Michel Foucault

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This extract from my PhD thesis[i] provides a short biographical introduction and overview of oeuvre of the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault.[ii] Foucault was born in Poitiers in 1926 and he died in Paris in 1984. Foucault was educated at the famous *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in Paris. He became a lecturer in Paris and later in Lille. Between 1955 and 1960 Foucault left France to work as a cultural attaché, successively in Sweden, Poland and Germany. Back in France in 1961 he defended his doctoral research on the history of madness and on Kant's anthropology, which he had also worked on during his foreign stay. He had posts as a lecturer in the French city of Clermond-Ferrand and another foreign stay followed in 1968 in Tunis. In 1970 Foucault became elected professor in the 'history of systems of thought' at the prestigious *Collège de France* in Paris where he gave public lectures that attracted big (international) audiences. Foucault became a much-demanded lecturer around the world. The last years of his life he spent much time in the United States, especially in San Francisco, teaching at the University of Berkeley.

Foucault was a critical philosopher, and a public figure, known in France as well as elsewhere for his social engagement and activism. His research focused on the history of madness, of crime and punishment and of sexuality. His research themes and his engagement with the causes of repressed social groups and emancipatory movements were surely related to, but by no means exclusively determined by his own experiences as a homosexual. Whereas in his early career Foucault tried to dissociate his personal life from his work as a philosopher, in the later years of his career his personal concerns were more openly connected to his work. He enjoyed the new liberties in such cities as San Francisco. His untimely death in 1984 at age 57 was due to AIDS.

As a philosopher Foucault was not searching for eternally valid, metaphysical answers to the question of what human beings and society are, but he investigated how conceptions of humans about their own existence develop in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts. In a beautiful personal portrait Paul Veyne[iii], described how his friend and colleague Foucault could be characterized as a contemporary 'Skeptic'. Indeed Foucault was critical and suspicious of the proclamation of general truths and ideologies. The purpose of this skepticism was to create space for societal change by showing that what seems necessary is often

arbitrary. Foucault's activism was not in conflict with his skepticism about 'the truth', but was based in his belief that 'effort' and 'commitment' are required to give historical developments a turn for the better. Maybe this makes Foucault even more a contemporary 'Cynic', as he provoked established truths in such an activist way.

Foucault's career is characterized by changing perspectives. Looking back, he spoke himself about three periods, which he described as: 'knowledge', 'power' and 'subject' (roughly the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's). In addition, in the beginning of his career (1950's) Foucault published about psychology and psychopathology.[iv]

In each of these periods (especially the three main periods) he has had much success and attracted a following, although, the readers have rarely followed Foucault in his successive turns. Many have their favorite Foucault at the expense of the other 'Foucaults'. In his homeland France the reception long remained focused on his early work on the history of the (human) sciences, while in the United States Foucault became a star-philosopher with his work on power. During the past fifteen years Foucault's late work on the subject is gradually being discovered and becoming more influential. Foucault's late work has been an important inspiration for the current trend of attributing more importance to the practice of ethics, the practical arts of living. The changes in reception of the work of Foucault are closely linked with new editions of writings that were less well-known during his lifetime. In 1994 the collected interviews and short texts (*Dits et Écrits*) were published. From 1997 on the lectures at the *Collège de France* are being published. These new texts shed new light on his already multifaceted oeuvre.

The later focus on ethics and the subject troubled many readers of Foucault, because this 'return of the subject' seemed at first sight a regression to notions Foucault had vehemently criticized earlier. I think however that by taking into account the shift in Foucault's later work from knowledge and power to ethics, Foucault's work is becoming all the more relevant for actual problems and discussions. One contemporary problem field where Foucault's approach is highly relevant is the influence of technology on our existence and on how we live our lives. I find his perspectives and insights very inspiring and helpful for elaborating a philosophy of technical mediation and subjectivation. However, for this project it has been necessary to revisit Foucault's work through the lens of the philosophy of technology, while at the same time combining his work on power with his later work on the subject.

My reading and interpretation of Foucault's work is thus distinct in two respects. Firstly, Foucault is read through the lens of the philosophy of technology. Secondly, his earlier work is reassessed from the perspective of his later work. In this way I will recombine ideas of Foucault in a way that he has not done to any great degree: I will show how the 'power of technology' can be recombined with the 'aesthetics of existence' from his later work. The result is a new understanding of the human subject in relation to the influence of technology. The approach emphasizes how users of technology experience and operate transformations of their mode of existence by engaging with new technologies. This view on 'subjectivation through technology use' offers on the one hand an alternative to the opposition between a technical and a genuine human sphere that figures in most ethical evaluations of technology (critical theory, Heidegger). On the other hand, while it has proven difficult to recombine research on 'technical mediation' and 'hybridization' (Latour) with ethics, this is precisely where 'subjectivation and technical mediation' offers a new perspective.

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i S. Dorrestijn (2012), *The design of our own lives: Technical mediation and subjectivation after Foucault*. Enschede: University of Twente (PhD thesis). See ch. 3.

ii See: Eribon, D. (1991). Michel Foucault (trans. Betsy Wing). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. (Michel Foucault: 1926-1984. Paris: Flammarion, 1989) ; Macey, D. (1993). The lives of Michel Foucault: A biography. New York: Pantheon Books; Macey, D. (2005). Michel Foucault. London: Reaktion Books.

iii Veyne, P. (2010). *Foucault, his thought, his character* (trans. J. Lloyd). Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity. (*Foucault, sa pensée, sa personne*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2008).

iv The following are some of Foucault's major works. In the early period Foucault published *Maladie mentale et personalité* (1954) (translated as *Mental illness and psychology*, 1987).

The passage to the 'knowledge' period is marked by Foucault's doctoral thesis, *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (1961) (*History of madness*, 2006). Then followed *Les mots et les choses* (1966) (*The order of things*, 1970) which is an absolute classic of twentieth century philosophy, and *L'archéologie du savoir* (1969) (*The archaeology of knowledge*, 1972).

In the period on power Foucault published another classic, *Surveiller et punir* (1975) (*Discipline and punish*, 1977), and *La volonté de savoir* (1976) (*The history of sexuality: Vol. 1. An introduction*, 1978).

The period on ethics is marked by *L'usage des plaisirs* (1984a) (*The use of pleasure*, 1992) and *Le souci de soi* (1984b) (*The care of the self*, 1990).