Danaher, G., Schirato, T., and Webb, J. *Understanding Foucault*. (London: Sage Publications, 2000).

A search on 'Michel Foucault' from an academic database results in 548 references. While many of these fall into the realm of historical, philosophical, or sociological journals, a surprising number come from journals seemingly far removed from the theoretical works one might expect. Ranging across nursing, town planning, business management, and environmental journals, the invocation of Foucault's name is broad indeed. A similar search on a popular Web search site results in an even wider collection: 173,000 references. These cover numerous sites devoted to providing resources such as bibliographies, definitions, links to secondary sources, and discussion groups focused on Foucault's life and works, and comprise sites in many languages.

Some of the search results are amusing at first glance, for example, one leads to a dating service. While this may seem surprising, even a mistake, it is in fact quite telling. Web site owners, hoping to attract visitors, are notorious for padding their sites with keywords that, while having nothing to do with the subject or purpose of the site, are deemed to be popular as search terms, thus generating inadvertent visits. As Foucault might have suggested, this entrance of his name into the discursive flow of the Web is itself an indication of his perceived importance to contemporary thought.

Foucault's name is invoked by many as the 20th century philosopher best suited to reflect the ideas of his time. His ideas permeate, directly and indirectly, much of the writing of the latter portion of that century and the current. His name has been used as a shorthand representation of an entire generation's fascination with questions of Theory ("I Was Michel Foucault's Love Slave," http://www.salon.com/feb97/loveslave970210.html). At the same time, he has been vilified by some writers, such as Patrick West's vitriolic article provocatively titled *"The philosopher as dangerous liar: Michel Foucault taught that might is right, truth is relative, and history just an interesting narrative. Why do we still lionise the French philosopher?*" (*New Statesman (1996)*, June 28, 2004 v133 i4694 p24) who concludes his vituperative tirade with the advice that, like Baudrillard's book of the same name, we should "forget Foucault."

To the student approaching Foucault for the first time, the pervasiveness of his name and the myriad ways in which his ideas are referenced, offer a daunting hurdle to understanding both

his works and those that draw from, and refer to, it. Danaher, Schirato, and Webb, in writing *Understanding Foucault*, have provided a much needed, and quite lucid, avenue of approach for the interested student. While not suggesting that their book is an exhaustive analysis of Foucault's writings, the authors do propose to elucidate three aspects of Foucault's work. These include the question of knowledge, relations of power, and the question of the subject.

Given the number of unique terms defined or re-defined by Foucault (or at least their currently accepted translations from the original French), it is appropriate that the book begins with a fairly comprehensive glossary. Some, like power and archaeology, may seem familiar to the general reader, but they are not always used by Foucault in their commonly defined ways. Other words and phrases, such as biopolitics, epistemes, heterotopia, and dialectical materialism were created by Foucault or those that influenced him, to help explain their ideas.

The narrative proper begins with an Introduction that situates Foucault in the world of postmodernist theory and its backlash. Stating that academics presumed that knowledge constitutes an authentic truth and that the production of knowledge "was part of an ongoing process of civilization and was free of political considerations", the authors proceed to explain how postmodernist theories challenged these assumptions, and how Foucault's work has been so influential in this area. They continue by describing the theorists and theories that influenced Foucault. These include Marxism, specifically those aspects of it that combine philosophy with political activeness, and phenomenology, especially the ideas about the importance of personal perception. Structuralism, for its emphasis on a systematic historical analysis, and psychoanalysis, in which Lacan suggests that the subject can never know itself, are also cited as influencers, along with Nietzsche's ideas about the relationship between truth, knowledge and power, and the Enlightenment ideals that value reason. In all cases the authors point out that Foucault did not simply accept these ideas, rather he developed his theories as part reaction, part synthesis of these ideas.

