
Revising Foucault: The history and critique of modernity

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Abstract

I offer a major reassessment of Foucault's philosophico-historical account of the basic problems of modernity. I revise our understanding of Foucault by countering the influential misinterpretations proffered by his European interlocutors such as Habermas and Derrida. Central to Foucault's account of modernity was his work on two crucial concept pairs: freedom/power and reason/madness. I argue against the view of Habermas and Derrida that Foucault understood modern power and reason as straightforwardly opposed to modern freedom and madness. I show that Foucault held a much more complex view of these pairs, a view encapsulated in his term 'reciprocal incompatibility'. By revising our interpretation of Foucault's work on modernity in this way, we open the way to much more effective deployments of his critical apparatus.

Keywords

critique, Jacques Derrida, *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, *History of Madness*, modernity

The future of Foucault studies

Critics and commentators across disciplines have been interpreting Foucault's work for over four decades now. In the Anglophone world, the critical reception of this impressive body of work has taken place in three phases. Early on, literary critics along with philosophers and historians of science led the way in focusing attention on Foucault's structuralist archaeologies of knowledge. Next, the critical weight shifted to political theorists and those working in various cultural studies capacities who explicated and deployed Foucault's provocative models of modern forms of power. In the latest round of

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scholarship, philosophers have led the way in discussions of Foucault's later work on ethics. Foucault's thought appears, then, to have been exhaustively treated.

Yet a new domain of Foucault scholarship is precisely what we are promised by, among others, intellectual historian Eric Paras, whose recent book is provocatively titled *Foucault 2.0*.¹ Paras promises to extend the scholarly consumption of Foucault's thought by taking it into a fourth and so far little-explored domain: Foucault's annual course lectures at the Collège de France. Now that Foucault's course lectures are beginning to appear and are being translated into English, Foucault scholars have at their disposal a possible new domain of research. This might seem fortunate since we have thoroughly worked over the rest of Foucault's corpus. But we should pause at this point. For in moving into the course lectures, we risk importing the received wisdom on Foucault into yet another domain of Foucault studies. If we do that, and if it turns out that there are erroneous assumptions informing the received wisdom, then in the end it will be that much more difficult to make right our understanding of what Foucault was doing.

Now that the initial reception of all phases of Foucault's thought is complete, we have the opportunity of stepping back from the assumptions which structured that initial reception. For Foucault's North American readers, these assumptions were largely articulated by certain of Foucault's most influential European interlocutors, such as Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. But it is notable that Foucault himself always insisted that both Habermas and Derrida had misinterpreted him. So rather than extending into new domains like the course lectures the assumptions which now structure our understanding of Foucault, perhaps we would do better to go back to Foucault's primary works to revisit those assumptions.

I will here consider just one set of assumptions which has thus far largely structured our reception of Foucault – this bit of received wisdom is, moreover, widely accepted by readers both sympathetic and hostile to Foucault. The received wisdom is that Foucault's works offer a picture of modernity in which power and rationality exclude or subjugate freedom and madness. According to this view, Foucault not only laments the loss of madness and freedom essential to modernization, but he finds himself forced to admit that neither is any longer possible – Foucault is thus often said to paradoxically claim that we are bound to be rational and unfree. But by returning to two of Foucault's major texts, *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*, I will show that this implausible portrait is not at all Foucault's picture of modernity. Rather, Foucault saw modernity as problematized by ineliminable tensions between couples like power and rationality or freedom and madness. The problem for Foucault is that we find ourselves increasingly unable to negotiate these tensions – rationality and madness, just like freedom and power, are increasingly purified of one another. The problem, in other words, is not that of the *exclusion* of madness and freedom by rationality and power (a problem which could be met by the liberation of each) but rather that of the *purification* of rationality and freedom such that they are unmixed with madness and power (a problem which must be met by transgression and experimentation).

This contrast between exclusion and purification will be central in the argument that follows, so it is important to clarify the sense in which I am using each of these terms. Exclusion can be taken in the rather colloquial sense of banishment or expulsion, such that the exclusion of madness by reason amounts to the exile of madness wherever

rationality reigns. Purification should be taken more technically as describing a process in which two kinds of practices rigorously isolate themselves from one another, such that the purification of madness and reason amounts to the simultaneous production of both madness and reason in such a way that they cannot admit of admixture with one another. We could schematize these relations as follows: *a* excludes *b* while *y* and *z* are produced so as to purify themselves of one another.

The standard Foucault

The commonly accepted misrepresentations of Foucault are rooted in theoretical work which has been subtly dominant within 20th-century intellectual culture and which has thus been imperceptibly applied to Foucault himself. I shall not here explore this theoretical work in detail – I need only refer to it in passing under the heading of Max Weber's thesis that modernity is an age of relentless rationalization and bureaucratization. Weber's influential thesis was that, to put it a bit simply, modernity is characterized by the categorical differentiation of various rationalized value spheres (science, politics, aesthetics) such that the internal rationality appropriate to each can function only by excluding from within its purview all activity that cannot be operationalized according to this rationality.² That Derrida and Habermas share common assumptions regarding Foucault may seem surprising – but given the deep influence of this Weberian interpretation of modernity as rationalizing bureaucratization it really is not. When one starts looking for this Weberian interpretation of modernity, it begins to crop up practically everywhere – including, of course, in the critical literature on Foucault. While some have explicitly attributed this thesis to Foucault, it is far more common that critics will implicitly impute it to him in offering interpretations of Foucault on whose validity they ultimately aim to cast doubt.³

What is surprising, therefore, is the extent to which Foucault freed himself from this extremely common interpretation of modernity. Foucault offered a new philosophical-historical interpretation of modernity which simply left behind the familiar Weberian categories that have structured the thought of thinkers as diverse as Habermas, Adorno, Blumenberg, Arendt, Heidegger, Lyotard, and Derrida. Recognizing this important feature of Foucault's work requires that we reinterpret some of his central claims as against the reception structured by such critics as Habermas and Derrida.

