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# From Discourse to *Dispositif*:

## Michel Foucault's Two Histories

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### **Foucault and the Methodology of Social Science**

The French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault is today one of the most often-cited names in the social and human sciences. He is frequently described as a poststructuralist and mentioned as one of the fathers of postmodernist thinking in the social sciences. He was also a theorist of power, prison, body and sexuality, and several anthologies discuss his writings from the perspective of education, religion or ethics. Foucault also had a special theory of discourse, which is mentioned frequently in social scientific research.

For historians Foucault's popularity grew in the 1990s. This development was especially relevant for one branch of historical research, the new cultural history, which has become influential in the United States, and where it has been made widely known by two theoretical anthologies edited by Lynn Hunt.<sup>1</sup> Foucault's impact upon the new cultural history is largely due to the seminal works from the later period of his career:

1. *New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1989), *Beyond the Cultural Turn. New Direction in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1999).

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*Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1976).<sup>2</sup>

I would argue that a problem lies in the way Foucault's texts were introduced in the mid to late 1980s. The problem is that most of the methodological work in the social sciences and cultural studies treats Foucault's method primarily as discourse analysis. This is, however, an excessively narrow view, especially when we take into account not just his methodological texts, but also his empirical works and in particular *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. This failure holds the danger of forgetting what was most original and interesting in Foucault's thinking. In several of his more popular empirical studies Foucault was interested in a much wider phenomenon than discourse. He also studied practices and an abstraction that he called *dispositifs*, by which he meant historically specific totalities of discourses and practices. In English translations of Foucault's works *dispositifs* translated using various terms (apparatus, deployment, construct, alignment, positivities, etc.) which together make the central importance of the concept unnecessarily difficult to detect.<sup>3</sup> Seeing Foucault only as a discourse theorist also gives the new cultural history an excessively narrow view of culture. This perhaps helps to explain why it has not led to the intellectual breakthrough expected in the late 1980s.<sup>4</sup>

### The Textbook Image of Foucault

Seeing Foucault as essentially a theorist of discourse has led social scientists writing on his work to overlook or at least distort his opinions on many important theoretical issues. The most extreme example of misrepresenting Foucault's thinking is to describe him as supporting the

2. I use throughout this article the English titles of Foucault's translated works. Readers are reminded, however, that *Madness and Civilization* is not translated from Foucault's dissertation published in 1961, but from a later condensed version.

3. This is also mentioned by David Halphen in his *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York, 1995), pp. 41, 188-89 and 201. In a recent translation of Foucault's "Society Must Be Defended," *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York, 2003), *dispositif* is rendered as "the grid of intelligibility."

4. On the pessimistic accounts of the merits of new cultural history see, for instance, the recent articles of William Sewell and Geoff Eley. William H. Sewell Jr., "Whatever Happened to the 'Social' in Social History" in *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretative Social Science*, ed. Joan W. Scott and Debra Keater (Princeton, 2001), pp. 209-26; Geoff Eley, "Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later" in *The Historical Turn in the Human Sciences*, ed. Terrence J. McDonald (Ann Arbor, 1996), pp. 193-244.

strong version of social constructivism. This misrepresentation often occurs in works regarded as reliable textbooks. For instance, C. G. Prado in his *Starting with Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy* claims that according to Foucault "... madness is an invention..." and suggests that the main emphasis of Foucault's argument is that "'the subject' is a product of discourse rather than being prior to discourse." He further writes that Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* informs us "... how prisoners came to be talked about and treated, and in doing so it lays out how a subject was manufactured."<sup>5</sup> A similar interpretation can be found in Rudi Visker's introduction to Foucault. Visker claims that the originality of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* lies in the fact that, contrary to the so called repression hypothesis of Western sexuality, "... he had to analyze sexuality as discourse, i. e. as something which comes into being in and through discourse and does not precede it."<sup>6</sup>

The dominant interpretation from the social sciences has influenced the new cultural history. As an example we can examine the methodological anthology *New Cultural History* (1989) and Patricia O'Brien's article which treats Foucault as a cultural theorist with path-breaking new insights. According to O'Brien, Foucault claims that the world consists of nothing but discourses. She thinks this view of the world frees the cultural theorist from the reductionist thinking that rendered both social history and Marxism uninteresting. "The state, the body, society, sex, the soul, the economy are not stable objects, they are discourses."<sup>7</sup>

O'Brien's interpretation of Foucault's thinking is so exaggerated that the editor, Lynn Hunt, gives a word of warning in the introduction. She asks the question: If everything is discourse, so is there nothing else left at all? Loyalty prevents her from developing the inquiry into a clearer statement of disagreement with some of her younger colleagues. She is, however, clearly of another opinion, and delineates several times how discourses

5. C. G. Prado, *Starting with Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy*, second edition (Boulder, 2000), pp. 23, 57, 58.

