

Short Foucault Biography

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Foucault was born of upper-middle class parents (father an important local surgeon; mother with inherited land) in 1926 in Poitiers, France; died a world famous writer, of AIDS, in 1984 in Paris. Three biographies have been published so far: Eribon, which tells of the French old-boy network w/ help of which F rose in academia; Macey, a standard intellectual biography; and Miller, a fun read, but unfortunate attempt to establish the "truth" about MF in his taste for "limit-experiences." It's not that "acid days and leather nights" aren't fun to read about, but Miller is rather relentlessly reductionistic in tracing everything MF ever wrote back to his death-wish. There's a good treatment of all three, with critique of Miller, in David Halperin, *Saint-Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*.

Speaking of which, F was gay, and that's both important and not. It's important in that F wrote about sexuality, and hence has become a major theoretical resource for gender studies, queer theory, etc-- alongside all his other impacts: history, architecture, medicine, law, literature, philosophy: basically all the humanities and social sciences. But F's gayness is unimportant since what F is critiquing is the making of sexual identity into the key to a person, the "truth" about a person. As we'll see later in the course when we read the three published volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, F will show how that type of thinking and practice (medical, psychological, legal) is tied up with a modern (post 1750) type of power he calls "bio-power."

In any event, F spent his school years in Poitiers in the shadow of WWII. After the war, he was sent to Paris to study for the entry exam to the Ecole Normale Supérieure, to which he was admitted in 1946. There he received his *licence* in philosophy in 1948, in psychology in 1949, and his *agrégation* in philosophy in 1952. Now the ENS is not a University, but much more prestigious, a Napoleonic-heritage training school, where the best and the brightest prepare for brilliant careers, as did Bergson, Sartre, Derrida and many others. Besides Eribon, you could look at Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* for a sociological analysis; there are lots of other books on the ENS.

Now in the late 40s the ENS student political allegiance was split among Gaullists, Catholics, and Communists. The latter were adherents of the PCF, the French Communist Party. The PCF had huge prestige after the Resistance, as they were the *parti des fusillés*: the party of the executed ones: in other words, those who had done the dirty work in fighting the Nazis and Vichy. However, they were also a Stalinist hierarchy, with thought police and official dogma: they were the arbiters of scientific truth about the objective laws of history and they were going to lead any revolution that occurred from above. Foucault joined the PCF while at the ENS, but had quit by 1953. We'll come back to this point.

Anyway, from 1952-55, F worked at University of Lille, then from 55-60 at a series of quasi-diplomatic French culture jobs around Europe. First, 55-58 at University of Uppsala in Sweden. There he discovered a great library and did the research for his first big book, *Madness and Civilization*. In 58 he worked in Warsaw and in 59 at Hamburg, Germany.

He returned to France in 1960 to teach at Clermont-Ferrand, commuting from Paris, where he stayed until 1966. During this time he received his *Doctorat ès lettres* (1961) for *Madness and Civilization*, w/ secondary thesis an intro and translation of Kant's *Anthropology. MC*, along with the next year's *Birth of the Clinic*, establishes his reputation as a smart young historian/philosopher, but it was not yet read with any political meaning nor as an anti-psychiatry text. Those readings came later, illustrating a Nietzschean point F will later exploit: the origin of a thing is no clue to its current use and vice versa. Things get captured and reinterpreted by outside forces from whole 'nother lineages: transversal communication as D/G would say.

During these years Foucault writes quite a bit on literature: a book on Raymond Roussel, and articles on Blanchot, Bataille, Klossowski, and Artaud in journals such as *Critique*, *Tel quel*, *La nouvelle revue française*. These pieces are not very often read, for two reasons: 1) he never returns to literature with such concentration; 2) his impact on literary studies mostly comes from his later work on historical forces in modern Europe, which provide literary critics with insight into the context of literary works on which

they work. I'd be interested if anyone would want to read some of these pieces and write on them for their term paper.

Foucault's next move was to Tunisia in 1966 where he stays until autumn 1968 (dates important). During 1966 F's *The Order of Things* bizarrely becomes a best seller. This is bizarre because it's a difficult book about the "history of systems of thought," to use the title F gave his own work. We'll start discussing this soon.

Up through the *The Order of Things*, then--*MC, BC, OT*--Foucault's work is usually seen as concentrating on **knowledge**: under what conditions are there "human sciences"? *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is a methodological reflection on how he wrote those books.

F was out of the country during the events of May 68--student disturbances leading to spontaneous general strikes and overall *contestation* (a great word, meaning "we're mad as hell and not going to take it any more, so we're going to resist by not working and going to class--instead we're going to talk together on how to reformulate things around here!")

