

## The Demise of Michel Foucault

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Opposite the fireplace and beside me, the telephone. To the right, the sitting room-door and the passage. At the end of the passage, the front door. He might come straight here and ring at the front door. "Who's there?" "Me." Or he might phone from a transit centre as soon as he got home ... There wouldn't be any warning. He'd phone; He'd arrive ... There's no particular reason why he shouldn't come back. There's no reason ... why he should. But it's possible. He'd ring. "Who's there" ... "Me."

Marguerite Duras, *The War*: a memoir (1986: 5).

### Preface

Who is "Me"? Was it Foucault? Or was 'Me' just a label? Or was "Foucault" just a name, or label, which might be used by someone ringing a door bell, someone who might be bald, or bearded, or a pushy agent selling, and not someone expected, an author, or ... a lover ... ?

Foucault, at any particular time, might have been any one of that list. Indeed, on many occasions, Georges Dumezil said that there were a thousand Foucaults.

### I Introduction

This paper draws upon my invited lecture at the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia Conference at the Auckland University of Technology in November, 2011. It also draws upon my forthcoming paper in Stone and Marshall, and on Foucault's paper *Structuralism and Post-structuralism* (Foucault, 1998) and which was first published in *Telos* in 1983, almost a year before his death in June 1984.

Michel Foucault was interviewed by Gerard Raulet, a Professor at the Sorbonne. This should have been an exciting contest, but Foucault would not answer Raulet's questions. Instead, in answering the questions, Foucault gave an excellent example of how not to answer an interviewer's questions.

Foucault could be perverse yet he could often be gracious and amusing (e.g., his Interview with Jean-Pierre Kabbach in Tunis, April 2, 1967). But what was he doing in Raulet's interview? Perhaps Foucault was offering obscure type questions to an "innocent" Marguerite Duras's war time questions? Or was he being perverse with Raulet, refusing to answer Raulet's questions on structuralism and post-structuralism because those questions involved a set of philosophical assumptions that he rejected (for example his tussles with critics who accused him of being a structuralist. (See Foucault's *The Order of Things*, Foreword to English version, 1970: xiv).

## II Le College de France

Briefly, Foucault was elected to a new chair at Le College de France, in April 1970, in the year in which he began his required annual lectures. Jules Vuillemin had proposed this new chair, created in November 1969. Entitled, “The History of Systems of Thought” his Chair replaced Jean Hyppolite’s “The History of Philosophical Thought”. The omission of “philosophy” from the title by Foucault was important, as it explicitly permitted thought that was not necessarily philosophical. This, later, was to be the case. His inaugural lecture was given on December 2, 1970 (with respectful homage to Hyppolite).

Teaching at the College de France followed a particular set of rules. Professors were to provide 26 hours of teaching lectures (and the possibility of a maximum of up to half of that total being seminars). They were required to present their original research for each year, thereby obliging them to change their entirely open courses yearly; there was no enrolment and no required entry qualification. Thus large audiences were made up of students, teachers, researchers, the curious public and international academics.

## III Foucault’s lectures

Foucault, who made it into the “holy of holies”, delivered his inaugural lecture at the College de France on December 2, 1970, under the “bronze eye” of Henri-Louis Bergson, and a large crowd jostling to hear philosophy from Foucault. By 1973-1974 at least two amphitheatres were required for his lectures. Established professors, who had been concerned about Foucault’s sulphurous reputation, were perhaps mollified by a judicious intervention from Georges Dumezil (Eribon, 1991: 213). Among those present at his inaugural were Dumezil, Levi-Strauss, Braudel and Deleuze.

Hyppolite, Dumezil, and Vuillemin had begun working towards Foucault being accepted at The College de France as early as 1966. Hyppolite had unfortunately died on October 27, 1968. It was to be Vuillemin who presented Foucault’s “claim” to the important meeting of Professors on Sunday, November 30, 1969. Vuillemin, formerly at Clermont- Ferrand, had hired Foucault there in 1960. Foucault was probably exhausted by the teaching—of prepared aspects of *Les Mots et les choses*—and his responsibilities in psychology. He wanted philosophy!

Foucault arrived in Tunisia in 1966 to teach philosophy. His teaching was most successful, but students in Tunisia were also concerned by the Tunisian government’s plans for proposals for higher educational “reforms”. It was a dangerous time for students (and for Foucault!). Foucault was well aware of French problems. It is possible that he was in Paris in May 1968 (Macey, 1993: xvii). He had been a member of Minister Fouchet’s committee (effected in 1967), on higher education “reforms”. These were in response to the demands of the workers for democratisation and demands from the students for more participation.