6. Rudi Visker, *Michel Foucault. Genealogy as Critique*, trans. Chris Turner (London, 1995), p. 78.

7. Patricia O'Brien, "Michel Foucault's History of Culture" in *New Cultural History*, p. 36. In the interview "The Confession of the Flesh" (1977), a group of young scholars discussed with Foucault his *The History of Sexuality*. One of them, J.-A. Miller, refused to believe that institutions like hospitals can consist of nothing else but discourses. Foucault, in the end, had to surrender to this stubborn argument in order to be able to continue with the interview! See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton, 1980), pp. 197-98.

affect the world we live in, rather than create it.<sup>8</sup> Timidity in the face of the strong formulation of social constructivism is also present in the more recent theoretical anthology *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (1999), edited by Lynn Hunt and Victoria Bonnell. In their introduction the editors describe the intellectual climate in which the new cultural history was born:

Following the lead of Foucault and Derrida, poststructuralists and postmodernists insisted that shared discourses (or cultures) so utterly permeate our perception of reality as to make any supposed scientific explanation of social life simply an exercise in collective fictionalization or mythmaking: we can only elaborate on our presuppositions, in this view; we cannot arrive at any objective truth. . . . [T]he cultural turn threatened to efface all reference to social context or causes and offered no particular standard of judgment to replace the seemingly more rigorous and systematic approaches that had predominated during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

This is, of course, an apt description of the intellectual climate that prevailed in many Western universities during the 1980s. To link the name of Michel Foucault (side by side with his worst philosophical enemy, Jacques Derrida!) to this development is questionable. Can we harness his intellectual authority to justify the pessimistic interpretation of the so-called linguistic turn? As a preliminary answer to this question I would cite from the closing arguments of Foucault's lectures given in 1983 at the University of California and published recently as *Fearless Speech*. Here Foucault explains the methodological principles of his approach to history, which he had started to call problematization in the early 1980s:

Some people have interpreted this type of analysis as a form of 'historical idealism', but I think that such an analysis is completely different. For when I say I am studying the 'problematization' of madness, crime, or sexuality, it is not a way of denying the reality of such phenomena. On the contrary, I have tried to show that it was precisely some real existent in the world, which was the target of social regulation at a given moment. The question I raise is this one: How and why were very different things in the world gathered together, characterized, analyzed, and treated as, for example,

8. Lynn Hunt: "Introduction: History, Culture, and Text" in *New Cultural History*, pp. 10 and 17.

9. Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt: "Introduction" in *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, pp. 3 and 9.

'mental illness'? . . . The problematization is an 'answer' to a concrete situation which is real.<sup>10</sup>

It is very difficult to reconcile this declaration of intent with later interpretations of Foucault's thinking. The purpose of this article is to show that Foucault "the social historian," who wrote *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, cannot be read as an extreme advocate of social constructivism. This view, widely spread in the 1980s and 1990s, ignores the nonsymbolic part of reality, and would be untruthful even if we considered Foucault only as a discourse theorist. The other side of the problem is that Foucault's work, both theoretical and empirical, contained ideas which went considerably further than discourse theory.

### Foucault's Approaches to Historical Study

For our purposes, Foucault's works can be roughly divided into two parts. The first, consisting of "social historical" works, includes *Madness and Civilization* (1961), the *Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84). The second, which appeared during the 1960s and early 1970s, concerns the history of science, and includes *The Order of Things* (1966), *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *The Order of Discourse* (1970). The two latter works describe the method Foucault used for the history of ideas and his history of science.