The standard interpretation of Foucault which I want to cast doubt on is one that leaves him in a difficult bind. The bind is that his image of modernity as increasingly swept up in an insidious form of disciplinary rationality leaves us with impossibly little wiggle room by which we may come to free ourselves of our disciplinary constitution. On this interpretation, a stifled and disturbed Foucault offers us little better than, in Richard Rorty's catchy phrase, 'more and more sophisticated expressions of resentment'.⁴ Even more sympathetic critics such as James Bernauer similarly hold that 'confinements are the central experiences that Foucault's work describes'.⁵ These familiar images commonly attributed to Foucault are obviously patterned, whether consciously or not, after Weber's famous assertion of the 'iron cage' of modern rationalization. That Foucault is commonly interpreted along such Weberian lines can be witnessed in the standard interpretations of both *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*.

In common accounts of *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault is described as tracing the history of a western rationality that would separate itself from its primary other, namely madness, so as to exclude it from modern culture. For example, in his excellent book on Foucault's archaeologies, Gary Gutting presents Foucault as charting the 'suppression', 'conceptual exclusion', and 'condemnation' of madness by reason. According to this common line of interpretation, Foucault near the end of the book issues a desperate cry on behalf of those banished madmen in lyrically invoking the names of Nietzsche and Artaud, Sade and Hölderlin. Gutting finds in these closing pages Foucault's 'romantic desire to see madness as an infrarational source of fundamental truth'.⁶ The received wisdom on *Madness and Civilization*, then, is that it is a lamentation of modern reason's domination of madness, a domination that seems to leave us all, including Foucault himself, helplessly trapped in the iron cage of modern rationality.

Having interpreted *Madness and Civilization* in this way, a number of critics have rallied to the defense of the frenzied madness which Foucault supposedly finds rigorously excluded by modern rationality. We are not as trapped as Foucault suggests, they argue, because irrationality and its correlate forms of freedom were never totally excluded by reason. One of Foucault's most provocative critics even went so far as to argue that madness had always remained lodged at the very heart of reason itself. Kierkegaard's line that 'the instant of decision is madness', was placed by Derrida as an epigram to his essay on Foucault and Descartes. In the essay itself, Derrida disparagingly referred to Foucault's book as a 'Cartesian gesture for the twentieth century' because it seems to intern Cartesian reason itself, a claim clarified by Derrida's reference to Foucault's supposed 'revolution against reason'. Derrida made two related claims in lodging this complaint. First, he claimed that Foucault understood modern reason as attempting the internment of madness. Second, he claimed that this internment is an impossible project which could never work. Derrida wrote of philosophical rationality that it is 'the reassurance given against the anguish of being mad at the point of greatest proximity to madness'. Derrida was thus able to claim what Foucault never could have: 'this crisis in which reason is madder than madness . . . and in which madness is more rational than reason . . . this crisis has always begun and is interminable'.⁷ Derrida's two claims, in short, were that reason can never fully exclude madness and that Foucault had said that it could. As Foucault would put it in his rebuttal essay years later, the picture offered by Derrida is one in which 'philosophical discourse is finally excluded from excluding madness'.⁸ In conceptualizing the relation between philosophy and madness in the manner here described by Foucault, Derrida had taken himself to be rebutting Foucault since he had considered Foucault to be claiming that modern philosophical rationality had successfully excluded madness.

What all this shows, Derrida thought, was that in accepting reason's claim of dominance over madness, Foucault had capitulated too soon. The dominance of madness by reason was, Derrida insisted, impossible since madness was always buried within the heart of reason itself. Derrida went on to make an impressive career out of this conclusion and the style of argumentation which yielded it. Much of his later work can be seen as variations on the theme that madness remains lodged within reason as simultaneously its condition of possibility and its condition of impossibility. Derrida improvised on this point right up to his final years, in which he surveyed his own work as 'keeping within

reason, however mad it might appear'.⁹ A key idea running throughout all of Derrida's work is that Unreason (writing, undecidability, madness, violence) unceasingly haunts Reason (speech, decidability, rationality, law). Derrida's key terms (trace, *différance*, aporia) are so many attempts to state this unstatable non-meaning at the heart of all meaning. The crux of deconstruction can thus be not too unfairly glossed by the following formula: the deconstruction of x reveals a y which is simultaneously the condition of the possibility of x and the condition of the impossibility of x .

Returning now to Foucault, it is notable that almost identical misinterpretations structured the reception of his later work, most notably the image of modernity presented in *Discipline and Punish*. On the standard accounts of this work, Foucault was diagramming for us the workings of an insidious and unbeatable form of power which had over the course of the past few hundred years come to structure modern society, modern knowledge, modern law, and even modern subjectivity itself. It is Foucault's point, commentator after commentator declared, that we cannot free ourselves from the exercise of modern discipline. The Panopticon, once thought to be a mere architectural innovation, turned out to be a diagram for the whole of modern society itself. We have so thoroughly internalized panopticism that we inhabit that mode of thinking nearly everywhere: we accept and even embrace discipline in our factories, our workplaces, our schools, our hospitals, our prisons, and above all in ourselves. On such a reading, Foucault is seen as a deep pessimist about modernity who had argued that we are swept up in a power which renders freedom totally impossible. As Frank Lentricchia put the point, Foucault 'cannot explain why he himself is not a mindless zombie, how he himself can mount a criticism of the system'.¹⁰

Critics interpreting Foucault in this way, and there are many passages which one could mount as evidence in favor of this interpretation, were quick to castigate him for leaving us moderns in so submissive a posture. Freedom is surely not as caged up as Foucault tells us, they insisted. A freedom liberated from the grip of power is in fact the very essence of modernity, they consoled themselves. One of Foucault's best critics on this point was Habermas. His criticism was that Foucault's interpretation of modernity under the sign of disciplinary power eviscerates from modernity the very premise of emancipation that is the condition of possibility of modern reflection at all. This led Foucault into a performative contradiction, meaning that his diatribe took place under the very conditions of modern freedom which it had announced as impossible – Foucault's critique, Habermas argued, performed precisely what it had insisted cannot be done.¹¹

Turning now to the broader reception of Foucault's work as a whole, a curious fact about the standard interpretations of Foucault has thus far escaped the notice of most critics. Thinkers who usually see themselves as opposed to one another – for instance, Derrida and Habermas – found themselves aligned against Foucault on the very same points and by deploying the very same assumptions. It is remarkable that two thinkers as otherwise disparate as Derrida and Habermas would find common ground not only in disagreeing with Foucault, but also in the terms in which they articulated that disagreement. The goal common between them is that of showing the way out of a strong form of the Weberian logic of differentiation which they together attribute to Foucault.

