By Peter Määs and David Brock

For a man who has been hailed as the "Philosopher of Power" by the American sociologist Richard J. Gottfried, intellectual Michel Foucault is surprisingly unassuming. Slight in physique and gentle in voice, Foucault is in fact the figurative giant in contemporary philosophical and historical circles. His work, according to UC Berkeley professors Hübner-Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, offers "elements of a coherent and powerful means of understanding." In their recently published book on Foucault, the Berkeley professors boldly state that Foucault's work is the most important contemporary effort both to develop a method for the study of human beings and to diagnose the current situation of our society.

In his most recent book, "The History of Sexuality" (1976), Foucault investigated the origin of modern civilization's sexual practices and came up with the idea of conclusion that has been delighting his followers and baffling his critics for the better part of 20 years. Sexuality, he wrote, is an "historical formation," an artificial concoction developed as an instrument through which the prevailing power structure controls and normalizes human behavior. "We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power," he warns. Foucault asserts in his major works, with topics ranging from madness ("Madness and Civilization," 1961), to knowledge ("Archaeology of Knowledge," 1969) and prisons ("Discipline and Punish," 1975), that modern civilization has witnessed a startling increase in the number of normalizing institutions and methods of normalization, all of which are grouped together into what Foucault terms "bio-power." According to Dreyfus and Rabinow, "bio-power is the increasing ordering in all realms under the guise of improving the welfare of the individual and population." But instead of accomplishing this noble task, Foucault says that bio-power detrimentally alters human behavior and the way humans view themselves.

Foucault, who holds a chair in the History group at the Collège de France, is currently on a month-long visit to UC Berkeley as a Regents Lecturer. He delivered a public address on "The Culture of the Self" to a standing-room-only audience in Zellerbach Auditorium April 12, and will be meeting while at Berkeley with students and faculty in small, informal seminars arranged through the Department of French. Foucault paused during his hectic schedule to talk this week with the Daily Californian. What follows are excerpts from an hour-long interview held on the Berkeley campus.
The experiences people have either in socialist countries, totalitarian regimes, or in liberal systems, show that there is a huge problem which has been, I think, partly neglected from the 19th century until now: it is the problem of power and how those power relations could be managed, changed, transformed, improved.

DC: You've been criticized from the Marxist perspective for ignoring the economic aspect of the social relations. On the one hand, the economic question is the strongest and most compelling in terms of the way society is organized. The way society is organized, it is organized into classes. But the economic structure of society, to you, is not the control of power, it's control led by power.

MF: Yeah, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Maybe they are expressing something else rather than what I say, maybe they are disappointed, I don't know. Well, after all, that could be a question I would like to ask you: What are the reactions of the students to this kind of thing? You see, I have the feeling that what I don't fit with the normal studies of the students in this university.

DC: To follow up on America and your following line, your lecture at Zellerbach was very well attended, and some students were even turned away. Do you think there is anything in particular that you are saying to students which accounts for your popularity?

MF: No. You see it surprises me a lot because I'm not speaking about most of the time something rather particular. For instance, last time (at Berkeley) I spoke on the---ment about it, which people have for their personal work, much better than in France.

DC: At the College de France, where you teach, you don't have students per se.
Foucault

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MF: Well I think that we have to make a distinction. First, I think that history proves that the relation between economics and politics, or power relations, are not direct relations. They are not direct and simple. They are not direct because you can see very well that there are some economic structures which can develop under one political regime, and you find the same political regime with other economic structures, or conversely, you can find those same economic systems with other political structures and regimes.

And the second point is that are we really sure that the relations go from the economic structure to the political ones, and not to the contrary? For instance, the development of the great political administrative states at the end of the 19th century and during the 20th century is a consequence or a reaction to the economic development of capitalism? But now we know very well that the capitalist development is also an effect of this political development. So, you see you have indirect relations and you have also circular relations. So the normal Marxist schema of the infrastructures/superstructures doesn't fit. I think that's the first time I want to say — the relations are much more intricate and complicated than we most of the time would imagine.

The second point is to say is that my point is not to describe the Western societies as a whole, but what I would like to analyze is the relations between our knowledge and the power relations that are at work in our societies. And that's my problem. The economic structures are only background and I don't try to analyze them for themselves. So you see there is a methodological reason why I don't focus my attention on the economic structures, and there are also those reasons due to the facts and the history.

DC: When did you first decide to focus on power as the essential problem?

MF: Well, see I studied first philosophy and then psychiatry, and when I was working in a mental hospital I began to feel that there was in these kinds of institutions a very interesting, intricate relationship between the institution itself and the type of knowledge, the type of techniques, the type of scientific technology which was put to work in these institutions. I had the feeling, and I think that everybody could notice that, that the mental hospital is not only a place, an institutional place, where psychiatric knowledge could be applied, but that the normal hospital was the cradle for the rise of psychiatry.

So my problem was to analyze the interactions between a type of knowledge and this institution. I do not mean that this knowledge — psychiatry — has no other reason or foundations than those institutions, but I think that the rise of the development and even some of the aspects of the psychiatric science is directly linked with this social structure and this power structure.

DC: Can I ask you a question about resistance, a topic which is very hotly debated? To some people your concept of resistance is elusive in that it is difficult to grasp in contemporary terms and in terms of contemporary political institutions, what resistance is, and how perhaps resistance can successfully alter, change or overcome power.

