Do We Need a New Biography of Michel Foucault?

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In the 34 years since his death, there has been no lack of interest in Michel Foucault's work. His ideas continue to be analysed, critiqued, utilised, and cited, across an ever-broadening range of disciplines. New books of material by Foucault, whether lecture courses or other previously unpublished material, have appeared at a rapid rate over the last twenty years. Most of these have been quickly translated into English and other languages. Yet there has been no new biography of Foucault for twenty-five years. Didier Eribon's biography was translated in 1991, and David Macey's *The Lives of Michel Foucault* and James Miller's *The Passions of Michel Foucault* both appeared in 1993.

Naturally, some of the many books on Foucault have had biographical elements, of which David Halperin's *Saint Foucault* (1995) is perhaps the key example. But that book, as with so many other interpretations and analyses had a rather different purpose than a biography in a strict sense. It was to read Foucault as a gay saint, a figure who could be held up as an exemplar of a particular way of life. I do not doubt that he can be that, but he was of course much more. The second and third editions of Eribon's biography, which appeared in French in 1992 and 2011, are important. The third, in particular, includes a lot of new material, and its English translation is overdue: the existing translation is of the first French edition (1989). Eribon's *Michel Foucault et ses contemporains* also includes a lot of biographical material, and there are biographical discussions in his *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (1999, 2004). Macey moved onto other topics before his own early death in 2011. His biography will be reissued by Verso in 2019, with an afterword by me.

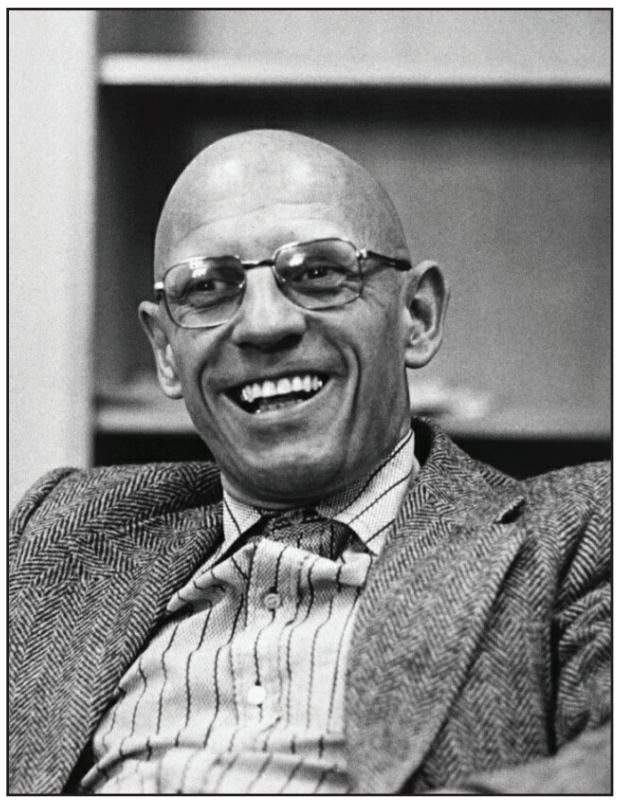
While Eribon and Macey are hard to beat in terms of their analysis and breadth of coverage, a large amount of new material has come to light in the past several years. Beginning in 1997, all Foucault's courses at the *Collège de France* have been published under the general editorship of François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana. The last of these appeared in French in 2015 and is currently being translated by Graham Burchell. A number of other volumes of material have appeared posthumously. These include Foucault's Introduction to his translation of Kant's *Anthropology*, originally submitted as part of his secondary thesis. Lecture courses from Toronto, Louvain, Berkeley, and Dartmouth have all been published, as well as volumes of interviews, radio addresses, and other talks. His activist work with the *Groupe d'Information sur les prisons* (GIP) has been collected in two French volumes edited by Philippe Artières and others (2003, 2013), and an English translation of some of this material is forthcoming. In 2013, the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BnF) bought a large collection of Foucault's papers from his partner, Daniel Defert, and much of this is now available to researchers. Led by Foucault's nephew, Henri-Paul Fruchaud, and with the assistance of Daniele Lorenzini, Ariana Sforzini, Elisabetta Basso and others, some of this material has been published, and a future programme is underway. In recent years we have had, for example, an early 1960s text on madness, the introduction to an early draft of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and a text on Homer dating from the same period. And perhaps the most eagerly awaited, the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*, *Les aveux de la chair,* was published in February 2018.

Some recent books on Foucault have made use of this newly available material to fill out their analysis of Foucault. This was certainly the impetus behind my own studies *Foucault's Last Decade* (2016), *Foucault: The Birth of Power* (2017) and one for which the research is still ongoing, *The Early Foucault*. With each of these, taking the periods 1974-84, 1969-74, and 1950-61 respectively, I have tried to outline Foucault's intellectual history through a juxtaposition of his writings and speeches, his interviews, his lectures and reading notes, developing and enriching the story of what was familiar with the newly available resources. A fourth book on the 1960s may follow. But I was always clear that these books were not biographies, or fragments of one.