This common goal suggests, however, that perhaps it is Derrida and Habermas, and not Foucault, who understand modernity in terms of the familiar Weberian oppositions.

Both Derrida and Habermas impute to Foucault a view which I do not find in him: the view that the basic problems of modernity can be cast in terms of relations of exclusion and incorporation. According to this view, reason dominates madness by totally excluding it and power dominates freedom by totally incorporating it. Derrida sets out to rescue madness by showing how it is internal to reason. Habermas sets out to rescue freedom by showing how it is external to power. These are, to be sure, two very different rescue operations. Derrida wants to show, against Foucault, that reason's separation from madness is impossible whereas Habermas wants to show, against Foucault, that freedom's separation from power is necessary. Regardless of the viability and success of these two very interesting critical projects, my point here is simply that both theorists oppose Foucault in terms which he could not have accepted. Derrida thinks Foucault's view is that the modern exclusion (of madness) has already taken place. Habermas thinks Foucault's view is that modern exclusion (of power) was an impossible dream. But Foucault did not understand modernity in terms of the Weberian logic of differentiation suggested by these models of exclusion and incorporation. Derrida and Habermas may share enough common ground to be logically at odds with one another.¹² But Foucault evades their interminable debates by redrawing the intellectual historical terrain on which these issues are located.

Foucault thought it hopeless to think that we moderns should try either to liberate freedom from power (Habermas) or to locate madness within reason (Derrida).¹³ For Foucault, both of these positions were clear errors rooted in a failure to perceive the basic problematics of the modern experience. Madness and rationality, like freedom and power, presuppose one another in modernity. They are, in Foucault's phrase, 'reciprocal but incompatible'. Understanding this crucial aspect of Foucault's interpretation of modernity goes a long way towards clearing up interpretive difficulties invited by the thus far standard accounts of Foucault's thought.

The revised Foucault

Near the end of *Madness and Civilization* Foucault offered a striking characterization of his thesis in that book: 'Man and madman are bound by an impalpable connection of truth that is both reciprocal and incompatible.'¹⁴ I find this idea of reciprocal incompatibility crucially helpful for understanding Foucault. What this particular formulation suggests is an understanding of reason and madness not on the model of exclusion, but on the model of what I will call purification. Exclusion seeks to eliminate by means of separation, purification seeks to preserve by means of separation. Exclusion is the logic of war where the enemy must be eliminated. Purification is the logic of a modernity in which reason must preserve madness as its other, in which clinical medicine must isolate health from illness while at the same time requiring the preservation of illness as the abnormal other against which normal health can be recognized, and in which punishment must preserve criminality rather than eliminate it in order to justify the continued need for the disciplinary apparatus itself. The proper response to exclusion would be the liberation from domination or exile. The proper response to purification would be what Foucault variously calls experimentation or transgression, or what we might call hybridization. Foucault has been read by critics and disciples alike as sketching a modernity of

exclusion to which liberation is the only possible (but hardly efficacious) response. I would like to now show that Foucault is better read as sketching a modernity of purification to which transgression is the most effective reply.

I take Foucault's point to be that the relations between pairs like madness and reason or power and freedom constitute the very problematic of modernity itself. What Foucault's historical problematizations demonstrate is that these relations are an intractable problem for moderns such that they are constitutive of the modern condition as such. To complain that Foucault failed to fully liberate either side of these oppositional terms from the total repression of the other, then, is to entirely miss his point. Foucault's point was that these terms are reciprocal but incompatible: they can neither be fully liberated from one another nor totally assimilated to one another. Reason or power could never fully dominate madness or freedom – and at the very same time, these terms could never be fully detached from one another. Assuming either a rational freedom purified of mad power or a rational power at root identical with a mad freedom is precisely what would be the most difficult thing for us moderns to do.

This can be clarified by focusing attention on what was for Foucault a crucial point: categories like madness and reason are not universal and invariant. Foucault did not theorize madness, reason, freedom, and power in their universal senses. Rather, he was concerned to describe the precise historical shapes assumed in their specific instantiations. Foucault described various powers, but not power itself; he traced the shape of modern rationalities, but not the structure of universal reason itself; freedoms and madnesses, not Freedom, not Madness. As such, Foucault simply could not have been interested in liberating invariant experiences of madness or freedom from their repression by unwavering rationality or power. What Foucault always insisted upon, rather, was that our problem today consists in bringing these reciprocal yet incompatible aspects of modernity into more explicit tension with one another. What he insisted upon with various key concepts such as transgression, experimentation, aesthetics of existence, bodies and pleasures, and self-creation was a form of critical practice in which we manifestly assumed the intertwining of our power and our freedom as a basis for elaborating ourselves and our relations to one another. To expand upon the revised interpretation of Foucault which I am here offering, let me return again to *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*.

John Rajchman notes a point about Foucault which he finds troubling: '[m]any had found in [Foucault's] early work a kind of romanticism about madness.' Rajchman and others, including Clare O'Farrell, have attempted to correct this perception by revisiting the passages at the end of *Madness and Civilization*. On the alternative view, these passages witness not a celebration of a repressed madness that artists like Nietzsche or Goya could liberate, but rather the idea that, as O'Farrell puts it, '[t]he work of art can only resemble or produce an *effect* of madness, it is not the language of madness itself'. It is not that Nietzsche is for Foucault a forgotten madman, but rather that Nietzsche is capable of reinvigorating a forgotten dialogue between madness and reason. The basic modern problem to which Foucault finds Nietzsche as a possible response is that, as O'Farrell explicates Foucault, '[w]hat Descartes does in fact is banish the possibility of a dialogue with the Other. Truth can only be found within the limits of the Same – reason.'¹⁵ Foucault laments not Nietzsche the excluded madman, but the fact that a

