



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**

DEPARTMENT FOR  
CONTINUING EDUCATION

# Philosophy of History

Week 10: Foucault

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# Foucault's main works

- *Madness and Civilization* [*Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*] (1961)
- *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1963)
- *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966)
- *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969)
- *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975)
- *The History of Sexuality* (three vols, 1976, 1984)

- ‘Foucault’s histories aim to show the contingency – and hence surpassability – of what history has given us. Intolerable practices and institutions present themselves as having no alternative: How could we do anything except set up asylums to treat the mentally ill? [etc ...] Foucault’s histories aim to remove this air of necessity by showing that the past ordered things quite differently and that the processes leading to our present practices and institutions were by no mean inevitable.’ (Gary Gutting)

# Foucault's phases

- 1960s – *archaeologies*;
  - early-mid 1970s – *genealogies*;
  - late 1970s onwards – *problematizations*.
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- Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem
  - ‘epistemic [or epistemological] break’
  - historicism

# ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’

- ‘[the task of genealogy] is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes.’ (§3¶3/374)

- ‘[the] heritage [of the past in the present] [...] is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath.’ (§394/374)

# Foucault on Nietzsche

- ‘Nietzsche’s criticism, beginning with the second of the *Untimely Meditations*, always questioned the form of history that reintroduces (and always assumes) a suprahistorical perspective: a history whose function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself.’ (§5¶1/379)

- ‘The historical sense [i.e. genealogy] gives rise to three uses that oppose and correspond to oppose the three Platonic modalities of history. The first is parodic, directed against reality and opposes the theme of history as reminiscence or recognition; the second is dissociative, directed against identity, and opposes history as continuity or representative of a tradition; the third is sacrificial, directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge.’ (§7¶1/385)

# Foucault on the 'three uses'

1. Parody, as opposed to the monumental use of history, with its focus on the 'great men' of history.
2. Dissociation, as opposed to the antiquarian use of history, with its insistence on continuity and preservation.
3. Sacrifice, as opposed to the critical use of history.

# vs the monumental

- ‘the parodic double of what the second of the *Untimely Meditations* called “monumental history”’ (§7¶2/385)
- ‘Genealogy is history in the form of a concerted carnival’ (§7¶2/386)
- Cf. *Beyond Good and Evil*, §223 (Course Pack, p. 22)

# vs the monumental

- ‘Historians supplied the [French] Revolution with Roman prototypes [...] The good historian, the genealogist [...] will push the masquerade to its limit and prepare the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing. No longer the identification of our faint individuality with the solid identities of the past, but our ‘unrealization’ through the excessive choice of identities.’ (§7¶2/385-6)

# vs the antiquarian

- ‘the systematic dissociation of our identity’  
(§7¶3/386)
- But cf. *Beyond Good and Evil*, §220 (Course Pack, p. 21)

# vs the critical

- questioning the value of truth
- ‘Nietzsche [...] reproached critical history for sacrificing the very movement of life to the exclusive concern for truth’ (§7¶5/388)
- But cf. *Uses and Disadvantages...*, §3¶5.

- ‘In a sense, genealogy returns to the three modalities of history that Nietzsche recognized in 1874. It returns to them in spite of objections that Nietzsche raised in the name of the affirmative and creative powers of life.’ (§7¶6/389)

# *The Order of Things*

- ‘the end of man’
- ‘As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.’

# *The Order of Things*

- ‘And yet the impression of fulfilment and of end, the muffled feeling that carries and animates our thought, and perhaps lulls it to sleep with the facility of its promises, and makes us believe that something new is about to begin, something we glimpse only as a thin line of light low on the horizon – that feeling and that impression are perhaps not ill founded.’

- ‘Hölderlin, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx [...] all felt this certainty that in them a thought and perhaps a culture were coming to a close, and that [...] another was approaching – in the dim light of dawn, in the brilliance of noon, or in the dissension of the falling day.’
- ‘to establish for man a stable sojourn upon this earth’
- ‘man [is to] be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea’
- eschatology

- ‘one of the most harmful habits [...] in modern thought [...] the analysis of the present as being precisely, in history, a moment of rupture, or of high point, or of completion, or of a returning dawn, and so on. The solemnity with which everyone who engages in philosophical discourse reflects on his own time strikes me as a flaw. I can say this all the more firmly, since it is something I have done myself; and since, in someone like Nietzsche, we find this incessantly or, at least, insistently

- [...] enough. I think we should have the modesty to say to ourselves that, on the one hand, the time we live in is not *the* unique or fundamental or irruptive point in history where everything is completed and begun again. We must also have the modesty to say, on the other hand, that – even without this solemnity – the time we live in is very interesting; it needs to be analyzed and broken down [...] the function of any diagnosis concerning what today is [...] does not consist

- in a simple characterization of what we are, but, instead – by following lines of fragility in the present – in managing to grasp why and how that which is might no longer be that which is. In this sense, any description must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, that is, of possible transformation.’

(1983 interview with Foucault [‘Structuralism and Post-structuralism’])