Now NOT being in Paris in May 68 became sort of a point of pride to F later, as he was in Tunisia, where things were serious. This of course is to poke fun at the sacred cow that May 68 became among the French new left, but we should remember it wasn't a political revolution even if it was culturally important. What May 68 did was three things: 1) established culture and lifestyle as important topics for struggle, since power is dispersed in all sorts of petty little stylized humiliations and infantilizations--e.g., the Sprewell case shows the treasured petty tyranny of athletic coaches and the resonance that any revolt provokes all throughout the system; 2) revealed the hierarchical investment of the PCF: by backing the electoral solution to the crisis, the PCF showed they'd rather have De Gaulle in charge than have a revolution from below, since an election would maintain the centralized power structure after which they lusted. *Somebody* must be in charge, they cried! *Somebody* must be daddy! 3) Which brings us to the last point, the delayed reaction of May 68: revealing the depths of patriarchy even in the precious heart of the new left, a revolution which sparks the MLF. While perhaps not as blatant as Stokely Carmichael's infamous "There's a place for women in SNCC: on their backs!" May 68 never quite got around to critiquing gender roles with the same intensity as other power nodes: gay posters were virtually the only ones torn down in the occupied Sorbonne, and women got to demonstrate their allegiance to the revolution by putting out for the brave barricades fighters, or at least by making coffee, arranging shelter, and typing!

Anyway, one of the reactions of the government to May 68 was the creation of Paris VIII at Vincennes. Foucault was chosen head of the philosophy department. This was disliked by the ultra-leftist students (Maoists, Trotskites, etc.), who thought of F as structuralist, vaguely technocratic and maybe even Gaullist (he did work on the Fouchet reforms, *against* which the 68 students struggled)--all charges that were hurled at F by Sartre, Beauvoir and their crowd at *Les temps modernes* in reaction to *The Order of Things*.) Nonetheless, F became an ultra-leftist for several years, until say 1973. He didn't publish much during this period, but took part in ground level work publicizing prison conditions (not speaking the "truth" of the situation as a "general intellectual"--his code word for Sartre--but using his prestige to provide a venue in which the marginalized voices of prisoners and others with local knowledge could be heard) as well protesting via demonstration, petition, and open letters the events of the day such as police brutality toward journalists and immigrants.

In 1969, F's life changed forever with his election to the College de France. Now, at 43, he was a member for life of the most prestigious academic institution in France, with the obligation only to hold a short series of public lectures on works in progress. His course *resumes* are now published and show him setting up the work of the 70s and 80s.

In the early 70s he starts travelling again (he had visited Brazil in the 60s), taking lecture tours of the US and Japan. He would return often to the States in the 70s and 80s, establishing his "beachheads" in NYC and California, leaving Yale to Derrida (who by the 90s has now established his own circuit in NYC and UC Irvine).

In 1975 and 76 he publishes his two most well-known books, *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality*, volume 1. These will be the main focus of the course, in which F elaborates his notion of

modern, dispersed, "bio-power." Roughly speaking, then, we could say that May 68 sparked F's ultra-left political turn and showed him how to think dispersed **power**: the second heading in the usual tripartition of F's work.

In the mid 70s F's political orientation changes to a concern with human rights and a renewed critique of totalitarian structures in the Communist bloc. In a way, he's close to the *nouveaux philosophes* in this reorientation, though of course many times a greater thinker. In this time he protests the Franco regime, supports the Soviet dissidents and later the Solidarity movement in Poland.

In addition to political work such as driving across Europe with medical supplies for Poland, he tries his hand at journalism, writing some pieces on the Iranian revolution in which he is caught up in the novelty of this new political revolution, neither left or right, marxist or capitalist. They've provided ammo for his critics, but they're nothing out of the ordinary for that time--lots of people didn't know what to make of Iran--and he certainly doesn't hesitate to criticize the Khomeini regime when its murderous nature becomes apparent.

In the late 70s and early 80s F stalls on completing the other planned volumes of *History of Sexuality*. He does however give lots of interviews, discussing gay practice for the first time. His intellectual stalemate is resolved as he changes his investigation from power/knowledge to that of "subjectivation": the ways we become aware of and able to work on ourselves. Hence the third heading of his work: investigating the historical practices of making a **subject**.

Finally, in late 83 and early 84, knowing he is dying, he is thus able to complete volumes 2 and 3 of *History of Sexuality*, the first reviews of which he is able to read in the hospital before his death on 25 June 1984.

A quick grid of F's work, based on his last self-assessment:

<i>Method</i>	<i>Theme</i>
Archaeology of knowledge	(<i>episteme</i> = the "historical <i>a priori</i> " governing scientific discourse)
Genealogy of power/knowledge	(<i>dispositif</i> = articulation of discursive and non- discursive practices)
Problematization of subjectivizing practices	(<i>problematic</i> = establishing a subject/object of truth)