

A Last Interview with French Philosopher Michel Foucault



BY JAMIN RASKIN

WHEN FRENCH PHILOSOPHER-HISTORIAN Michel Foucault died three weeks ago, he bequeathed to this world a precious intellectual legacy, a gift we are far too likely to lose in the nap-time nursery school of American philosophy. An intense, dazzling thinker whose shining bald head had become a symbol of modern structuralist inquiry and a figure as instantly recognizable in France as the Eiffel Tower, Foucault had achieved at his death the same stature as other towering intellectuals in French history, such as Voltaire, Montesquie, Diderot, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Foucault's reputation of brilliance rested on his seminal application of the structuralist method of social concepts such as health, sickness, normality, deviance, chastity, promiscuity, knowledge, and power. Foucault took a flashlight to the darkest corners of Western civilization.

The world is brighter because of him.

In all things, Foucault wanted to show that what we often taken to be the natural order of things in fact is the culmination of a long process of human construction. That is why the French have taken to calling his work "deconstruction"—the systematic taking apart of reality to uncover the historical genesis of this or that institution or idea or practice. Foucault described the nature of his project in the fascinating and overlooked book, *The Birth of the Clinic*, in which he wrote: "In the last years of the 18th century, European culture outlined a structure that has not yet been unraveled; we are only just beginning to disentangle a few of the threads, which are still so unknown to us that we immediately assume them to be either marvelously new or absolutely archaic, whereas for two hundred years they have constituted the dark, but firm web of our experience." As a Professor of History and Systems of Thought at the College de France, Foucault tried to illuminate the Western thought structures—reductionist, categorical, functionalist—that frame discourse and action in our times.

In the project of philosophical and historical deconstruction, Foucault enjoyed the good fortune of being joined by a group of original French thinkers who took the torch of structuralism and ran with it back to their own individual fields of inquiry. Claude Levi-Strauss reshaped the world of anthropology by showing that myth, symbol, and ritual are not the

icing of civilizations, but rather the cake itself. The exquisitely fluent Roland Barthes brought perhaps the most beautiful eye of the 20th century to French culture and literature, generating poetic essays on subjects as diverse as Greta Garbo's face, the Eiffel Tower, Fourier, Flaubert, keeping a journal, and public wrestling matches. And Jacques Derrida, whose influence is soaring in France, realigned the critical interpretation of literature by charging readers with the task of seeing through the "transparency" of words to decode the radical meaning of the text. While thinkers in other parts of the world are concerned with system-building, the French structuralists are taking systems apart. With existentialism, another product made in France, and logical positivism, whose roots are British, structuralism has figured as one of the two or three most influential philosophical movements in Europe since World War II.

It was Foucault's special role in this movement to examine the intimate relationship of knowledge and power in our world. A graduate of the Sorbonne who received his Licence de Philosophie in 1948, he began by disassembling the modern notion of insanity, asserting in *Madness and Civilization* (1961) that our concepts of mental illness reflect through the ages not the actual dispositions of the insane, but the kinds of behavior we want to impose on the rest of society. In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), which he called "an archaeology of medical perception," Foucault showed through historical illustrations that it is impossible to separate our medical understandings and techniques from our ways of looking at the world: "Alone, the gaze dominates the entire field of possible knowledge..." he wrote. In the opaque *The Order of Things* (1970), which was an "archaeology of human sciences," Foucault appointed himself the parallel task of arguing that lines are drawn in the sciences not on the basis of an "objective reality," but as a mirror of the mental categories that dominate social thought at any one time. Then, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and his great, incomplete multi-volume study, *History of Sexuality*, Foucault elaborated his central thesis that "power and knowledge directly imply one another," that the hegemony of ideas transpires to social power and vice versa.

At the very heart of this equation lies Foucault's most potent contribution to the thought of the 20th century, an age that

witnessed the consolidation of institutional power over the individual. Here is his novel and arresting insight: *that the idea of an intellectual discipline doubles as, and reinforces, the fact of social discipline. As knowledge increases, so does the power of knowledge-controlling institutions over the citizen.* When Foucault uses the French word "clinique," it is no accident that it means both the discipline of clinical medicine and a type of hospital; every subset of knowledge generates its own power relationships and institutional arrangements. The academic disciplines of medicine or political science or art are not only ways to rope off subjects of inquiry; they are also methods of disciplining the mind and training social thought. This metaphor is so pivotal to Foucault's work that at least one critical observer, Michael Walzer at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, has suggested that Foucault's entire system of thought may in fact rest on the power of "a pun."

Yet the history of the 20th century cries out for Foucault's analysis of *discipline* and *disciplines*. The enclosure of science from democracy has unleashed painful consequences from Los Alamos to Hiroshima to Three Mile Island, and the radical separation of technology and morals continues to court disaster in machine society. The failure to recognize the relationship of knowledge to power means that every increment of knowledge will add one more rock to the pyramid of domination.