There are many aspects of Foucault's life and career which could be fruitfully explored or revisited.

Part of the reason that I, and I suspect others, have been reluctant to try to write a new biography of Foucault is the quality of previous attempts. There seems little point in undertaking such a project unless someone genuinely felt it could be done better. In terms of the material we now have access to, some elements of this work would undoubtedly be easier, though I am continually amazed at how perceptive Eribon and Macey were, given what we now know, and how much of that was unavailable to them. But they also had access to a much richer resource. Many of Foucault's teachers and contemporaries were still alive, and were interviewed or opened up private archives. Because Foucault died at such a young age, there were a large number of people who had known him at all stages of his life still alive. Now, given that Foucault was born 91 years ago, this pool of people is much diminished. While there are naturally still many people who knew him in the 1970s and 1980s, for earlier periods there are far fewer witnesses. The majority of those were key informants for the earlier biographers.

Of course, biographies of long-dead writers, artists and other historical figures continue to be written. Yet the best of these are not just re-examinations of the same evidence, but make use of previously unavailable or underexplored material. Often the most significant resource is the subject's correspondence. With Foucault we do not have this, and it is not at all clear that we will in the future. Defert has said that Foucault rarely kept correspondence sent to him, and it is unclear what proportion of letters he sent were copied or still exist in the correspondents' papers. I know of some material available in archives, but it is often available only with restricted access—no copying or right of quotation, for example. Some of the correspondents, entirely rightly, have said that the letters sent to them will go with them to the grave. There are thus good reasons why nobody has added to the list of the biographies published within a decade of Foucault's death.



Michel Foucault, 1926-1984

And yet, there are many aspects of Foucault's life and career which could be fruitfully explored or revisited. Foucault's time in Tunisia between 1966 and 1968 was politically and intellectually important for him, and some of the lecture courses there are due to be published. His time in Vincennes, while brief, was also crucial for his career. His lecture course there on Nietzsche can now be consulted in the archive, along with notes for a second course on sexuality and heredity, and one student's notes on Nietzsche are online. Foucault's political activism has been thoroughly explored in relation to the GIP, but less so in relation to the parallel *Groupe Information Santé*. Other lectures, from a 1964 course on sexuality at Clermont-Ferrand, to lectures in Brazil and the USA, to a sequence of courses in Lille in the 1950s (many of which were also given at the *École normale supérieure*), are extant, as are some student notes, and will be published.

In the mid-late 1950s Foucault was employed outside France, initially at the Maison de France in Uppsala, and then in briefer cultural postings in Warsaw and Hamburg. Relatively little is known about the second and third of these, and no materials relating to his teaching from this time seems to have survived, although a recent book in Polish adds considerably to the story of the period in Warsaw. For the whole of his career though we have archival boxes of Foucault's reading notes. I made use of many of these in my recent studies, but much more could be done with this material. While filled thematically, rather than chronologically, and undated, these notes trace the preparatory work for his courses and writings. His own library is somewhat fragmented, with a collection of works dedicated to him now owned by Yale University's Beinecke library, but work on this could be invaluable. Equally, Foucault's intellectual notebooks—a kind of journal of work being undertaken—still exist at the BnF though are not, as far as I know, available for consultation.

Much of this, of course, challenges Foucault's 'no posthumous publications' stipulation. That wish,

Elden continued on page 23

Cook continued from page 9

Before this, in 1912, a lack of money meant that Schmitt couldn't marry an unnamed Jewish woman. And, while Schmitt's exposed his anti-Semitism in works published after 1933, "his diaries and other evidence documented life-long anti-Semitic attitudes and affects. Schmitt himself spoke of his "Jewish complex." Only through his diaries have we learned how intense his friendship with the Jews were before 1933." Mehring suggests a love-hate relationship with Semitism and that Schmitt's anti-Semitism "fed not least off his resentment of his own background, a permanent source of suffering for the social climber."

Mehring's biography also highlights Schmitt's consistent search for a transcendent historical figure or institution grounded in "the political unity of the earth;" though "[i]n his search for a fundamental order, Schmitt gradually had to abandon all political systems and alternatives." Before this, Schmitt had "justified to himself his support for executive dictatorial power in terms of a theology of history." While his "association of a dawning new age with the hope for a new ruler of the world…legitimized National Socialism," after 1941 "he spoke about the 'Reich' in less affirmative terms and referred more ambiguously to the 'nomos of the earth.'"

For much of his adult life, Schmitt sought the *katechon*, the figure who would create divine order and delay the arrival of the anti-Christ; though "only…in the face of the coming defeat of the 'Reich', did he make public his concept of the *katechon*—as the salvic core of his idea of the Reich—and begin to look for new 'delayers,' 'retarders and accelerators.'"

The search for some form of integrated and grounded (in some senses, divine) order led Schmitt to dismiss romanticism, because it was "a failed attempt at escaping the original faith," and both a party political and a pluralist state, because they refused a unity at the level of the state (with plurality only being legitimate in the relation between states). (A psychological explanation, either in the terms of Oedipalization or Kleinian partial objects, seems readily available.)