Nietzsche can, as he puts it, no longer be 'on the border of reason and unreason' since that border is precisely what modern purification rejects.¹⁶

For Foucault, madness is not banished by reason, because madness and reason are simultaneously produced as incapable of interaction. Foucault's text does not witness reason's subjugation of madness so much as a more insidious separation of reason from madness. It is not that some former reality of madness is held at bay by the production of reason, it is rather that madness and reason in their modern form are simultaneously produced as incoherent with one another. Foucault is clear on this point: 'In the Renaissance, madness was present everywhere and mingled with every experience by its images or its dangers. During the classical period, madness was shown, but on the other side of bars. . . . Compared to the incessant dialogue of reason and madness during the Renaissance, classical internment had been a silencing.'¹⁷ Foucault thus notes that his study of madness and rationality aims to 'go back toward the decision that simultaneously links and separates reason and madness; it must aim to uncover the perpetual exchange, the obscure common root, the original confrontation that gives meaning to the unity, as well as to the opposition, of sense and non-sense'.¹⁸ We must aim, it is Foucault's point, to restore that broken interaction where madness and rationality interact.

It is, however, undeniable that *Madness and Civilization* remains deeply ambiguous regarding the status of madness in modern culture. In the earlier chapters on the classical age, Foucault often seems to be describing reason's separation from madness in the interests of exclusion such that he appears to be just the kind of quasi-romantic emancipator of madness that most critics have taken him to be. In later chapters on the modern age proper, however, Foucault inches page by page closer to a description of reason's separation from madness as in the interests of a ritual purification of rationality that would not exclude madness but rather keep it separate as the necessary other of reason.¹⁹ While *Madness and Civilization* therefore provides ample evidence for both interpretations, it is worth taking seriously the periodization implicit in the book itself. For if Foucault sees modernity as beginning with a ritual exclusion of madness by reason that later gives way to a milder purification of madness and reason, then the upshot of the book would seem to be a claim for purification as a basic problem facing modernity.

That Foucault himself understood modernity in this latter sense is confirmed, I believe, in his next major statement on madness and reason, the 1963 essay 'A Preface to Transgression'. The Nietzschean concept of transgression elaborated there was to prove crucial to all of Foucault's subsequent work. Important for my purposes here, this call to transgression makes sense only against the background of an understanding of modernity as enacting a purification rather than a rationalizing exclusion. In this essay Foucault hopes that 'perhaps one day [transgression] will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought'. If contradiction relates to an older modernity fascinated with exclusion and opposition, then transgression relates to a newer modernity fascinated with preservation by way of purification. The key difference is that 'transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses' whereas contradiction describes not an impassable limit but an unthinkable thought. Contradiction and dialectic are related through the old categories of appearance and reality, whereas limit and transgression are related as continually overcoming and preserving one another. Thus for Foucault, 'limit and transgression

depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable [differentiating it from contradiction] and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows [differentiating it from dialectic]'. Limit and transgression are reciprocal yet incompatible.²⁰

In this essay, Foucault finds an important exemplar for transgression in 'the possibility of the mad philosopher'.²¹ He must be thinking of Nietzsche here, who is named throughout the rest of the essay even though it is ostensibly devoted to Bataille. This idea of the mad philosopher nicely clarifies earlier claims from *Madness and Civilization*. For a mad philosopher would precisely be the kind of experimentalist, like Nietzsche, who sought to restore the broken dialogue between reason and madness, between the light of clarity and the frenzy of confusion, between Apollo and Dionysus. Such an experimentalist would be at once mad and philosophical, thereby transgressing the limit between reason and madness which forms a core problem of our modernity. Such transgression, in any event, could make sense for Foucault only if he understood modernity in terms of a purification of reason and madness whereby a divide or limit was instituted between the two so as to preserve each in its purified form. Transgression would make no sense in a dialectical world of contradiction according to which reason everywhere banishes and excludes a madness that would be essentially foreign to modern culture itself. Foucault therefore does not mourn a banished madman, but rather that much less noticed silencing of the narrow border between reason and unreason in which all the mad philosophers raise their shouts.

Foucault's position can be further clarified by a brief look at Nietzsche. Nietzsche's work time and again returns to themes closely resembling Foucault's idea of the reciprocal but incompatible tendencies of romantic madness and calculative rationality.²² 'There are ages,' Nietzsche wrote early in his career, 'in which the rational man and the intuitive man stand side by side, the one in fear of intuition, the other with scorn for abstraction. The latter is just as irrational as the former is inartistic.'²³ This contrast between inartistic rationality and intuitive irrationality expresses Nietzsche's more well-known contrast, discussed around the same time in his *The Birth of Tragedy*, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. While Nietzsche, like Foucault, is often seen as a romantic celebrant of Dionysian irrationality, a closer reading of his work sustains the view that Nietzsche recognizes a value in both Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies. What he deplores is not Apollonian culture, but the kind of Socratic culture which disrupts the interaction of Apollo and Dionysus by subjugating the latter. It is in this spirit that he wrote that 'the intricate relation of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in tragedy may really be symbolized by a fraternal union of the two deities: Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; and Apollo, finally, the language of Dionysus and so the highest goal of tragedy and of all art is attained'.²⁴ Later on, in his *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche restated this view. He contrasts the metaphysical 'faith in opposite values' to the possibility that 'what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things'. He then goes on to defend 'a doctrine of the reciprocal dependence of the "good" and the "wicked" drives' while mocking the metaphysicians who 'continue to talk of opposites where there are only degrees and many subtleties of

gradation'.²⁵ Nietzsche's insistence here on 'reciprocal dependence' suggests an experimentalism that would later much impress Foucault. It is thus worth noting that in his only detailed discussion of Nietzsche's work Foucault ends with a call for 'experimentation on ourselves' which he would echo again in the final months of his life in describing as 'experimental' the 'historico-critical attitude' which he finds crucial for modernity.²⁶

There is an important symmetry between Foucault's earlier work on modern reason and his later work on modern power. In a sense, freedom and madness harbor the same promise of liberation for us moderns. But it was Foucault's point that positive transformation is to be sought elsewhere than in liberation. Madness is neither subject to nor can it be liberated from reason; and freedom stands in the same relation to power. Foucault's point, I think, is that we must develop practices which intensify the tensions between madness and reason or freedom and power. This intensification is what Foucault, following Nietzsche, sought to elaborate with his crucial concepts of transgression and experimentation.