But the work of Foucault *et al* invites us to believe that knowledge can have a liberating influence in place of a repressive one. Indeed, Foucault moved in his life to break down the walls between disciplines so we could unearth and recover the basic epistemological choices that are in essence moral choices as well. In this sense, Foucault was travelling at the end of his life from *deconstruction* to *reconstruction*, from the unravelling of old understandings that box people in, to the creation of forms of knowledge and belief that liberate.

I went to see Foucault on a dark, shadowy morning late in March, the kind of day that makes Paris a melancholy and very beautiful place. Foucault had just finished delivering a spellbinding lecture on Greek philosophy to an overflow class at the College de France, and had agreed to see a number of students afterwards. I waited my turn and then spoke to Foucault in his small upstairs office which was cluttered with books and journals from all over

the world. Foucault was animated and warm; his normally severe expression gave way to a splendid openness. This 10-minute conversation—which I have reconstructed to the best of my ability from notes, as Foucault did not want to be taped—is the last interview Foucault granted to a foreigner, and perhaps to any interlocutor at all.

As Foucault himself once wrote, "it is death that fixes the stone that we can touch, the return of time, the fine, innocent earth beneath the grass of words." Michel Foucault has returned to the earth, but his words remain.

CP: Monsieur Foucault, you are very kind to consent to an interview.

MF: In general, this is not something I like to do. There are translation* problems and cultural problems, and of course problems of time. But you are a student and I pass my life with students. I gave an interview, in any case, to *Vanity Fair*, and if I am right, they asked me about two subjects: sex and politics. You Americans are not much interested in philosophy (laughter)... They asked me about Mitterand. Did you see it?

CP: No, I'm sorry. What did you say?

MF: I told them that philosophers should maintain a certain critical distance from politicians. It is known that corruption is often the result of intellectuals serving politicians—very often. I have not wanted to form a part of that very long historical process. Not that they would have me in any case...

CP: And what do you think of Mitterand?

MF: In the absence of anything better, I shall support the program of the Socialists. I recall something (Roland) Barthes once said about having political opinions "lightly held." Politics should not subsume your whole life as if you were a hot rabbit.

CP: You must mean, then, politics in the sense of electoral politics since much of your work, especially *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, tries to show that politics appears everywhere, doesn't it?

MF: Exactly. Philosophers do not have to be engaged in the European Parliamentary elections or on the front page of *Le Monde* every day to exercise an influence. One does not have to be seen at the opera with famous personages. We should be aiding the students, workers, and everyone in the experiment of discovering meaning in everyday life. Philosophers, or perhaps I should say myself—I want to turn the gaze of the time. Change the perspective. It's difficult enough with so much ambiguity in the world; I don't need to pass my time with politicians.

CP: You speak with some disapproval about the American appetite for sex, and yet you have written hundreds of pages about sexuality. One might say that this is one more example of French elitism...

MF: The type of sex they want to know about is the vulgar type which sells their magazines and has nothing to do with the poetic sensibility, sensuality, the appreciation of bodily love, the family of emotions and attitudes one can follow from Greek times to the Victorian era, where interest in sexuality reached dramatic levels.

CP: You think sex is bad today.

MF: Sex is boring today. I cannot even write about it anymore. I will give you a simple example. In early Greek times, one of the great characteristics of healthy sexuality was the occasional denial of satisfaction and desire. To see a beautiful young person and then not to touch him was a supreme virtue. This is a kind of aesthetic we do not value today. We do not comprehend denial.

CP: Do you think it is possible to create a social situation where beautiful aesthetic values and political themes concerning justice are honored?

MF: Sometimes I fear that the young are so impressed with change and revolution, with the instrumental nature of political ideology, that they ignore what's going on in the present. Do not disquiet yourself about change in the future. You are in the face of responsibility enough with the crises in all of the institutions and structures where you study or eat or work. Therefore, I say study history, not the future. Study history to prepare for the future. One ought to read history into the artifacts and the news of the moment. Then the domains of past and present unite.

CP: That is what you mean when you use the word "archaeology" in the curious way you have used it.

CP: I mean that everything possesses an interior history, a history of both the physical and spiritual type. Political, too, if you please. But I am afraid now, my friend, that our time is up. There is someone at the door. There is always someone at the door.

CP: May I ask a final question? It's the one I wanted most to ask. Do the structuralists have a way to go from the interpretation and unlocking of events and ideas to the remaking, the reconstruction of the world?

MF: I can suggest one thing. Search for what is good and strong and beautiful in your society and elaborate from there. Push outward. Always create from what you already have. Then you will know what to do.