This division of Foucault's works does not perhaps appear as sophisticated as the more common division into an earlier period identified with the archaeology of science, and a later period concerned with the genealogy of power. I will, however, show that my characterization of the main building blocks of Foucault's works correspond closely to his own ideas on what he had accomplished. Furthermore, my approach gives due

10. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, 2001), pp. 171-72. One can also consult Foucault's "My Body, This Paper, This Fire"—an answer to Derrida's critique of *Madness and Civilization*—to confirm his reaction to the thesis that the world consists only of discourses. Michel Foucault, *Power. The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion (New York, 2000), p. 416. Also a late interview conducted in 1984 is instructive: "Problematization doesn't mean the representation of a pre-existing object, nor the creation through discourse of an object that doesn't exist. It is a set of discursive and non-discursive practices that makes something enter into the play of truth and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether under the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, or political analysis, etc...)." Michel Foucault, "The Concern for Truth" in Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York, 1988), p. 257. I have corrected the English translation with the help of Robert Castel, "'Problematization' as a Mode of Reading History" in *Foucault and the Writing of History*, ed. Jan Goldstein (Oxford, 1994), p. 250.

attention to parts other than simply the discourse analysis of Foucault's works and is in that way more comprehensive than the more conventional treatment. The usual method of dividing Foucault's work is also problematic for several other reasons. It tends to give priority to the object of research. Furthermore, it does not give attention to the label Foucault applied to his approach in the 1980s, that of problematization. In addition, it is quite difficult to describe two early works, *Madness and Civilization* and *The Birth of the Clinic*, as merely examples of the archaeology of knowledge. This defines them far too narrowly."

Foucault gave one of his first methodological statements in his candidacy proposal for the College de France.<sup>12</sup> He opened the presentation by stating the issue investigated in *Madness and Civilization*: what was known about madness in a certain period of history? He then divided the question into more specific parts by cataloguing his research data. First, he mentioned medical theories, general fears and prejudices, theatre and literature as sources for definitions of madness. He further noted that all this was not enough. One could not remain in the sphere of sources used in the ordinary history of ideas. He was also interested in knowing how madness was detected, how a person defined as mad was separated from others and moved outside the community into institutions and given treatment, as well as what kind of institutions these were, and who the authorities were who decided on these procedures and on what grounds. In short, what kinds of institutions and practices were involved in producing madness? For this purpose it was necessary to investigate archives and the material contained in them, such as official orders, statutes, hospital and prison records, court proceedings and similar material. "... I undertook the analysis of a knowledge whose visible body is not theoretical or scientific discourse, nor literature either, but a regulated, everyday practice."<sup>13</sup>

11. Beatrice Han divides Foucault's career into three periods, archaeology (1963-75), genealogy (1975-84), and the history of subjectivity (1984). This periodization leaves Foucault's important dissertation on madness outside any classification. The other problem is that the classification of periods is not coherent, and the third period is based on the subject of research while the two earlier periods are based on methodology. Furthermore, Han's classification cannot take into account the fact that Foucault did not abandon archaeology when adopting genealogy. See Beatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project. Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, trans. Edward Pile (Stanford, 2002), p. xiii.

12. Michel Foucault, "Candidacy Presentation: College de France, 1969" in Michel Foucault, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow. (London, 1997), pp. 5-10.

13. Michel Foucault, "Candidacy Presentation: College de France, 1969," p. 6.

This is how Foucault presented himself in an official context as a researcher. The presentation continued in an interesting fashion, as he defined his recent work as an exception to his main area of interest. Foucault stated that in *The Order of Things* (1966) he experimentally left "the whole practical and institutional side but without giving up the idea of going back to it one day.. ." In an interview two years earlier (1967) he had also stated:

There is nothing to be gained from describing this autonomous layer of discourses unless one can relate it to other layers, practices, institutions, social relations, political relations, and so on. It is that relationship which has always intrigued me, and in *Histoire de la folie* [*Madness and Civilization*] and *Naissance de la clinique* [*The Birth of the Clinic*], I tried to define the relation between these different domains.<sup>15</sup>

These statements of intent from the late 1960s were not isolated incidents. Ten years later, in a well-known interview called "Questions of Method," he again explained the main characteristics of his approach. Here he compared *Madness and Civilization* (1961) with *Discipline and Punish* (1975), highlighting how the study of practices was paramount in both works:

In this piece of research on the prisons, as in my other earlier work, the target of analysis wasn't 'institutions', 'theories', or 'ideology' but *practices* [italics in the original] — with the aim of grasping the conditions that make these acceptable at a given moment; the hypothesis being that these types of practice are not just governed by institutions, prescribed by ideologies, guided by pragmatic circumstances — whatever role these elements may actually play — but, up to a point, possess their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence, and 'reason'. It is a question of analysing a 'regime of practices'—practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and

14. Ibid.

15. Michel Foucault, "On the Ways of Writing History" in Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol 2, ed. James D. Faubion and Paul Rabinow (New York, 1998), pp. 284-85.



reasons given, the planned and the taken-for-granted meet and interconnect.<sup>16</sup>