The book continues with chapters focusing on what the authors consider to be Foucault's main contributions. Each chapter is framed using the terms and phrases that permeate Foucault's work. Those terms and phrases are described and illuminated with examples drawn both from Foucault's work and from contemporary popular culture. For example, the chapter on "Questions of Knowledge" begins with a quote from Foucault's work *The Order of Things*, which explains how a distinctly un-western taxonomy of animals shaped his thinking on historical modes of

classification and consequently on his notions about the history of ideas. The authors follow this with references to popular movies and television shows like *Braveheart* and *Xena*, examining the philosophically anachronistic tendencies of contemporary culture to cast all times and places as imitations of our own.

Are people self-knowing individuals in charge of their history and destiny? The authors examine Foucault's writings on the subject while introducing the key concepts of discourses, discursive flow, and their role in shaping and being shaped by institutions. In addition to explaining how speech and language help shape the 'games of truth' or the "sets of rules by which truth is produced," they point out that "for Foucault, thought is what provides us with the tools for ethical behavior. . ." and that "criticism is the critical work we do upon ourselves in order to 'make' our subjectivity as an object of self-reflexive thought. . .[both] allowing us to problematise--and, potentially, transform--our subjectivity." By bringing Foucault's writing out of the theoretical and into the active (and in a sense affirming that theorizing is activity), the authors respond to critics who mistakenly interpret Foucaultian theory as asserting that individuals are "dupes of dominant social groups, never knowing what we do."

The next four chapters introduce and explore discipline and instruction, relations of power, governmentality and liberalism, and history and geopolitics. Using the image of the prison panopticon that Foucault uses in his *Discipline and Punish,* the authors again define the terms in clear and direct language. They describe Foucault's theories about the development of the prison model, situating it in the pre- and post-industrial age by asserting that "all these disciplinary procedures, and the panoptic gaze, emerged at an historic moment when it had become necessary to produce a pliable, healthy and sober workforce to service the factories of the Industrial Revolution." (p. 57) From this idea of the panopticon and its impact on the development of self-surveillance, they move to Foucault's ideas on power.

Foucault sees power as a "ubiquitous and ever-changing flow" that is more effective when it is hidden from view. The Renaissance focus on 'man' means a focus on human sciences, on bodies and behaviors. This gives rise to "institutions and administrative techniques for measuring, regulating and controlling people and behavior in order to ensure that states got the most out of their human resources." (p. 80) This knowledge, this biopower, is not completely regulated. With so many competing ideas, and no single authority, biopower produces

compliance and resistance. By defining normal you define abnormal. By defining both you invite self-identification with one or the other.

Self-identification, the shaping of the state by individuals and of individuals by the state, and the changing conception of the 'subject' are the focus of the final three chapters of the book. They begin by outlining the historical ideas about 'the subject,' ideas of freedom and responsibility and self-knowledge. It continues in a chapter on the sexual subject by exploring discourses around the social and historical constructs of desire. More importantly, they explore how sexual practice is inextricably intertwined with relations of power, with ideas of compliance and resistance, and most importantly, with ethical practice.

The book concludes with a look at Foucault's later writing wherein he shifts from his early focus on power relations to his later focus on the "ways in which human beings become subjects." According to Foucault, the 'subject' is a form, hence a crafted object shaped by the social and the historical. This does not imply that the individual has no control over the crafting process, as Foucault's critics contend. Rather, Foucault sees the process of self-crafting as an exercise in freedom and as a challenge in ethics. Within the confines of our episteme we are who we choose to be, who we create ourselves to be, and in so creating we make choices. Foucault frames his view in artistic terms, not neglecting to examine the reciprocating relationship between art and how it represents society, and society in how it translates and regulates art and taste.

And so we end with what might be the most difficult aspect of Foucaultian theory: that point at which it migrates from theory and methodology to real life practice. Skeptics may complain that Foucault's view is self-indulgent, even dangerous. Critics may complain that, though looking only at the interstices of history and society may be somewhat useful it does not provide us with a useful theoretical framework for actually doing anything. The authors of *Understanding Foucault* however, have at least ensured that those interested in Foucault have an accessible way to approach his ideas.

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