

Michel Foucault (Key Sociologists)

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Foucault and Political Sociology

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Michel Foucault (1926–1984) was one of the most influential French philosophers of the twentieth century – although he himself shunned the title 'philosopher' and described himself instead as a 'historian of systems of thought'. A household name in France and an international icon of anti-establishment philosophical radicalism during his lifetime, he has since his death become a firmly established member of the canon, not only of continental philosophy but of many other disciplines, including sociology and social theory. As with all immensely influential thinkers, the meaning of his work for the present is deeply contested. Indeed, the very extent of his contemporary influence – the way that he is taken up as a 'great thinker' and authority on questions of method or political theory – seems at odds with his own central commitments to challenging the dominant power relations that are embodied in hierarchies of academic knowledge, as well as the kinds of fantasies of individual agency that underpin the fetishisation of philosophers. Throughout his career, he was perpetually exploring the power dynamics that are bound up with practices of knowledge, as well as the processes – the modes of 'subjectification' – through which possibilities of agency, desire, thought and reason are constructed. He explored these themes through histories of systems of thought concerning madness, psychiatric care and the 'psy-disciplines', the human and the human sciences, criminality and its treatment, sexuality, public health, race and eugenics, liberal governance, ethics, and public philosophy.

Foucault's Power/Knowledge and the Cultural Turn in Political Sociology

Foucault's distinctive contribution to political sociology centres on his rethinking of the role of knowledge and truth practices for the composition of power relations, subjectivity and the social. He can be situated alongside Stuart Hall, the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, Pierre Bourdieu, and others as a key figure in the framing of the 'cultural turn' in sociology – through which culture, forms of language, ways of knowing and media came to be seen as the most essential stuff of power relations and social life (Nash 2001). Foucault invites us to think of power/knowledge as a single indivisible concept. To formulate knowledge is always an act of power rooted in struggle, and power relations are always created and suspended in webs of knowledge and rules for the production of truth. Indeed, for Foucault our very being as conscious and active creatures – subjects – is composed through regimes, relations, and practices of knowledge.

Foucault challenges us to think politically and creatively about the very conditions and practices of the subject's emergence. Not only do we make history in conditions that are not of our choosing, but what it means for us to be a person – to choose, to act freely, to think, to relate to the world or to others – to be a subject – is contingent upon conditions that could be otherwise. The human sciences (especially medicine, psychiatry, biology and political

1

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