The characterization of Foucault's approach as consisting of two different modes, one resembling social history and the other intellectual history, was not just accidental, and Foucault repeated the point time after time throughout his career. An example worth citing comes from the late 1970s, when, in a book-long interview conducted by the Italian journalist Duccio Trombadori and originally published in 1981, Foucault spoke of his "books of explorations" and "books of method." Of the latter type he mentioned *The Order of Things* (1966) as the prime example.<sup>17</sup> Four years later, in 1982 in an interview conducted by Rux Martin, he gave a similar description of his writings as described in the candidacy presentation in 1969:

I have written two kinds of books. One, *The Order of Things*, is concerned only with scientific thought; the other, *Discipline and Punish*, is concerned with social principles and institutions. History of science doesn't develop in the same way as social sensibility. In order to be recognized as scientific discourse, thought must obey certain criteria. In *Discipline and Punish*, texts, practices, and people struggle against each other.<sup>18</sup>

### What Is Meant by *Dispositif*?

As mentioned above, historians, including new cultural historians, place their highest value on Foucault's "social historical" works, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. These are often given as examples or sources of inspiration. They are, however, more difficult than Foucault's works in the field of intellectual history, which include several comprehensive texts where his method is carefully explained, texts such as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, or his inaugural lecture at the College

16. Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method" in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (London, 1991), p. 75. See also Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method" in Michel Foucault, *Power: The Essential Works of Foucault*, p. 225.

17. Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York, 1991), pp. 96-101.

18. Rux Martin, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault" in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (London, 1988), p. 14.

de France, *The Order of Discourse*. This side of Foucault's work is typically given ample attention in textbooks and introductions to his thought. Foucault's methodology is usually called discourse analysis, and the terms often applied to his work—the archaeology of knowledge and the genealogy of power — belong to this area. Discourse analysis is Foucault's contribution to the repertoire of intellectual history and does not, as such, constitute any problem.

On the other hand, Foucault's other approach, his "social history" and the method used when researching the history of madness, prison or western sexuality, is not so well covered. Foucault himself wrote only one short article explaining his methodology in *Discipline and Punish*. Otherwise, his opinions have to be collected, in the way I have indicated above, by combing through his interviews and articles scattered in several publications. In *Madness and Civilization*, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault's seminal social historical texts, one can detect a coherent metanarrative. The separation of mentally ill patients in institutions, a more liberal ideology of punishment for crimes, or the sexual liberation of the 1960s are strong and independent discourses. They cannot, however, be easily reduced to what had happened or was done. There were, indeed, important practices not included in these discourses and which could contradict them. Allowing for this discrepancy was important for Foucault. Furthermore, without the relativization of discourses to practices he would not have achieved the results that made his works original and exciting in the first place.

Foucault explained only in a fragmentary fashion what he thought about the approach to history that went beyond the history of science. Here and there in his smaller articles and interviews, however, we find statements which usually center upon the concept of *dispositif*, and which involve a more comprehensive object of study than either discourses or systems of thought. We can find statements making this point from the entire range of his career spanning from the 1960s to the early 1980s. This indicates that the concept of the *dispositif* did not simply occur to him at a certain moment, but was an idea central to explicating his purposes throughout his career. The best known and most often cited collection of articles and interviews, *Power/Knowledge* (1980), edited by Colin Gordon, includes an interview from 1977 in which Foucault gave an exceptionally detailed definition of what he meant by the *dispositif*. In this translation it is translated as *apparatus*:

What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific

statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions — in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. Thus, a particular discourse can figure at one time as a programme of an institution, and at another it can function as a means of justifying or masking a practice which itself remains silent, or as a secondary re-interpretation of this practice, opening out for it a new field of rationality. In short, between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of positions and modifications of function which can also vary very widely. Thirdly, I understand by the term 'apparatus' a sort of — shall we say — formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. This may have been, for example, the assimilation of a floating population found to be burdensome for an essentially mercantilist economy: there was a strategic imperative acting here as the matrix for an apparatus which gradually undertook the control or subjection of madness, mental illness and neurosis.<sup>19</sup>

This passage makes clear that Foucault was as interested in the nondiscursive as the discursive elements of culture. He did not even arrive at the thought that they would in some way be the same, as some Foucault experts have claimed. Especially important to notice is that he did not define nondiscursive as part of the discursive domain, as Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra have interpreted his ideas about the *dispositif*.<sup>20</sup> A second interesting aspect of Foucault's definition of the term is that he emphasized changing historical relationships, which were not constant or preordained. Historical specificity remains a central element in Foucault's

19. Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh" in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, pp. 194-95. The famous passage in *The History of Sexuality* denying the extreme constructivist interpretation of his work can also be read in support of this definition of the *dispositif* (translated as *deployment* at this time). Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London, 1979), pp. 151-52.

20. Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts" in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca, 1982), p. 62; Hayden White, "Foucault's Discourse: The Historiography of Anti-Humanism" in Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), p. 105.

methodological thinking. Especially important in this regard is the relationship between discursive and nondiscursive domains. Their connection is not fixed, but can take different forms. For that reason there can be no specific theories about this relationship, nor of the relationship between two successive *dispositifs*. Thirdly, the importance of the specific context is illustrated by describing *dispositifs* as functional parts of larger situations. This contextualization is, although in quite general fashion, a way of stressing the historical specificity of the phenomenon under study.

In the 1960s and early 1970s Foucault often used the expression "discursive practices." They belong, however, to the domain of discourses and do not concern the nondiscursive sphere.<sup>21</sup> The idea that discursive practices in some way could also include nondiscursive phenomena, that the nondiscursive were at the last instant discursive, is not possible. In the 1980s Foucault frequently used the expression "problematization," apparently referring to the political relevance of a *dispositif*.

It is true that my attitude isn't a result of the form of critique that claims to be a methodical examination in order to reject all possible solutions except for the one valid one. It is more on the order of 'problematization' — which is to say, the development of a domain of acts, practices, and thoughts that seem to me to pose problems for politics.<sup>22</sup>

Another area illustrating the methodological role of *dispositifs* is to be found in the much appreciated monographs Foucault published in the 1970s. The centrality of *dispositifs* is clearly seen in both *Discipline and Punishment* (1975) and in *The History of Sexuality* (1976). The historical succession of two major *dispositifs* are given a highly dramatic description at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault gives examples of punishment by torture and solitary confinement. Later in the book he writes about the "carceral system" and provides the following definition: it "combines in a single figure discourses and architectures, coercive regulations and scientific propositions, real social effects and invincible Utopias, programmes for correcting delinquents and mechanisms that reinforce delinquency."<sup>23</sup> Again, it is laid out clearly that the penal

21. See, for instance, Michel Foucault, "The Will to Knowledge" in Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, pp. 11-12.

22. Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics and Problematizations: An Interview," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), p. 384.

23. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, 1991), p. 271.

apparatus is not just a bundle of discourses or an illusion created by them, but something more heterogeneous and tangible.

In *The History of Sexuality* the concept of *dispositif* has an even more visible organizing role, although the English translation, which gives several unhelpful interpretations of this important word (for instance, deployment and construct) makes the reading of this text extremely difficult. The topic of the book is to analyze the change between two *dispositifs* (deployments), the movement from the *dispositif of alliance* ("a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions") to the *dispositif of sexuality*.<sup>24</sup>

The two systems can be contrasted term by term. The deployment of alliance is built around a system of rules defining the permitted and the forbidden, the licit and the illicit, whereas the deployment of sexuality operates according to mobile, polymorphous, and contingent techniques of power. The deployment of alliance has as one of its chief objectives to reproduce the interplay of relations and maintain the law that governs them; the deployment of sexuality, on the other hand, engenders a continual extension of areas and forms of control. For the first, what is pertinent is the link between partners and definite statutes; the second is concerned with the sensations of the body, the quality of pleasures, and the nature of impressions, however tenuous or imperceptible these may be. Lastly, if the deployment of alliance is firmly tied to the economy due to the role it can play in the transmission or circulation of wealth, the deployment of sexuality is linked to the economy through numerous and subtle relays, the main one of which, however, is the body — the body that produces and consumes.<sup>25</sup>

Again, one should pay attention to the nature of these *dispositifs*. They consist both of discursive and nondiscursive elements, they are historical and culturally bound to a certain area or civilization, and they are answers to certain greater problems in a particular society. These examples are hopefully convincing enough to show that Foucault's approach during several periods in his career was much more comprehensive than just discourse analysis. It is, however, a disappointing fact that the overwhelming majority of introductions to Foucault's work do not mention

24. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 106.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

this larger approach. Even the concept *dispositif* is absent from the texts of most Foucault experts, or it is interpreted in a misleading manner.

