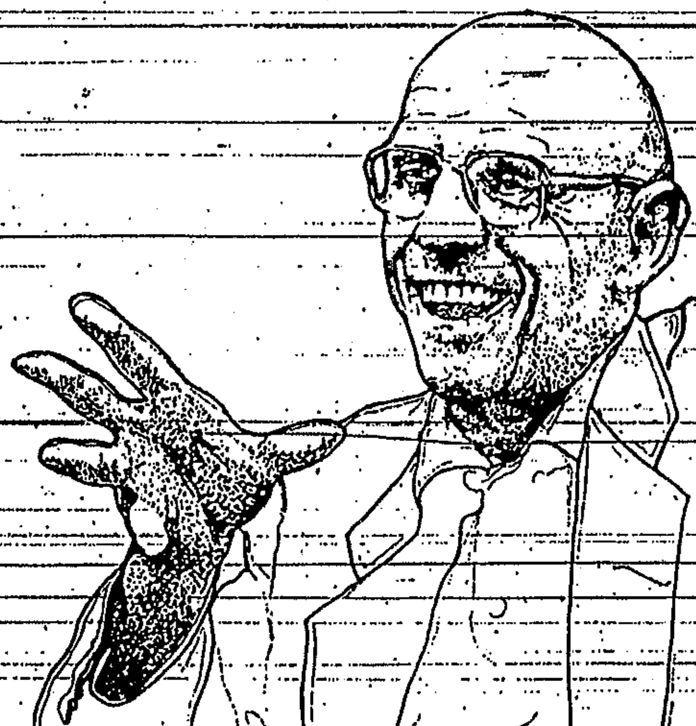
The Power & Politics of MICHEL FOUCAULT



Graphic by Anthony Roberts

By PETER MAASS and DAVID BROCK

For a man who has been hailed as the "Philosopher of Power" by the American and European press, French 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 Hubert 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 works "represent 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 kind of conclusion that has been delighting his followers and baffling his critics for the better part of 20 years. Sexuality, he wrote, is a "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," 1968) 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 and Systems of Thought at Paris' prestigious *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. ◆

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DC: It's somewhat unusual for a French intellectual such as yourself to visit the United States as often as you do. What, aside from the professional and personal friends you have here, attracts you to the United States and to Berkeley in particular?

MF: You think that there are very few French intellectuals visiting the States? There are a lot of them, no?

DC: There are a lot visiting, but maybe they don't visit as often and for as long as you do.

MF: Well, the first thing maybe is that I never felt myself very comfortable in France. Since I was a student or at least a young teacher, I spent most of my life either in Sweden, Poland, Germany, Tunisia and so on. So there is this negative reason . . . but from my own feeling I don't recognize myself as very French. But that's only a negative and personal reason.

I think that the intellectual life in the American university is for me something very, very exciting and interesting. You see, in France we have a partition between the intellectual life and the university life. Of course most of the intellectuals in France teach in universities, but I think the intellectual scene is much more of a political scene or literary scene than in university life. Do you understand what I mean? The intellectual life in French universities is rather poor.

DC: How so? How is it poor?

MF: First, because the conditions of work, maybe of which we can speak a little later, are very hard in French universities . . . the most active intellectual discussions take place outside of the university . . . I think that in the States it's the contrary. The most exciting intellectual discussions take place in some universities, in some great universities such as this one. That, for me, is something interesting. And the third reason is those conditions for work I mentioned. In the American university, the student and the teacher have very good conditions 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.

"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."

MF: No. You see, the *College de France* is not exactly a university, it is something outside the university which was founded in the 16th century against the *Sorbonne*, where we are supposed to teach the things which are not taught normally and regularly in the universities. That's the first difference and the second is that you do not need to be registered to attend the lectures of the teachers at the *College de France*. Anybody who wants to come there can come, sit back and listen to what the teachers say.

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DC: To follow up on America and your following here, 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 what I am speaking about is most of the time something rather particular. For instance, last time (at Berkeley) I spoke of the field of ancient culture . . . with which people are not very familiar either in France or in America. I don't know why people attend my lectures.

DC: You truly wonder why people attend your lectures?

MF: Yea, Yea, Yea, Yea, Yea. Maybe they are expecting something else other 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 do doesn't fit with the normal studies of the students in this university.

DC: But at the same time your work cuts across a number of different disciplines that students can identify with or at least know something about. You don't have to be strictly a philosophy student to be interested and have your work apply to what the student is doing.

There is also something else, and I would like to get your comment about it, which people have been saying. Currently, as far as students and young people are concerned, there is a sense of desperation in terms of thinking that we are controlled by an ever-growing bureaucracy which can't be fought; they believe there are rules and regulations here and there which limit our freedom, and that your work speaks directly to those concerns; it speaks about power. And that perhaps is one of the reasons why students and young people who feel victimized by power are attracted to what you are doing.

