

While 'The Archaeology of Knowledge' is a dazzlingly original challenge to the sovereignty of intellectual activity, it is ultimately defeated by the very problems it seeks to address.

Or

The Methodological failure of the Foucauldian Archive

by Jeremy Hutchison

“His real beginning... is his awareness of being already inserted into the order of discourse. And yet Foucault himself in his work says, by almost any literary standard, original things. His *oeuvre* has a unity all of its own, and indeed a beginning all its own in the perceptions he has of history and language. As author then he dramatizes a vacillation between writing as discourse (the author is a function of the discourse, in this case, of interpretation) and writing *against* discourse.”¹

In his lucid review of *The Archaeology of Knowledge (AK)*, Edward Saïd investigates Foucault’s disenchantment with the idea of the author, a subjective source of knowledge. As he explains, Foucauldian archaeology sets out a radical destabilizing of cultural discourse by emphasizing the ‘trans-personal authority of texts’². Every text exists within a socio-historic system of enunciability³; a shared field of discourse made up of a ‘whole mass of texts’ by ‘so many authors who criticize one another, invalidate one another, pillage one another’⁴. Foucault defines this pluralistic body of authors, texts and discourses as an *archive*, and explains that it governs what we can say in any given historical moment. It follows that any author’s deductions are contingent on (and indeed reinforce) the archival formation of his/her time. So, we might reasonably ask, where does this leave our detached interrogator himself? If Foucault’s enterprise in *AK* is to challenge the cultural hegemony of discourse by presenting a reading from outside this ‘whole mass of texts’, then his task seems problematic from the start. For in writing about discourse, he necessarily enters into it, simply bolstering its grip.

¹ Edward Saïd, 'An Ethics of Language: Review of Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*', in Barry Smart (ed.) *Michel Foucault: critical assessments, Volume 2*, London, Routledge, 1994, p.87

² *ibid.*, p.69

³ Michel Foucault, ‘*The Archaeology of Knowledge*’, London, Routledge, 1972, p.146

⁴ *ibid.*, p.143

This short essay will explore some of the problems that plagued Foucault's challenge on historical positivity in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Paying particular attention to his discussion of the archive, we will encounter instances of a fundamental 'vacillation'⁵ that contaminated his work on theoretical and methodological levels. In the space allowed, I will attempt to show that his extraordinarily ambitious procedure is ultimately defeated by the problems it seeks to address.

To begin with, it may be useful to provide a little context for Foucault's archaeological approach with an acknowledgement of his debts. Let us remind ourselves of his definition of the archive as 'the system that governs the appearance of statements... grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations... with specific regularities'.⁶ As a number of critics (Steiner⁷, Saïd⁸, Piaget⁹) have been quick to point out, this depiction of a historically contingent system of enunciability bears striking resemblance to Thomas Kuhn's concept of the 'paradigm', published just two years before *AK*:

'Men whose research is based on shared paradigms are committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice. That commitment and the apparent

⁵ Saïd, 'An Ethics of Language', p.87

⁶ Michel Foucault, 'The Archaeology of Knowledge', p145

⁷ George Steiner, 'The Order of Things: Review of Michel Foucault's *An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*', in Barry Smart (ed.) *Michel Foucault: critical assessments, Volume 1*, London, Routledge, 1994, p.402

⁸ Saïd, 'An Ethics of Language', p.75-6

⁹ Jean Piaget, 'Structuralism', New York, Harper & Row, 1972, p.131

consensus it produces are prerequisites for normal science, i.e. for the genesis and continuation of a particular research tradition.’¹⁰

If we agree with the assessment that the ‘rules and standards’ of Kuhn’s paradigm antecede the ‘law’ and ‘system’ governing Foucault’s archive, then the archaeologist is shown, ironically, to borrow from his own archive to pronounce a radical uncovering of historical positivism. Were this reflexivity *directly* accounted for and the ‘consensus’ alluded to, all would be forgiven. It could usefully illustrate the trans-personal discursive system in action. But as George Steiner laments, the debt goes unacknowledged, an omission that serves, ironically, to perpetuate the myth of the historian as univocal authority: ‘The trouble is that Foucault speaks as if he were a solitary explorer, opening up silent seas.’¹¹ The archaeologist, however, anticipates such a challenge with the nimble disclaimer ‘it is not possible for us to describe our own archive, since it is from within these rules that we speak’¹². Thus, with a self-reflexive sidestep, Foucault cleverly disables a host of awkward epistemological questions (e.g. what is the *origin* of his purportedly ahistorical thinking?), allowing his own procedure to languish in the very illusions he goes to such measures to puncture. While this may be satisfactory for the moment, this simultaneous *involvement in* and *detachment from* the history of ideas points to a host of problems that will come to shadow the figure of the archaeologist.