Seen in this light, Foucault's point in *Discipline and Punish* was not that we are trapped in power, nor that we should be pessimistic about freedom, nor that modernity was a bad thing. Foucault, rather, sought to carefully elaborate the difficulty we moderns face in our task of simultaneously negotiating freedom and power. The complex idea Foucault was striving to articulate and which so many of his critics have misunderstood was that freedom and power can be neither dissociated nor assimilated. They must be deployed simultaneously so that we can work within the internal tensions of their relationships. But in purifying freedom and power, we moderns have too often understood our problem to be either that of maintaining a rigorous separation of these two (Habermas) or that of showing them to have been unified all along (Derrida). In contrast to these simpler pro-modern and anti-modern perspectives, Foucault explored the complex series of relations between freedom and power. He thus found himself working as an experimentalist at the interstices where freedom and power connect.

This remains a point which Foucault's critics have found it enormously difficult to grasp. To take just one example, Béatrice Han ends her recent excellent study of Foucault with the disappointing observation that Foucault is 'very ambivalent' on the question of freedom insofar as he found himself over the course of his life 'more and more torn between two irreconcilable extremes'. She explicates these 'two interpretations of subjectivation' as follows:

On the one hand, the subject appears as autonomous, as the source of the problematizations of what he is and as a free actor in the practices through which he transforms himself. On the other, he is shown by the genealogical analyses to be inserted into a set of relations of power and practices that are subjecting to various degrees, and that define the very conditions of possibility for the constitution of self.

The upshot of the massive difference between these two views is, says Han, a 'fundamental ambivalence' in which it is 'very difficult to say if, for [Foucault], the subject is constrained or constituted'.²⁷ And yet this was precisely Foucault's point. It is difficult for us moderns to say whether we are constraining or constituting ourselves. If this were easy, then things would look very different than they do now in the sense that the

problems we now understand ourselves to be facing would have vanished into the rarefied air of an antiquity. Critics such as Han are effectively complaining that Foucault leaves us staring into the vacuum of the very ambivalence which he so patiently sought to focus our attention on. It is not Foucault who is ambivalent – it is the problematic of our modernity itself that is torn between two seemingly irreconcilable tendencies.

The precise point of Foucault's genealogies of modern power has therefore been badly misunderstood by critics from Habermas to Han.²⁸ Foucault's claim is that modernity produces autonomous freedom and disciplinary power as two reciprocal but incompatible aspects of our political existence. Foucault's model is not one of the exclusion of opposites, but of the purification of reciprocal incompatibles. Modern power-knowledge is described in *Discipline and Punish* as functioning 'according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding . . . and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution'. Foucault describes his work in this book as tracing '[t]he constant division between the normal and the abnormal'.²⁹ The point of the delinquency which *Discipline and Punish* traces the genealogy of is not to exclude the criminal, the mad, and the free romantic, but to preserve them by dividing them off from the legal, the sane, and the docile. In his Collège de France course lectures he was giving at the time *Discipline and Punish* was published, Foucault described the changing face of power in the modern age as the passage 'from a technology of power that drives out, excludes, banishes, marginalizes, and represses, to a fundamentally positive power that fashions, observes, knows, and multiplies itself on the basis of its own effects'.³⁰ Foucault's contrast here is between division by way of repressive exclusion and division by way of productive categorization. The formerly excluded 'other' is now included within the reach of a positive power which preserves the 'abnormal' as the ever-present inverse of the normal. Foucault's point, put in general terms, is that freedom and power now stand in a relationship of reciprocal incompatibility in which they both imply one another and oppose one another such that neither is capable of overturning the other. Could this be the meaning of Foucault's often-quoted but little-understood claim in his late essay 'The Subject and Power'? 'Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are "free"'.³¹ Perhaps Foucault is not here offering a normative recommendation for freedom as a positive counterweight to power. Perhaps Foucault is here rather urging the point that modern power and freedom are reciprocally incompatible such that they both require one another and cannot be mixed with one another. His point would thus not be that freedom is good and power is bad – for both have their advantages and disadvantages. His point would be that modern conceptions of freedom as autonomy and modern conceptions of power as disciplinary are tied up with one another such that transforming one requires transforming the other. This is of course, as noted above, only one way of reading this cryptic claim that has generated already an enormous amount of critical attention. The important point in the context of the present discussion is simply that Foucault in the late 1970s was continually clarifying a view according to which autonomous freedom and disciplinary and biopolitical powers were the reciprocal but incompatible conditions of one another.

Foucault recognized this general relation of the reciprocal incompatibility of modern power and freedom in a variety of contexts. He described it in biopolitical regimes thus: 'freedom is nothing else but the correlative of the deployment of apparatuses of

security.³² But despite the shifting terrain of political and epistemic circumstance, it remained Foucault's point that power and freedom in modernity are almost always purified of one another. This general point was most fully developed in the context of Foucault's genealogies of disciplinary power and autonomous freedom. One of the central theses of *Discipline and Punish* had been that freedom as autonomy and power as discipline both require one another and require their separation from one another. Discipline can neither banish nor incorporate autonomy, because power must preserve freedom as its purified other. Autonomy for Foucault is therefore not a mere illusive effect of discipline, but is a real force to which discipline must oppose itself in order to do its work. Autonomy and discipline thus instantiate Foucault's more general point about modern forms of freedom and power: complex practices of autonomy–freedom–liberation and complex practices of discipline–security–biopower emerge in tandem as effectively purified of one another. As Foucault himself put it, 'The "Enlightenment", which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines'.³³ This discovery and this invention: they were the same process.

