as a character, shows us that his agitation not only motivated his thought processes, but also touched on his everyday life as a philosopher, his concrete existence in society at a given time. We could choose the period between 1970 and 1975 in France to show that Foucault's personality was involved in divergent, sometimes contradictory activities. "The Thinker and the Militant" displays a Janus figure, a double-edged persona, a combination of reflection and activism.

Foucault is a thinker in his writings and in his role as a teacher, most notably at the Collège de France, where he started giving classes in 1971. In this temple dedicated to culture, a place where lofty minds met, Foucault worked alongside people known for their spirit of logical deliberation. But he did not project that smooth sort of self-image. He rejected the comfort his position offered and wanted to take his ideas to the street. Beginning in 1970 and 1971, Foucault supported Jean-Paul Sartre and far-left militant groups in their defense of immigrants and undocumented workers in their fight against deportation. Along with other intellectuals, he founded the Groupe d'information sur les prisons (the GIP, or Prison Information Group) with the aim of informing the public about conditions of detention and focusing media attention on prisoner revolts during 1971 and 1972. Foucault also got

involved in the “Vérité-Justice” committees that were set up by the Maoists of the newspaper *La Cause du peuple* to denounce the everyday injustice of capitalism. He was not a militant in the organizational sense of the term, but he analyzed, wrote articles, and spoke up to explain and denounce. He took sides in political conflicts, but also when it came to events like the tragic fire at the 5-7 nightclub in Grenoble, or the Bruay-en-Artois murder in 1972. Foucault wanted to think about the present in the present, and get involved in current events, basing his thought in the political and social reality of the times. In this critical perspective, he was joined by the politicized intellectuals of the era, notably Jean-Paul Sartre (though they had strong disagreements about philosophy) and Gilles Deleuze.

Both thinker and militant, Foucault brought together these two ways of involvement in the world. He defended the concept of the “specific intellectual” acting at a given time and place, involved in short-term, sometimes minor problems, and calling for a localized response. These particular problems did not always require a generalized mobilization of the mind, nor did they demand the involvement of the “total intellectual”—the kind of intellectual Sartre referred to, who lifted the smallest conflicts to the level of pure concept. Foucault’s position is based on circumstances. There’s a taste for the present in his thought that completed or contradicted the outmoded image

some people have of the thinker. By setting himself in the midst of events, with their unpredictable side and unexpected turns, Foucault ran the risk of throwing himself off balance, taking wrong positions, contradicting himself, and having to start all over or “unbind himself,” as he liked to put it—free himself anew. But that seemed to suit him just fine. He insisted on living in the world’s disorderly movement, and his own.

Where Does the Individual Fit In?

We can find Foucault’s interest in the unbinding of the self in a third approach oriented toward man. The human issue—or, more rightly, the subject—arises in his thinking in a way that at times seems contradictory. We see, for example, how things change between *The Order of Things*, published in French in 1966, and *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, his last texts published in French in 1984.

Of the first work, when it was published, people said it displayed a structuralist position and theorized about “the death of man” announced by Nietzsche in the previous century. His analyses of the different epistemological systems that have followed each other since the Renaissance in the areas of language, the body, and the economy are indeed compatible with the structuralist current that occupied the Paris scene in the 1960s. When the book came out, Foucault was

stingingly attacked by the upholders of the philosophy of the subject and humanist thought; in this work, they saw the equivalent of what Claude Lévi-Strauss was doing in anthropology, Roman Jakobson in linguistics, and Jacques Lacan in psychiatry. Jean-Paul Sartre also weighed in against the book that he judged inapt to reflect on history and human lives; he described its author as “the last rampart of the bourgeoisie”—which didn’t prevent the two intellectuals from working together ten years later in far-left groups.

Sartre’s critique interests us because it points to the disappearance of a knowing subject in Foucault. After all, what place could it have once the structures of knowledge, which are unconscious and collective, have dispensed man from any thought or action, any voluntary creation, any mastery of the practice of thought? In *The Order of Things*, man is a subject constructed by culture, educated and educator both, measured by the yardstick of his times. Foucault broke with the classical theory of the subject as creator of thought. On the contrary: he considered man as an invention of history, born in the nineteenth century and already slated for disappearance.

Then, less than twenty years later, Foucault seemed to make a radical departure from this book that had launched so much debate. In *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, he described man during Greco-Roman times who resembles, if not a creative subject, at least a being who creates himself via

modes of subjectivity. Certainly, the man of whom Foucault spoke is not the knowing subject of classical philosophy, nor the subject, master of his destiny, the way humanist thought dreamed of. But here is a being of flesh and blood, sensation and thought, and Foucault wanted to describe the choices, preoccupations, and active care he applied to himself. In this work on Antiquity, Foucault returned man to a central place in his reflection. He went on to build a way of being and thinking about relations with other people, a form of involvement in the social world, all things that could apply to any of us today. This new issue would occupy him until his death in 1984.

Over those two decades, his thought seems to have totally turned on its head, leaving readers of the time perplexed and at sea. In this change, if not a complete contradiction, there is a readjustment that once again displays the thinker's right to mobility of the highest order.

A Life on the Edge, A Job at the Center

The fourth and final movement describes the opposing positions Foucault occupied over a period of thirty years. He led a double life, pulled in two directions, a marginal being, far from society's norms, yet very close to the seat of power.

On one hand, "a life on the edge" reveals the progress of a timid young man from the provinces, wearing the straitjacket

of his family background, rejected by the intellectual environment of the *École normale supérieure*, feeling excluded by the great difficulty he experienced in accepting his homosexuality, attempting suicide and sojourning in psychiatric hospitals, and deciding late to live out the rest of his life with great panache, far past the edges of social and moral order. All the ingredients for a life of passion were there.

At the same time, Foucault was careful to maintain a choice location in the mechanisms that produced and distributed knowledge. His pathway was exemplary, paved with excellence, following the elite road in France: the Henri IV Lycée, the *École normale supérieure*, the Collège de France. He didn't turn up his nose on prestige positions that placed him at the heart of institutions of knowledge and language: cultural attaché overseas, chargé de missions for various ministries, and jury member for the ENA public administration school in Strasburg. He exercised a vigilant eye as his works were published by the most powerful houses, like Gallimard and le Seuil. He succeeded in living a paradoxical and atypical life, both on the edge and at the center of a very standardized world. He drove a Jaguar and dropped LSD on a regular basis, and spent his days at the National Library and the National Archives. He hit the gay S&M bars in Paris as well as in San Francisco a few hours after giving a lecture in front of an audience of stiff-necked academics. He practiced excess to

perfection, both in his intelligence and knowledge as well as the organized disorder and flaming out of his life.

In this very open game between private life and public office, Foucault danced a subversive *pas de deux*. Where others may have been careful or remained in outright rebellion, he decided not to choose. He proved that a person could be part of the seraglio but not transmit its customs. He showed how to develop personal freedom without becoming marginal. His freedom and refusal to maintain appearances caused some astonishment at the time, just as his death from AIDS caused a scandal. It was a sign of his moral and intellectual independence. Foucault never stopped reinventing himself and throwing off disturbing and contrary images of who he was.

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These four movements, among all the other possibilities, provide us with a confrontation of contraries, a staging of variables. This skewed perspective is true to Foucault's wishes. The thinker demanded the right to move about and to change. He refused to consider his works over and definitively finished; he preferred to speak of use rather than a body of work. He did not want his life, private and public, to be reduced to a single identity, and in the process risk turning it into something useful for policing.

FOUCAULT AGAINST HIMSELF

Foucault against Himself: the way he wanted to be, the way he thought, against himself.