¹⁰ Thomas Kuhn, 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions', Chicago, University of Chicago Press, revised edition, 1970, p.11

¹¹ George Steiner, 'The Order of Things: Review of Michel Foucault's An Archaeology of the Human Sciences', in Barry Smart (ed.) Michel Foucault: critical assessments, Volume 1, London, Routledge, 1994, p.403

¹² Michel Foucault, 'The Archaeology of Knowledge', p.146

Let us investigate for a moment these ‘rules’ that, Foucault tells us, connect discursive practices within our archive. Since ‘it is from within these rules that we speak’¹³, where then do they reside, and how exactly do they work? Around the time of his writing *AK*, Foucault describes archaeology as a ‘pure *description* of the facts of discourse’¹⁴ (my italics). One might reasonably assume then, that the rules of archaeology function as *descriptors*, in much the same way that grammatical rules allow schoolteachers to systematize linguistic phenomena. Not so. Foucault’s terminology clearly suggests that the rules actually *operate on* discourse: ‘The archive... *governs* the appearance of statements... *defines* the system of enunciability... it is that which *gives* to what we *can* say’¹⁵ (my italics). These rules must therefore be prescriptive; in order for us to obey them, they must be held within our minds. Yet, as he explains, neither is this the case. They are not ‘in men’s thought, in their consciousness or unconscious, in the sphere of transcendental constitutions.’¹⁶ As Dreyfus and Rabinow go to great pains to demonstrate, by attributing a causal efficacy to rules that - neither consciously nor unconsciously obeyed - can only ever play a descriptive function, Foucault’s archaeology vacillates between Structuralism and Phenomenology to devastating effect: ‘The very claim that discourse is *governed* by rules contradicts the project of the archaeologist.’¹⁷

As we shall see, this ambiguity with relation to the rules of discourse casts a fog that fatally obfuscates the archaeologist’s stance. For in order to do his job, he needs to exist

¹³ Michel Foucault, ‘The Archaeology of Knowledge’, p.146

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, ‘Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth (Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. 1)’, ed. Paul Rabinow, London, New Press, 2006, p.307

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, ‘The Archaeology of Knowledge’, p.146

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.121

¹⁷ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rainbow, ‘Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics’ Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1982, p.83

in perpetual vacillation, to effect what has variously been described as ‘double writing’¹⁸ or more vividly, an ‘ego-split’¹⁹. The nature of this condition is precarious, and operates on a number of levels. We shall investigate some of these in the following pages.

First, let us address a linguistic problem. The disappearance of man as the subject of discourse is central to Foucault’s discussion. Therefore, to pursue his archaeological line of enquiry, Foucault is inevitably forced to disappear as an author, to assume a position outside discourse in what he refers to as a ‘blank space’²⁰. To some extent, Saïd credits him with accomplishing this disappearing trick: ‘His oeuvre has a unity *all of its own*, and indeed a beginning *all its own* in the perceptions he has of history and language’²¹ (my italics). However, even were this radical epistemic break to be achieved, it would require him to build linguistic bridges, to *explain* the hitherto unexplored territory via a new discursive formation. Foucault does exactly this. He equips his archaeological procedure with its own catalogue of terms; ‘enunciative function’, ‘discursive formation’, ‘archive system’²². But this in turn poses a profound methodological problem: if the archaeologist is to stand outside history, supplying a ‘*pure* description of the facts of discourse’²³ then his language must also stand alongside him; pure, ahistorical, transparent, anonymous. Unfortunately, as both his disciples and critics have been quick to point out, his proliferation of terminology is anything but transparent. Indeed, it is unmistakably poetic. To his advocate Deleuze, his style ‘reaches the point where philosophy is

¹⁸ Edward Saïd, 'The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions', in Barry Smart (ed.) Michel Foucault: critical assessments, Volume 2, London, Routledge, 1994, p.90

¹⁹ Dreyfus and Rainbow, ‘Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics’, p.88

²⁰ Foucault, ‘The Archaeology of Knowledge’, p.17

²¹ Saïd, 'An Ethics of Language', p.87

²² Foucault, ‘The Archaeology of Knowledge’, p.148

²³ Michel Foucault, ‘Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth’, p.307

necessarily poetry'²⁴, while to Kermode, he is 'prone to a kind of self-intoxication that can produce prose resembling erudite poetry'²⁵. But it is Saïd who finally spells it out: 'An anonymous writer he clearly is not.'²⁶ We will return to this problem shortly, having examined Foucault's ego-split around questions of meaning.