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What's interesting in Poland now is that through very long resistance which started from the beginning or at least from the '50s against the communist regime, they are trying to build new kinds of social relations, of workers' organizations, of unions, of ideology and so on. And that's the reason why it's more interesting and I think more positive even if in the first case of Iran the revolution succeeded and in Poland it didn't yet succeed, and we don't know if it can obtain any real political success. But I think that the society in Poland has been deeply changed by what happened with those unions.

DC: For the most part, those two examples dealt with violence as a means of change or of resistance. In terms of Western Europe and the United States, most people don't seem to regard violence as a viable means for change or as a means of resistance. They are trying to go about it in other ways.

MF: Well you see in Poland there is no use of violence from the side of the resistance, and they take care not to use violence. But I agree with you, that in our countries resistance through violence has been tried, for instance in Germany and in Italy, and fortunately enough it collapsed, completely. It was a huge failure. But I am not sure that we can give a formula of the good resistance without violence and bad resistance with violence.

For instance, the black problem in the '60s has been raised in the States through means which were not non-violent. And of course maybe you can consider that the Black Panthers were a failure, but they also had some positive effects. I think anyway, violence is used, as everybody knows, by most of the political structures and institutions. And at certain moments, what else can you do than answer by violence. You don't agree?

DC: I feel that in this room my opinion isn't that important.

MF: Yes it is, yes.
DCI O.K., I would be inclined to agree with you, but the problem is that we are not in a country — perhaps not in so much in France — violence is not a clear issue. The kind of power you are exerting in Western Europe and the United States is against very overt examples of the exercise of power by various institutions. And perhaps that is a failure of power, because, as you said in your sexuality books, power has to succeed by being self-sufficient, and as far as any difficulty exists, it is the difficulty of success. And that is the difficulty of the resistance which I am curious about.

In Germany there is a certain reluctance to the government-sponsored census. There was an interesting article in the Washington Post which referred to some of the people in the villages in knowledge of power and therefore opposing the census. As the Post says that now the people have gone outside the villages and become more vocal in their protests. The Post says that the politicians there are limited to their trust and that the whole structure of public authority sometimes looks to them as an adversary. This is the kind of peaceful non-violent resistance that can be used in altering power, overcoming it or reducing it? MF: It cannot be the single one. This one may be important. Sometimes there is a huge resistance against these things. If there is a tendency to struggle for something that is not so simple, I think that the Christian attitude has certainly contributed to this problem. But I'm not sure it is the most important thing to struggle about, nowadays. The most important thing is, in fact, the decision concerning either economic or international problems on the point of the new model of the ancient republic. When this new model tries to get rid of the old model, we must care of your old self. I think that the priority for Christianity which you gave to the world or the Indian pronouncement of the self... its all a schematic picture.

DCI: Were the Greeks at the origin of a balanced perspective of the self? And if so, should we be studying the Greeks in order to reorient ourselves and redefine ourselves?

MF: That's a question I was discussing with Herbert Dreifus before you came. He told me that we don't see ourselves as we go back to the Greeks as a model. I think that the Greek civilisation is something like a model that has been forgotten today of Christianity, bourgeoisie society, in contrast with ancient culture. But I think that the problem of the self is very important. And I think that the problem of the self is very paradoxical and contradictory. I think that the Christian attitude has contributed to this problem. But I'm not sure it is the most important thing to struggle about, nowadays. The most important thing is, in fact, the decision concerning either economic or international problems on the point of the new model of the ancient republic. When this new model tries to get rid of the old model, we must care of your old self. I think that the priority for Christianity which you gave to the world or the Indian pronouncement of the self... its all a schematic picture.

Our ethics have been too closely related to religion, to law or to science. And I think that we are now at the point where we recognize that those three references to our ethics are not sufficient. What we are looking for is, I think, an ethics which could in itself be an aesthetics of existence.
who opposed him saying that it was irrationalism, and you cannot introduce a new science without abandoning the main principles of reason. It was from there a new type of rationality. Well, I think we can say the same, for instance, about psychiatry and psychology. For example, psychoanalysis: it was an incredibly new, imaginative form of using reason, isn’t it?

DC: In “The History of Sexuality,” you seem to focus more on male sexuality than on female sexuality. Do you think this is an accurate appraisal of the work?

MF: Yes, but you’re extending the previous definitions of reason.

MF: Well, I don’t think it is honestly possible to say that Freud did not use his reason and that it was not a type of rationality that he tried to apply. But that’s not the problem to know if you can find our contradictions, some errors in Freud— that’s another question, and maybe you can make a very sharp criticism of psychiatry. But it was an attempt to define a new type of rationality, new views of reason in order to analyze things like dreams which were outside the field of science for centuries and centuries.

DC: Are we on the beginning of a new epistemology, in which the way we think is changing?

MF: When I use the word epistemology, it is not at all to indicate or describe a kind of cultural unit. What I meant was this: from the beginning of the 17th century, when a type of knowledge begins to be considered as scientific knowledge, it has to meet certain criteria and those criteria which decide if it is scientific knowledge or not, those criteria of course are not exactly the same; they change. It is these criteria which characterize scientific knowledge among all the other knowledge; it is those criteria which I call the epistemology.

DC: Are you working on a new book?

MF: I am finishing two books in the series about the history of sexuality. I wanted to finish them before I came here... (but I didn’t) so I’m working like a dog now every morning.