Foucault emerged from those turbulent times as Head of the Department of Philosophy at Vincennes. The reforms’ response was that higher education was to be experimental, interdisciplinary, on the cutting edge of research, and democratic. It was a failure because the Fifth Republic’s notion of participation was not only vague and rhetorical, but it was interpreted differently by the students.

## IV An uneasy life

Macey says that Foucault’s works make classificatory difficulties, if not problems, of its own. They migrate through disciplines as diverse as history, philosophy, sociology, medical history and literary criticism ... (but) “Both the man and his work, to use a conventional dichotomy which would have exasperated him, were enigmatic, elusive and protean” (Macey, 1993: xviii).



There were several groups of intellectuals, not all philosophers, in whom Foucault was interested. According to Miller he “had no great love of England, which he tended to think of as already half-dead”. Daniel Defert did however manage to persuade him to travel to Sky (Miller, 1993: xvii). There were general intellectuals, perhaps a literary group, and which, as a literary group, included at least Rene Char, Roland Barthes, and Maurice Blanchot (Foucault & Blanchot, 1987). There was the Bachelard-Canguilhem group, known also as The Philosophy of the Concept Group, organised initially by Jean Cavailles (executed by the Germans for his resistance activities). Canguilhem and Foucault were major members of this group, though Foucault did not become a member of intellectual groups. After 1968 his writing became more political but, after being accepted into the College de France, he began to explore possibilities presented by “governmentality” in ways which were not just political.

For example governmentality featured strongly in the planned series as the genealogy of the man of desire from classical antiquity to the early centuries of Christianity. That was described in the first Volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), published shortly after *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Both were about power. Power traversed society in *Discipline and Punish* by bodies being constrained by mechanisms and networks of power, whereas *The History of Sexuality* was concerned with how sexuality was linked to power.

Eribon notes that the *History of Sexuality* “originated in the intersection of an earlier project and “current events”. He had already announced such a work in the preface to *Folie et déraison* (1961), and according to Eribon he “never stopped thinking about it” (1991: 269). But Foucault was still regarding sexuality as a series of prohibitions, transgressions and constraints in 1965 and, until 1968 when ideologies of liberation were appearing against repression: caused by established power; why was that the case and why had we made sex a burden with so much guilt attached? (Foucault, 1976: 6-9).

With such a long “introduction” Foucault began to work tirelessly upon *The History of Sexuality*. But only two volumes, went to the publisher—*L’Usage des plaisirs* and *Le Souci de soi*. The earlier volume, *Les Aveux de la chair*, was not completed, even though Foucault worked upon it until his hospitalisation in early June 1984: It remained unpublished (Eribon, 1991: 323).

Foucault maintained a lengthy public silence as he began to finish the last volumes. But the silence spawned a number of rumours: Foucault was finished, he had nothing more to say, he was at an impasse ... Newspapers and magazines, always ready to look for the flaw, to flush out any weaknesses, to proclaim failure, jubilant enemies, impatient admirers or worried friends—everyone was obsessed with the question: so when are we going to read the rest? Foucault was aware of both his critics and his friends, and they were felt “at his heels”, so to say. Blanchot said that it was a real mind hunt (rather like a manhunt) (Eribon, 1991: 321).

## V Foucault’s conclusion

Foucault returned to the United States of America (Berkeley), in April 1983. He was enthusiastic about working in the United States, but his positive position towards the States, was tempered by his burgeoning frustration with France and French publishers.

David Macey said that Foucault was pleased to accept that invitation for a (large) public lecture—*The Culture of the Self* (never published). He talked with the French department and to Paul Rabinow’s Seminar on April 26 and May 3. Lengthy recorded conversations were held with Dreyfus and Rabinow between April 15 and 21. Plans for the series were both fluid and useful. According to Macey, Foucault was also discussing returning to teach a full course and possibly a permanent visiting professorship.

For his planned series, he made several changes and turns. But his preparatory work and knowledge of the classics had caused him to see that antiquity as a golden age was perhaps an illusion.

It did not offer an alternative ethics of pleasure because it was linked to a virile society, to dissymmetry exclusion of the other, an obsession with penetration, and a kind of threat of being dispossess of your own energy, and so on. All that is quite disgusting (Foucault, 1983: 346).

Foucault told Paul Veyne and several other people that one begins writing by chance and then continues by force of circumstances. He reiterated that writing was not an activity that he had really chosen. Thereby he was the complete opposite of Sartre ... Foucault thought one had to pay far too high a price for la gloire—for fame and glory. But what was to be done? How could someone almost change his life? ... But the past undoubtedly has its own strong inertia (Eribon, 1991: 321).