In his analysis of the archive, the archaeologist is said to occupy a 'privileged position'²⁷. In revealing that any historical discourse is simply a dispersion of statements that were governed by a series of epiphenomenal rules, he can automatically dispel any claims to truth, meaning and intelligibility as naïve illusions. This suggestion that man cannot perform truth claims would be perfectly acceptable were it not for the archaeologist's fundamental dependence on them. Firstly, he depends on them as the *object* of his analysis. Without the 'historical a priori'²⁸, the archaeologist would have nothing to study, indeed nothing from which to liberate his reader. The survival of his discipline therefore depends on its never being realized. Dreyfus and Rabinow hold up this dilemma for inspection:

'The system works as long as everyone does not share the enlightened position of the archaeologist... The dawning of freedom from the illusion of serious truth and meaning must be constantly promised but constantly postponed.'²⁹

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, 'A New Archivist (The Archaeology of Knowledge), in Barry Smart (ed.) Michel Foucault: critical assessments, Volume 1, London, Routledge, 1994, p.392

²⁵ Frank Kermode, 'Crisis Critic: Review of The Anthology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language by Michel Foucault, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith', in Barry Smart (ed.) Michel Foucault: critical assessments, Volume 2, London, Routledge, 1994, p.8

²⁶ Saïd, 'An Ethics of Language', p.70

²⁷ Foucault, 'The Archaeology of Knowledge', p147

²⁸ *ibid.*, p143

²⁹ Dreyfus and Rainbow, 'Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics', p.95

Secondly, the archaeologist depends on truth claims as the *vehicle* of his analysis; he needs to find some way to *communicate* his uncovering of the archive. In order to do so, he must enter into a ‘horizon of intelligibility,’³⁰ formulating new statements, new truths, new definitions, even if these are simply located in the gaps between others (in ‘the difference of discourses’³¹). Thus a sinister paradox undermines the archaeologist’s task: in his attempt to articulate his interpretive act, he must reach for the very vehicles of meaning and truth that he seeks to dismantle.

The ultimate, and most sinister ‘ego-split’ extends well beyond the archaeologist’s reach, and into his cultural legacy. For in his failure to develop a register of language or intelligibility appropriate to his project, Foucault not only weakens his stance as the detached observer in a ‘blank space’, he actually does worse: he engenders a new discursive orthodoxy, complete with rules, concepts and terminology. And so in carrying out his activity, Foucault unwittingly trains a new army of disciples, arming them with the authoritative theories and methodologies of his archaeological discourse. What else, one might ask, can he do? The archaeologist is left with two choices: either he publishes his works, thereby introducing a new discourse into schools, academies, corporations and institutions, possibly upsetting the cultural hegemony on some levels but ultimately reinforcing the knowledge system he took such pains to critique. Alternatively, he avoids all these traps and keeps his thoughts to himself. Foucault, unsurprisingly, does both. He publishes *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in 1972, before committing himself to a ‘self-imposed silence’³².

³⁰ Dreyfus and Rainbow, ‘Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics’, p.86

³¹ Foucault, ‘The Archaeology of Knowledge’, p147

³² Dreyfus and Rainbow, ‘Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics’, p.100

This essay has tried to address some of the epistemological, methodological, linguistic and theoretical problems that undermine the critical philosophy Foucault lays out in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. It has explored the flaws inherent in the origin and communication of his system, along with the inevitable dilemma of the discursive legacy it engenders (to which the very existence of this essay is testament). By way of conclusion then, let us return to the citation that began this essay. Here is Saïd, providing generous defence on Foucault's behalf: 'His real beginning... is his awareness of being already inserted into the order of discourse.'³³ With this curt suggestion, Saïd seeks to explain away many of the problems raised in this essay. Were this 'real beginning' made explicit by Foucault himself, I would be inclined to agree. However, judging firstly by his failure to articulate this apology in *AK*, and secondly by the subsequent shift in his procedure³⁴, these problems simply indicate a devastating level of 'the unthought'³⁵ in early Foucauldian archaeology.

³³ Saïd, 'An Ethics of Language', p.87

³⁴ Dreyfus and Rainbow point to this methodological shift in clear terms; 'The Archaeology of Knowledge is followed by... two books in which the author, while still using archaeological techniques, no longer claims to speak from a position of phenomenological detachment.' Dreyfus and Rainbow, 'Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics', p.100

³⁵ This term, coined by Heidegger, is quoted by Dreyfus and Rainbow. *ibid.*, p.84

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