MF: Well, I think that is true, that the problem of power or power organization, control and so on is, at least in our societies, one of the main issues. We know very well that the economic problems are still pending, even in overdeveloped countries such as yours. But it's a fact that during the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century people thought that the main problem was an economic one and that since the economic problem could be solved, everything else would be O.K. But the experience people have either in socialist countries, totalitarian regimes or in liberal systems such as ours, all those experiences 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, the power systems, could be managed, changed, transformed, improved and so on.

DC: You've been criticized from the Marxist perspective for ignoring the economic aspect of social relations since, from that perspective, the economic question is the strongest and most compelling in terms of the way society is organized, the way society is organized into classes. But the economic structure of society, to you grows out of power, and is controlled by power . . .

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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 systems 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 16th century and during the 17th, 18th centuries and so on — is it 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. So that's the first thing I want to say — the relations are much more intricate and complicated than we most of the time would imagine.

The third thing I wanted 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 attenion on the economic structures, and there are also those reasons due to the facts and the history.

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

MF: Well, you 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 mental 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 reasons or foundations than those institutions. But I think that the rise, 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. How can resistance successfully change the prevailing bio-power, and what forms should this resistance take, or can it take in contemporary civilization?

MF: I think that it's impossible to conceive any power relations without resistance. If there was no resistance, there would be no power. I think that power relations imply on one side the will to impose something, and on the other side the inclination to resist this thing. The tension may be either strong or visible or implicit, and so on and so on, and it is this field of resistance and more or less stronger resistance which constitutes a society. That's the first point.

The second point is that at certain moments and at certain points people resist explicitly, voluntarily, globally to a kind of power, either political power or ideological power or ethical types of power. For instance, in Poland there is still now both a political resistance and ideological resistance; social resistance, ethical resistance. I think that this kind of process is something which occurs very regularly in history or very frequently at least in history, that it is very important, that it is through those processes of active resistance that things begin to change. But by itself, resistance cannot change anything if in the forms by which people resist power there is not somthing which is a new kind of organization, of relations, of social relations or ideology of knowledge and so on.

You see, for instance you can compare what has happened in Iran and what is happening right now in Poland. In Iran it is very interesting to see that there was a huge popular resistance, really everybody in Iran was against the Shah, and it is typical and significant that all the organizations through which people resisted the Shah were not able afterwards to give shape to a real democratic and free government. And they fell down to another type of dictator, a totalitarian regime.

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or dictator, a totalitarian regime. 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 is 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 everbody knows, by most of the political structures and institutions. And at certain moments, what else can you do than answer by violence to violence. You don't agree?

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

MF: Yes it is, yes.

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DC: O.K., I would be inclined to agree with you, but the problem is that in this country — perhaps not so much in France — violence is not going to achieve the kind of change that people are interested in. And that's one thing which I wanted to press you on a bit. The type of violence you are referring to in Western Europe and the United States is against very overt examples of power — the exercise of power — by various institutions. And perhaps that is a failure of power, because, as you said in your sexuality book, power has to succeed by hiding itself, and this is what is most difficult to successfully resist. And that's the kind of resistance which I'm curious about.

In Germany there is a controversy raging over the government-sponsored census. There was an interesting article in the Washington Post which referred to some of the people in Germany saying knowledge is power and therefore opposing the census. The Post says that now the people have gone "outside the bounds of conventional politics to tell the politicians that there are limits to their trust and that the whole structure of public authority sometimes looks to them like an adversary." Is this the kind of peaceful non-violent resistance that can succeed 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 — intrusions of privacy and so on — but I think it's a good thing that people show themselves distrustful against this kind of institution. But I'm not sure it is the most important thing to struggle about, nowadays. The most important things are, for instance, the decisions concerning either economic policy or international . . . negotiations on disarmament against nuclear weapons — these things escape public knowledge and we don't know anything about what the targets of the negotiations are and what they are discussing, the bargaining. I think the implicit violence of power is much more sensitive in this kind of secret than in the intrusion of our private lives when they ask you how many children you have.

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DC: I wanted to ask you a question regarding your lecture last week on concern with the self. You talked at the end about sacrificing the self. What kind of sacrifices have we made?

MF: What I wanted to say was that something very strange happened in the history of the self in Western culture — during the last six or eight centuries — the Greco-Roman culture has underlined the importance of the self and developed a set of devices, techniques, in order to take care of the self, and in this very line of techniques of the self, the Christian church, the Christian culture, has developed the idea that if you want to take care of yourself in the right way you have to sacrifice yourself. And there is in the Christian idea of the self something which I think is very paradoxical and contradictory. I think the Christian asceticism has its main problem in this paradox. If you want to take care of yourself — if you want to save your soul — you have to sacrifice yourself and renounce yourself, your will and your desires. And I think to put things in a very simple way — the Christian asceticism seems to be at the point of junction between the ancient culture which underlines the importance of the self and something like an Indian ascetic which tries to get rid of the self. And to get rid of the self in taking care of yourself — that I think is the paradox of Christianity which you can compare to the stoic (view) of the self or the Indian pronunciation of the self . . . its all a schematical picture.