Understanding Foucault's problematization of modern hybrids of power and freedom in these terms has the further advantage of helping us recognize that his late work on ethics never sought to rehabilitate an autonomous form of freedom as a site of resistance to an increasingly irresistible disciplinary complex of power and knowledge. To long for autonomy and emancipatory practices of freedom in the face of repressive power is precisely to miss the crux of the problem as Foucault stated it. The problem we now face, according to Foucault's elaboration, is that there is no pure freedom to be emancipated just as there is no pure power to dominate it. Modernity produces autonomous freedom and disciplinary power as two reciprocal but incompatible aspects of our political existence. It is not that disciplinary power eliminates freedom, just as it is not that modern rationality eliminates madness. It is rather that power and freedom are simultaneously produced so as to render autonomous freedom ineffective against disciplinary power. And yet freedom in modernity is often understood in romantic terms of total autonomy opposed to the total dependency induced by the utilitarian efficiency of disciplinary power. But, it is Foucault's point, just as madness finds itself in no position to question reason in the modern age, freedom understood on the modern model of autonomy finds itself hardly equipped to oppose power on the model of discipline.

Foucault therefore held that freedom in the sense of resistance must be sought elsewhere than in the romantic ideal of freedom in the sense of autonomy. This point is important because it enables us to recognize that Foucault was a friend of freedom even if he was not impressed by the modern paradigm of freedom as autonomy. The crucial thing about that paradigm is that autonomy is an image of freedom purified from power, whereas in actual fact autonomous freedom and disciplinary power constantly invoke one another in their operation. One of the central points of *Discipline and Punish* had been that autonomous individuality is one of the intended effects of disciplinary power, rather than a predisciplinary capacity for freedom which might seek its revenge on power.³⁴ In other work written around the same time Foucault argued that 'opposing the individual and his interests' to disciplinary power is to be avoided. Modern 'political rationality' effects 'both individualization and totalization', and so it follows that '[I]beration can come only from attacking not just one of these two effects but political

rationality's very roots'.³⁵ Foucault's point is that the freedom to do what one likes, the autonomy of the paradigmatically modern romantic private self, is not adequate as resistance to modern forms of power.

Freedom in the form of resistance, as Foucault practised and understood it, must work through, not merely against, power. This means trading in the model of freedom as autonomy for a more experimental model of freedom. David Hoy notes this point well in his discussion of Foucault's work on freedom as resistance: 'Resistance is never simply to constraint in general, because one is always constrained by something or other. There is no originary freedom with absolutely no constraints.'³⁶ Just as Foucault's concept of transgression would seek to restore a broken dialogue between madness and rationality, his concept of experimentalist resistance envisions intensified interactions between freedom and power. Experimental freedom is a practice where discipline and autonomy are no longer purified of one another, and is therefore a practice which strictly speaking is neither disciplined nor autonomous. As such, it requires neither the metaphysical voluntarism nor the metaphysical determinism which so many of Foucault's early critics have imputed to him.

But does all this suggest that Foucault really was an anti-modern insofar as he was disconcerted by the specifically modern model of freedom as autonomy? On the contrary, Foucault explicitly defended modern models of freedom, only not those models given over to the romantic dream of autonomy and therefore also to the disciplinary model of power.

My argument relies on a distinction I have been invoking and which I now want to make explicit: Foucault's work requires that we distinguish between freedom as a doctrinal right to private autonomy and freedom as a critical-experimental practice of resistance.³⁷ Freedom in the latter sense of transformative resistance can and must work at those crucial interstices where modern autonomous freedom and modern disciplinary power interlock and intersect. Foucault did not find a positive conception of freedom in the idea of autonomy working against power, but rather in the idea of experimental resistance working through, in, and alongside of power. This, it was Foucault's point, is the way in which freedom really can transform a situation. Far from being anti-modern, this notion of freedom resonates remarkably well with many quintessential modern freedom movements. So it is not Foucault's point that we need regard modernity as a trap – his more modest point was simply that the modern conception of an autonomous freedom totally liberated from power is but a corollary of disciplinary power.

Armed with a distinction between autonomous freedom and experimental freedom, I would like to now risk an interpretation of the overall trajectory of Foucault's work from the early 1970s forward. Foucault's genealogies of modern culture increasingly came to emphasize the point that disciplinary power and autonomous freedom were reciprocally but incompatibly implicated in the same sets of institutional apparatus. When he is writing in this mode, Foucault often seems unexcited about freedom, indeed even disdainful of it. This is because the purification of autonomous freedom and disciplinary power which his genealogies reveal describe one of the most intractable problems of modernity. But once Foucault finally got clear on this problem, he was able to turn his attention to responding to it, and it is here that we find him making more positive references to freedom. Later on, when Foucault began to explore the value of freedom, it is

not autonomous freedom that he holds in high esteem but the freedom of experimentation and resistance. In reviewing Foucault's texts when he was working out this shift from genealogical analyses of power and autonomy to ethical responses in the form of experimental resistance in the years between 1975 and 1980, one is easily puzzled by a seeming deep ambiguity in Foucault's: at times he is clearly unexcited about freedom and yet at other times clearly in favor of freedom.³⁸

This puzzlement is dissipated if we regard Foucault in these years as working out a very delicate distinction between modern autonomous freedom and modern experimental freedom. On this view we can freely acknowledge that there are real difficulties in Foucault's work between 1975 and 1980. This view holds that Foucault was working out a distinction between autonomy and experimentation in these years, not that his work during this period instantiated this distinction in any straightforwardly clear fashion. When we find Foucault writing about freedom in these years, he is indeed often ambiguous. And there is no easy way for us to resolve these ambiguities. But what we can do is to realize that in the years before this transitional period Foucault most often wrote of freedom in the negative sense of autonomy, while in the years after this transitional period he tended to write of freedom in the positive sense of resistance and experimentation. In the years in between, we have access not to Foucault's decisive claims for or against freedom, but to his very interesting attempts to work out a way of distinguishing what is good in freedom (experimental resistance) from what is bad in freedom (autonomous willing).