Eribon notes that Foucault's writing changed considerably by the time of the publication of the last two books. Eribon talks of Foucault's writing becoming calm and dispassionate. Eribon made similar remarks to Maurice Blanchot on these issues. Less fiery Blanchot noted. More sober, said Deleuze, who was to write a very good book on Foucault in spite of the earlier collapse of their friendship. Deleuze just said that he had to write it.

Foucault talked a lot about philosophy in general in the Raulet interview, but also a lot of Foucault saying what he was, or what he did—"as a Foucaulidean". For the publication of *Telos* in 1983, was he, in part, writing his own philosophical obituary? One might here confront Liberation's Obituary (there are some mistakes), or was there a rewriting over some opponents setting "them" straight?; or was he making sure that the truth (in his sense) was enunciated finally? Or was this really just an interview which both were enjoying? Or, are all of these odd hypotheses? There are probably more!

In the beginning of 1984 Foucault had said to Pierre Bourdieu, "One thing is certain, I won't give my course again next year" (Eribon, 1991: 321). (This is perhaps ambiguous, as he must have known then that he was suffering from aids). At the same time he was thinking of leaving Le College de France and seemed "out of sorts". He even thought of stopping writing!

Foucault began ordering his affairs, probably with Denial Defert; there were at least two crucial questions which needed to be asked. Did Foucault know that he had aids? And if he did know how long had he known?

According to Paul Veyne, "Foucault was unafraid of death as he sometimes told his friends ... he was not bragging ... (it was) that of work performed by the self on the self, of self-stylization." Veyne said to Foucault, when he seemed unable to recover from a cough and a fever; "Your doctors are bound to think you have aids." Foucault replied to Veyne; "that is exactly what they think," he responded with a smile. "I realized it from the questions they asked me" (Veyne quoted in Eribon, 1991: 326).

Foucault would not have lied to Veyne, his old and close friend. I believe that he did know the answers to those two major questions. When he was hospitalised early in June he was visited often by his friends with whom he laughed and joked, and for a while even seemed to be getting better, but on June 25, the grim reaper took him.

## VI Where to in French philosophy

But if Foucault and Derrida had led jointly what was the "new" philosophy, and the attacks on the "old" philosophy, then it could not last after March 4, 1963. Then Derrida read his famous critique on Foucault's *Folie et deraison*. Derrida's lecture, entitled *Cogito et histoire de la folie* was a "savagely critical reading of *Histoire de la folie*" (Macey, 1993: 143). The disciple had turned upon the master, and it was a symbolic murder of the master. Furthermore it helped Derrida's career but "the real

murder victim was their friendship" (Macey, 1993: 144-145). Foucault responded to Derrida some seven years later in 1970! It was a brutal attack, not only on Derrida's lecture, but also on his deconstructionism as a whole. There are few references indeed to Derrida in Foucault's writing, and they are not complementary (Macey, 1993: 145)

Many of the post-structuralist texts emerged at the same time as the student uprising of 1968. Foucault, as Head of Philosophy after 1968 at Vincennes, and later at Le College de France, was involved with students in various types of resistance (including parts of the national philosophy curriculum at Vincennes).

There were many young professors on the left after 1968 awaiting a new philosophy. There were Lyotard, Deleuze, Derrida, Irigaray and Kristeva, but there was not a strong group of Left-(overs). André Glucksman and Bernard-Henri Lévi attempted to right that omission in the early 1970s by founding a leftist group called le nouveaux philosophes. Lévi founded it and Glucksman denied membership. Gutting, is rather scathing concerning their domination of the media including impassioned pleas that they were no longer Marxists, and adding "belatedly" that Marxism had been responsible for a number of horrors (2001: 271). Lévi says however:

[i]f I could single out a single aspect of France's May '68 it would be its libertarianism, and therefore anti-authoritarianism and therefore its anti-Stalinism and therefore ... its profound antitotalitarianism (Lévi, 2009: 55)

The primary object of the new philosophy critique was the modern notion of the subject as the epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical centre of existence. Poststructuralists rejected the metaphysical and epistemological primacy of the subject on the basis of Heidegger's deconstruction of Western philosophy (Stone, 2005: 83-89).

Foucault's struggle with aids is very well covered by Hervé Guibert in his novel *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1991). This was a French best seller. His "hero", Muzil (based upon Foucault), had figured that he had aids before the experts decided, especially with "that boa constrictor of the lungs". (Compare Veyne in Eribon, 1991: 326). Finally, "Muzil never laughed so much or so heartily as when he was dying" (Guibert, 1991: 16).

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