DC: 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 Hubert Dreyfus before we met. I won't say we have to turn back to the Greeks as a model. I think this idea that the Greek civilization is something like a model which has been forgotten through Christianity, bourgeois society, in-

> "Our ethics have been too (closely) related either to religion, to law or to science. And I think that we are now at the point where we recognize that those three references for our ethics are not sufficient. What we are looking for is, I think, an ethics which could in itself be an aesthetics of existence."

dustrial development and so on, doesn't make a lot of sense, since. history is history. There is no way, no hope, no positive meaning in turning back to something. Yet it is a fact that in antiquity you had an example, and I think a unique example in our history, of an ethics which was not related either to religion or to civil law or to science. Religion in Greece and Rome had very few things to do with ethics, with morals . . . the civil law was, we could say, very tolerant of a lot of things . . . and they had no scientific culture or did not want to have one as a model for their everyday behavior. From Christianity until now, our model of our ethical reference has been religion, Christianity, law — from the 16th century to the 18th — and science, now, with psychology, sociology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis and so on. Our ethics have been too closely related either to religion, to law, or to science. And I think that we are now at the point where we recognize that those three references for our ethics are not sufficient. We don't ask religion to give us our ethics; we need an ethics which has nothing to do with religion; we don't want civil law to intervene in our lives; and I think we have become a little distrustful towards the promises of science. And what we are looking for is, I think, an ethics which could in itself be an aesthetics of existence. And you have in ancient culture an ethics which has nothing to do with religion or science, but with aesthetics, the aesthetics of existence. I don't mean at all that we have to begin again to live like the Greeks — that makes no sense — but we have an example of a culture in which ethics have been very strong, very interesting . . . the philosophy of ethics has been one of the major achievements of ancient culture, and this ethics is an aesthetics of existence. Maybe we need something like that. We have the same problem, but, of course, the solutions have to be very different and that's why I'm interested in this problem.

DC: In the three references which you mentioned — science, law and religion — it seems like all three of them have a base in modern civilization in rationalism. Is rationalism, perhaps, enemy number one or problem number one? How closely linked is it to the alienation that comes out of our consistent references to these three areas?

MF: Well, that's a good and very difficult question. You asked me if rationalism could be enemy number one or problem number one? I would agree with the last proposition and disagree with the first one. It is not an enemy, but it is of course problem number one. Maybe I would wonder if the word rationalism is a good one. Problem number one is not rationalism but rationality. What people call rationalism — most of the time — a certain form, a certain state of reason, knowledge, scientific knowledge and so on, considered as a definitive, eternal and universal formula of using reason. In this way I think that we have to consider rationalism as an enemy, but to consider rationalism as an enemy does not mean that you consider reason or rationality as an enemy. It means that you have to see in which way and how far a type of rationality can be used or changed or limited or transformed.

I think that there are no deep differences between reason and imagination, or I think reason has to be imagined. The possible uses of reason are much more numerous than people most of the time think. This . . . transformation of rationality by itself is something which is very important in our life so that we have to use our reason without being a slave of a certain type of rationality. Is it clear now?

DC: It's clear, but to take it a step further, how do we imaginatively use our reason?

MF: I think that from this point of view, the scientist, most of them, give us a very good image of what can be the work of reason towards and against reason. Imagine a new type of rationality; what is Einstein if not an example of this imagination, a new type of rationality? It is very significant that when, for instance, Einstein did his work you had the old traditional scientist

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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, no?

DC: 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 or not some 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.

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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: The title of "The History of Sexuality" is not a very good one. The real title, which the publisher refused, was, "Sex and Truth." The problem of truth has been linked to the problem of sex and reciprocally. I think that since most of the thinkers have been occupied with sex problems, the theory of sexuality and so on, from antiquity until now, are males, their perspective is a male one. For instance, it is very clear that for the Greeks you cannot find, with the exception of Sappho, nearly anything written by a woman about sex. All of the reflections have been made by males from the point of view of males trying to give sexuality a theory, an explanation or an ethic . . . so the masculine character of our reflections of our sexuality, this masculine character is a historical fact. I don't deny that there is female sexuality . . . but if you try to analyze not the sexuality itself but the way in which this sexuality has been reflected, analyzed, theorized and so on, then you place yourself from the point of view of men since it was always men who studied and spoke on sexuality during centuries and centuries.

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

MF: When I use the word episteme 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 recognized 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 knowledges; it is those criteria which I call the episteme.

DC: Are we on the verge of a new era of some type?

MF: It is difficult to know. I think

that the intrusion, the development in our sciences of things like notions of information, or things like that, change a lot in the main epistemic criteria of knowlege. So maybe it would be possible to indicate not a new episteme but a new epistemic configuration or new epistemic criteria.

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. ●

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