This story about the development of Foucault's thought can be made more convincing by pausing to consider just one particularly interesting example. Consider Foucault's discussion of 'counter-conduct' in his 1978 course lectures, *Security, Territory, Population*. Foucault introduces 'counter-conduct' as a name for something that he calls 'resistance, refusal, or revolt'. His usage of these terms in other writings makes it amply clear that Foucault is at the very least interested in the positive potential of counter-conduct – furthermore, he also refers to ascetic practices in a way that directly anticipates his later work on an ethics of freedom. This counter-conduct is a form of freedom 'in the sense of a struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others'.³⁹ This counter-conduct is thus a potential form of the experimental freedom of resistance. While everything he needed to develop freedom as experimental resistance was here present, it is also quite clear that Foucault had not yet arrived at a solution to what he took to be his problem. Indeed it seems as if at times he does not yet have the problem in full view. And so he was unable at this time to take up counter-conduct and rework it into a form of freedom as resistance which might offer an alternative to freedom in the form of autonomy. But we can in this text at least glimpse the beginning of a solution. Foucault would return the next year in his 1979 course lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, to an analysis (which oddly continues to surprise many of his commentators) of those forms of governance endorsed by the German Ordo-liberals and the American Chicago economists in the postwar period. One of the best representatives of this strand of liberal political philosophy, for both his accessibility and his rigor, is F. A. Hayek. But far from endorsing in his lectures the Hayekian liberal mode of governance, Foucault in these lectures should be seen as attempting to get clear on the way in which disciplinary powers and autonomous freedoms were purified of one another in the tradition of liberal thought. Hayekian

thought is particularly useful for understanding liberalism in this way just insofar as this version of liberalism revolves around this distinction between public power and private freedom. Having thus clarified the terms of his problematic in 1979, Foucault could then go on in later years to more fully develop the notion of counter-conduct and the non-autonomous freedom of ascesis he had only briefly ventured into in 1978. This led him into a long and detailed exploration of ancient forms of freedom as experimental self-work, not autonomous self-legislation, that would occupy him for the rest of his life. He would not live to finish this exploration.⁴⁰

Whereas the standard modern conception of freedom as autonomy is strangely complicit (in the sense of reciprocal incompatibility) with disciplinary power, Foucault's conception of freedom as experimentation is meant to offer resistance to both disciplinary power and autonomous freedom. This is indeed the point of it. Distinguishing two conceptions of freedom in this way clarifies a crucial point established by Foucault's work. Difficult as it may seem, and it was precisely Foucault's point that it would be difficult, resistance to modern practices of power requires resistance to modern practices of freedom. This twin resistance to power and freedom suggests an integral connection between the two such that the transformation of either requires the transformation of both. Experimentally freeing ourselves of any particular powers circulating through us necessarily involves freeing ourselves of the freedoms through which we enable that circulation. Or, to put the same point in the vocabulary enabled by my distinction, experimentally resisting any negative forms of power which circulate through us necessarily involves experimentally resisting certain forms of autonomy which assist that power. Judith Butler suggests precisely this view in much of her work, including her work on Foucault in which she at one point offers this helpful description of his practice of critique: 'To be critical of an authority that poses as absolute requires a critical practice that has self-transformation at its core.'⁴¹ In a discussion of practices of resistance in one of his course lectures, Foucault offered a formulation which credits the interpretation which I, following Butler, am urging: 'there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.'⁴²

The interpretation of Foucault I am urging establishes a far greater continuity between Foucault's work on power and ethics than critics usually acknowledge.⁴³ The work on ethics is best understood as a direct response to the work on politics – it is an attempt to explore an alternative form of freedom to that conception of autonomous freedom complicit in the deadlock of disciplinary power. It would have made little sense for Foucault's late work on ethical practices of freedom to have aimed at an elaboration of modern practices of freedom as autonomy since his middle work on power had highlighted this as part of the very problem of modernity. Foucault in his late work did not abandon his earlier theses about modern power in order to elaborate a theory of modern autonomous freedom which these theses had explicitly invalidated.⁴⁴ Contrary to this familiar misinterpretation, the middle work on power can be seen as providing the problematic context to which the late work on alternative forms of freedom is written as a potential response. Foucault's late work elaborates practices of freedom which respond to the deep problems set by our reciprocal but incompatible practices of modern disciplinary power and modern autonomous freedom.

Foucault on the problem of modernity

To return, in conclusion, to Foucault's broader interpretation of modernity, my point here is that his positive views about transgression and experimentation can only be made sense of on the basis of revising those familiar misinterpretations of Foucault's understanding of modernity which I have considered above. For Foucault, modernity is not an age of exclusion and domination. Indeed, if Foucault had seen modernity in these familiar Weberian terms, then it would be difficult to explain his hesitancy about modern notions of liberation and autonomy. Liberation and autonomy are clearly the best answers to exclusion and domination. But perhaps Foucault was asking a different sort of question: what if our most dangerous problems are not those obvious forms of exclusion of which we are all aware but rather those unobvious forms of purification and reciprocal incompatibility which are so difficult to recognize in both others and ourselves?

If Foucault was indeed working with this different interpretation of modernity, then his famous doubts about certain modern forms of freedom make sense. For if modernity presents us with the dangerous problem of reciprocal incompatibility, then autonomy and liberation are less helpful ways of responding to this danger than are transgression and experimentation. I have here argued that Foucault developed genealogies of modernity in which the basic problematic of modernity is that of reciprocal incompatibility. Taking aim at the heart of modernity as understood in *this* way, Foucault quite plausibly argued that transgression and experimentation are the best responses we currently have to the purifying logic of our most dangerous reciprocal incompatibles.