A psychological account would, for me, have added something to this account of Schmitt's theories because, unlike Mehring, I'm not convinced that Schmitt's "political views are thoroughly discredited" and that something akin to his "statism, nationalism and [the] anti-Semitism of Weimar no longer exist." The international rise of anti-Muslim (and, in many cases, anti-Semitic) populist parties and politicians, for me, renders such a view hard to sustain and leads to a profound interest in not just the social and political conditions that have given rise to this phenomenon but also its psychological conditions. I am not suggesting that the same psychological conditions operate. I'm simply interested in the psychological conditions that gave rise to Schmitt's theories.

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Bogue continued from page 11

reaffirmed that impersonal life, the anexact event of *a* life, shortly before he committed suicide and laid to rest the struggling organism that could no longer write and work.

In her introduction, Beckman voices her apprehensions upon undertaking this critical biography, listing as arguments against the project the existence of Dosse's lengthy biography, the massive and ever-expanding corpus of Deleuze scholarship, and Deleuze's own rejection of traditional conceptions of the individual, the body, temporality, and history so central to standard biographies. The idea "of capturing a life and drawing it into a linear narrative," she observes, "of focusing on 'man,' of thinking that we could somehow organize, understand and 'know' life according to chronological structures, is a project that Deleuze himself would vehemently resist." It is fortunate for us that, despite such misgivings, Beckman decided to pursue her project, for what has emerged from this effort is a truly Deleuzian "Life and Thought of Deleuze." With great intelligence, sensitivity and creativity, Beckman has "thought with" Deleuze, made an offer of posthumous friendship, and celebrated the anexact life that passed through the human being named Deleuze and that continues to play through the works he created. It is hard to imagine a finer tribute to this philosopher than the graceful and moving critical biography Beckman has given us.

Both a Distinguished Research Professor and a Josiah Meigs Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Georgia, Ronald Bogue retired in 2014, continuing to both conduct research as well as serve on graduate committees. His books include Deleuze and Guattari *(1989),* Deleuze on Literature *(2003),* Deleuze on Cinema *(2003),* Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts *(2003), and* Deleuze's Wake *(2004).*

Elden continued from page 12

found on a note left in his apartment, structured the posthumous Foucault industry for several years. In 1994 the collection *Dits et écrits* was published, edited by Defert and Ewald. This truly significant four-volume work, for which we still do not have a complete English translation, brought together almost all the publications which had appeared in Foucault's lifetime, in any language. A few pieces were missed, some unauthorised pieces were omitted, and many more have appeared since, but it was still a definitive work. The interpretation was that this was a posthumous collection, not a new publication. With the lecture courses the initial claim was that these were simply transcriptions of recordings in the public domain, but over time editors made more and more use of the manuscript lecture notes, and other preparatory material. With the earliest courses, which were among the last to be published, there were no extant recordings, so they made use of the notes entirely. But there had been volumes of material published in the interim which had already stretched this interpretation to breaking point, and the publication of the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality* shows its end. This volume, which Foucault was very close to completion at his death and which he was revising even in hospital, might well have been the *first* posthumous publication.

It will likely not be the last. Some of the listed boxes of the BnF archive contain materials relating to the *History of Sexuality* in its original, thematic plan—Foucault replaced that plan, outlined in the first volume, with the more historical version he was close to completion at the time of his death. There are strong indications that substantial parts of some of the initially promised volumes survive. There are manuscripts on Nietzsche dating back to the 1950s, and writings on literature and art which have sometimes been mentioned before. More materials relating to radio appearances exist, and there are untranscribed recordings of lectures and discussions from various places in archives. More may still yet exist in private collections. One important early piece of writing, long thought lost and not kept by Foucault himself, was recently rediscovered.

If Foucault was serious about not wanting material published, why did he keep so much? For years there were stories of manuscripts being completely destroyed, only for these same things to be found in the archive. As well as unpublished work, there are two drafts of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and material relating to several other published books. While some is carefully preserved—I was able to read draft versions of nearly all the chapters of the actually published second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*—other material was turned into scrap paper, and reading notes appear on its reverse.

The archive is not yet fully accessible, and its catalogue is only slowly being completed. While it is surely right to preserve things in the order Foucault left them, cross-referencing and indexing would make research there more effective. Given the huge range of material, the lack of dating, and Foucault's frequently difficult handwriting, this is a substantial task. My sense is that all this writing, of which a selection is likely to be published over the next several years, will continue to transform and enrich our understanding of Foucault's intellectual development and preoccupations. It will doubtless inspire yet more studies utilising and developing his ideas. But I am not yet sure that it provides the material needed to write a new biography.

Stuart Elden is Professor of Political Theory and Geography at the University of Warwick and Monash Warwick Professor in the Faculty of Arts, Monash University. His books include the forthcoming Shakespearean Territories *(2018),* Foucault: The Birth of Power *(2017),* Foucault's Last Decade *(2016), and* The Birth of Territory *(2013), which was awarded the Association of American Geographers Meridian Book Award for Outstanding Scholarly Work in Geography. Elden current book projects include studies of Georges Canguillem and of the early Foucault.*