Michel Foucault's work was described at his death as “the most important event of thought in our century”. As a philosopher, historian, and political activist he most certainly left behind an enduring and influential body of work, but is this acclaim justified? Introducing Foucault places Foucault's work in its turbulent philosophical and political context, and critically explores his mission to expose the links between knowledge and power in the human sciences, their discourses and institutions.

Chris Horrocks, whose most recent publication is Introducing Baudrillard, explains how Foucault overturned our assumptions about the experience and perception of madness, sexuality and criminality, and the often brutal social practices of confinement, confession and discipline. He describes Foucault's engagement with psychiatry and clinical medicine, his political activism and the transgressive aspects of pleasure and desire which he promoted in his writing. Zoran Jevtic's inspired illustrations give an added dimension to this fascinating introduction to a major 20th century thinker.
Discourse

Foucault drops epistememes as the dominant principle in history and asserts discourse.

Discourses are not linguistics systems or just texts – they are practices, like the scientific discourse of psychoanalysis and its institutional, philosophical and scientific levels.

By analyzing statements – single units which constitute a discursive formation – we can see their constraints and where they situate the speaker.

In this case, the patient and analyst.

Rules of Discourse

There are three rules of forming discourse. Discourse requires …

**Surfaces of emergence**: social and cultural areas through which discourse appears, e.g. the family, work group or religious community.

**Authorities of delimitation**: institutions with knowledge and authority, like the law or the medical profession.

**Grids of specification**: a system by which different kinds of madness, say, can be related to each other in psychiatric discourse.

**Studying Discourse**

Foucault states that all history is a document of the past – the traces it leaves in our present through books, accounts, acts, buildings, customs.

But we should treat these documents like monuments – not for their reference to historical validity, but for themselves.

Documents should not be studied in order to determine their historical accuracy. This would be to reconstitute the “truth” of history.
Power/Knowledge

Prisons are major industries of power/knowledge.

Carceral society and its 'sciences', such as psychiatry, criminology, psychology and even sociology, ensure that the judges of normality are everywhere. "The carceral network constituted one of the armatures of this power/knowledge that has made the human sciences historically possible. Knowable man (soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct, etc.) is the object/effect of this analytical investment, of this domination/observation."

No power is exercised without the extraction, appropriation, distribution or retention of knowledge. At this level, we do not have knowledge on the one hand and society on the other, or science and state; we have the basic forms of "power/knowledge".

"Do not demand of politics that it restore the 'rights' of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to 'de-individualize' by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. Do not become enamoured of power."

Compliments and Criticisms

Discipline and Punish attracted great attention. Most reviews were favourable. "This book will send shock waves through the prison system. It will shake our faith in ethics."

Gilles Deleuze said: "... a very different picture, with different characters and processes, to that which traditional history, even if it is Marxist, has accustomed us."

Foucault has simply given us the reverse of the Enlightenment path to freedom: dystopian unfreedom.

J.G. Merquior:

"Foucault got many facts wrong. He omits the role of the French Revolution in the subsequent replacement of the public guillotine with incarceration. He overplays Enlightenment as a crippling disciplinary drive and he doesn't allow for human agency in his history – so he ends up with conspiracy theory."