### Why Take Only Half the Man?

We need to ask why the large expanse of literature of Foucault's body of work is methodologically so selective. Why is only discourse analysis highlighted while the more comprehensive idea of analysing social totalities, the *dispositif*, forgotten? Why has Foucault's contribution to intellectual history so dominated the academic world? Part of the answer rests in the attractive definitions — such as archaeology and genealogy — provided in his approach in discourse analysis.<sup>26</sup> These contributed to the history of ideas and showed a critical attitude to older approaches in the field. Foucault's alternative to the traditional history of ideas was easily grasped given his two large tracts, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *The Order of Discourse* (1970), in which he patiently explained his intentions regarding the history of science. Nevertheless, the attempt to reconcile these two methodological texts with the totality of his research has proven very difficult. One of the best examples of this is Alan Megill's suggestion that *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is just a private joke. For Megill, Foucault's book is a parodic repetition of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Foucault explained his social-historical methodology only in one often neglected text, a short article called "The Dust and the Cloud," in which he answered criticism leveled against *Discipline and Punish*.<sup>28</sup>

Foucault is not the first major thinker who is only partially understood. It is indeed instructive to compare the reception of his ideas with the fate of Max Weber's methodological ideas in the hands of Talcott Parsons and

26. For a comprehensive definition of archaeology, see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London, 1972), pp. 138-40. By genealogy Foucault understood "a form of history that can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, and so on, without having to make reference to a subject that is either transcendental in relations to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history." Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" in Michel Foucault, *Power*, p. 118.

27. Alan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 228.

28. Michel Foucault, "The Dust and the Cloud" in *French Studies in History*, vol 2, ed. Maurice Aymard and Harbans Mukha (New Delhi, 1990), pp. 323-33. Foucault defended his work against the critique of a very traditional historian which unfortunately diminished the informative value of this rare contribution.

his followers.<sup>29</sup> After Parson's translation (1930) of Weber's seminal *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the historicity of his theory about the economic role of the Protestant ethic has been rejected, and the majority of social scientists interpret Weber as if he had stated that the Protestant ethic belonged to the social reality of the twentieth century. In fact, Weber strongly denied such claims and simply intended to show that the earlier Protestant ethic was structurally a similar ethos to the prevailing capitalist spirit. Without historical specificity of concept it is impossible to understand correctly what he proposed to say in his famous essay; consequently, most of the discussions start from a misinterpretation of his thesis on the role of Protestant religiosity in the modern world. A similar trick has been played on Foucault.

The other aspect of the difficulties associated with understanding Weber and Foucault can be seen in the concept of the *dispositif*. Weber's interpretation of the concept of ethos, or spirit, was equally heterogeneous, and it has not been accepted in the way Weber intended at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Weber, ethos was an historical construct comprising both behavioural acts and intellectual attitudes and ideas. Periodically, Weber wrote, certain ideas and forms of action attach to each other and form totalities that prove long lasting and become recognized as phenomena in their own right. To him, the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism were such lifeforms. Structurally, Foucault's use of the idea of specific historical *dispositifs* is quite similar to Weber's methodological approach. It is easy to understand that both ideas are a poor fit in those social sciences designed to avoid historical specificity and create the illusion of a universality of concepts and methods. This helps to explain why Foucault's discourse analysis is accepted and his historical concept *dispositif* largely ignored.

Today, with the popularity of an exaggerated social constructivism diminishing, we are in danger of losing the fulness of Michel Foucault's achievements.<sup>30</sup> This would be a too high a price for mistakes so easily corrected. The widespread popularity of Foucault's work in the social and

29. There are several similarities in the way both these thinkers have been misunderstood in twentieth-century thought, and the historical nature of their methodologies was similar. As Geoffrey Hodgson has noted in *How Economics Forgot History: The Problem of Historical Specificity in Social Science* (London, 2001), time conceived as history is not just one variable among several similar variables in a multidimensional model of a society. One can raise and lower the level of rent or output, but time moves only in one direction. On this, see, for instance, Fernand Braudel, *On History* (Chicago, 1980), p. 49.

30. Dominick LaCapra's "Rereading Foucault's 'History of Madness'" is a promising new start with Foucault in the field of cultural studies. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Reading: Tocqueville, Foucault, French Studies* (Toronto, 2000), pp. 123-68.

human sciences has not adequately taken in account his theories and methodological thinking.<sup>31</sup> This is the imbalance that needs correction.

31. Willem Frijhoff forcefully makes this point in "Foucault Reformed by Certeau: Historical Strategies of Discipline and Everyday Tactics of Appropriation" in *Cultural History after Foucault*, ed. John Neubauer (New York, 1999), p. 87.