Notes

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1. Paras (2006); on certain problems in Paras' book see my review essay (Koopman, 2007).
2. Recent revisionist scholarship notwithstanding, the best of which is Scaff (1991[1989]) and Hennis (1988[1987]), most continue to interpret Weber's theory of modernity according to these classic terms of bureaucratic rationalization as they were established by Löwith (1932), Bendix (1966) and above all Parsons (1968[1937]). See Swedberg (2005: 226) on the current state of Weber scholarship concerning this concept.
3. While most critics have not often explicitly connected Foucault's thought to Weber's, my claim is that they have explicated Foucault in terms of Weberian concepts which were not really his. The existing comparative literature which is explicit about Foucault and Weber almost unanimously affirms a tight connection between the two; see O'Neill (1986), Dews (1987), Gordon (1987), Turner (1987), Owen (1994) and Szokolczai (1998). In a similar vein, Fraser (1981) sees Foucault as arguing for Weberian conclusions but without being Weberian enough. An important exception which explicitly refuses to interpret Foucault in Weberian categories is Dean (1994). Also notable are those who claim a Foucault–Weber alliance but on the basis of an interpretation of Weber which abandons the influential sociological interpretation handed down by Parsons and Habermas in favor of a nuanced interpretation according to which Weber

was like Foucault in attempting to fashion a critical apparatus for understanding and responding to the core problems of modernity – see for this type of claim work by Rabinow (1982, 2003). A further point which I offer (forthcoming) is that by detaching Foucault from Weber we can then explore more promising and seemingly more unlikely resonances of Foucault's thought with other major non-Weberian thinkers of the 20th century such as Bruno Latour and John Dewey.

4. Rorty (1981: 6).
5. Bernauer (1990: 16).
6. Gutting (1989: 71, 74, 89, 109).
7. Derrida (1963: 31, 36, 59, 62).
8. Foucault (1998[1972]: 413).
9. Derrida (2005: 151).
10. Lentricchia (1988: 70).
11. Habermas (1981, 1985) and Fraser (1981); see related criticisms by Walzer (1986[1983]), Taylor (1986[1984]) and McCarthy (1990).
12. On the seeming impasse between Derrida and Habermas see helpful work by Bernstein (1991) and Hoy (1993[1989]).
13. For a response to Derrida see Foucault (1998[1972]) and for an indirect reply to Habermas see Foucault (2000[1982a]).
14. Foucault (1965[1961]) quoted in Eribon (1991: 97); this passage is from the longer version of *Histoire de la Folie* recently translated into English.
15. Rajchman (1985: 117) and O'Farrell (1989: 78, 74).
16. Foucault (1965[1961]: 287).
17. Foucault (1965[1961]: 70, 261–2).
18. Foucault (1965[1961]) quoted in Derrida (1963: 43); from the longer version of *Histoire de la Folie* recently translated into English.
19. Gutting (1989: 89–91) helpfully registers this shifting emphasis through *Madness and Civilization*.
20. Foucault (1998[1963]: 72, 73).
21. Foucault (1998[1963]: 80).
22. Note, however, that while Foucault sensibly restricted this idea to his descriptions of modernity, Nietzsche incautiously deployed it much more widely, a point which is helpfully discussed by Sluga (2002, 2005).
23. Nietzsche (1993[1873]: § 2).
24. Nietzsche (1967[1872]: § 21).
25. Nietzsche (1989[1886]: § 2, § 23, § 24).
26. Foucault (1998[1971]: 388; and 1997[1984]: 316).
27. Han (2002[1998]: 175, 185, 172).
28. While Habermas' charges have certainly not gone unanswered, my response differs from those of most previous defenders of Foucault insofar as the tendency thus far has been to read Foucault's late work on ethics as an answer to the challenging question about power posed by Habermas; see exemplary discussions by Kelly (1994) and Osborne (1999). I insist, on the contrary, that we cannot answer Habermas with Foucault. This is because Habermas put his questions in a form that misinterprets Foucault's project. Rather than answering Habermas,

my approach is to show that Foucault was setting up a different problem than the typical Weberian problems which Habermas addressed.

29. Foucault (1995[1975a]: 199).
30. Foucault (2003[1975b]: 48) essentially recapitulating Foucault (1995[1975a]: 194).
31. Foucault 2000[1982a]: 342). In terms of my account below of Foucault's development of a distinction between 'autonomous freedom' and 'experimental-resistance freedom' in the years from 1975 to 1980, the quoted claim still fits my view insofar as I agree with Arnold Davidson that the composition of the second half of this essay probably dates from 1978 and not from 1982 when it was first published as an appendix to the Rabinow and Dreyfus volume.
32. Foucault (2007[1978]: 48); cf. Clifford (2001: 121).
33. Foucault (1995[1975a]: 222).
34. Foucault (1995[1975a]: 184 ff.).
35. Foucault (2000[1979]: 325); these claims by Foucault are helpfully discussed by Gordon (1991).
36. Hoy (2004: 100).
37. Rajchman similarly distinguishes between 'practical' and 'ideal' freedom in Foucault and he specified the former as 'rooted not in autonomy or the capacity to determine actions according to rules all must rationally accept, but rather in the unwillingness to comply, the refusal to acquiesce, to fit ourselves in the practices through which we understand and rule ourselves and each other', and therefore 'freedom not as the end of domination but as revolt within its practices' (Rajchman, 1985: 92, 115). Rose more recently urges that we 'distinguish freedom as a formula of resistance from freedom as a formula of power' (Rose, 1999: 65). The view I defend thus diverges from the claims of Oksala and others who find in Foucault an explicitly modern conception of freedom which is primarily 'autonomy among individuals' (Oksala, 2005: 183).
38. I am thinking specifically of such works as 'The Subject and Power' (2000[1982a]), the *Security, Territory, Population* (1978) course lectures, the forthcoming translation of *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1979) course lectures, and various other essays and interviews from this period.
39. Foucault (2007[1978]: 201).
40. My interpretation of Foucault's work from these years clearly counters two prevailing trends: that one which asserts that Foucault himself became something of a neo-liberal (cf. Paras [2006]) and that one which holds that governmentality is the master key to all of Foucault's work subsequent to *Discipline and Punish* (cf. Gordon [1991] and Lemke [2002]).
41. Butler (2002: 218); on Butler's complicated relationship to Foucault see Allen (1999), for helpful commentary on Butler's essay see Hoy (2004: 93–100).
42. Foucault (2005[1982b]: 252).
43. Others arguing for important continuities between the so-called middle and late works are McWhorter (1999: 189 ff.), O'Leary (2002: 107 ff.), Oksala (2005: 157 ff.), Hofmeyr (2006) and Allen (2008: 45 ff.).
44. Among those arguing for a basic incoherence between the so-called middle and late works are Dews (1989), McCarthy (1990), Han (2002[1998]) and Paras (2006).

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