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Michel Foucault (Routledge Critical Thinkers)



Synopsis

It is impossible to imagine contemporary critical theory without the work of Michel Foucault. His radical reworkings of the concepts of power, knowledge, discourse and identity have influenced the widest possible range of theories and impacted upon disciplinary fields from literary studies to anthropology. Aimed at students approaching Foucault's texts for the first time, this volume offers: an examination of Foucault's contexts* a guide to his key ideas* an overview of responses to his work* practical hints on 'using Foucault'* an annotated guide to his most influential works* suggestions for further reading. Challenging not just what we think but how we think, Foucault's work remains the subject of heated debate. Sara Mills' Michel Foucault offers an introduction to both the ideas and the debate, fully equipping student readers for an encounter with this most influential of thinkers.

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Customer Reviews

Sara Mills has published on feminism, post-colonial theory and linguistics. She is currently Research Professor at Sheffield Hallam University.

This book was pretty good.

Great guide!

This book is a great read, I suggest that anyone who is interested in rhetoric and composition get this book! It's an easy read and the author wrote it in a way you can understand it!

Michel Foucault is perhaps the one continental philosopher whom I can both understand and stomach. He has a peculiar attitude: he isn't a member of any particular school of philosophy, nor does he advocate any particular ideology. Nevertheless, many contemporary feminist and queer theory philosophers use him as a touchstone for developing their ideas. Sara Mills has done an excellent job in helping the reader understand Michel Foucault's key ideas. And, as always, there is a section at the end which lists all of Foucault's works, along with comments as to how readable and accessible the reader will find them. A great starting point for learning about Michel Foucault. John V. Karavitis.

Sara Mills' text on Michel Foucault is part of a recent series put out by the Routledge Press, designed under the general editorial direction of Robert Eaglestone (Royal Holloway, University of London), to explore the most recent and exciting ideas in intellectual development during the past century or so. To this end, figures such as Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur and other influential thinkers in critical thought are highlighted in the series, planned to include more than 21 volumes in all. Mills' text, following the pattern of the others, includes background information on Foucault and his significance, the key ideas and sources, and Foucault's continuing impact on other thinkers. As the series preface indicates, no critical thinker arises in a vacuum, so the context, influences and broader cultural environment are all important as a part of the study, something with which Foucault would agree. Why is Foucault included in this series? Foucault is probably second only to Jacques Derrida in influence on thinkers in the field of critical theory and cultural studies, and his impact has gone far beyond narrow intellectual confines to influence psychology, politics, literature, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, history and anthropology. Mills indicates that Foucault's primary focus is on issues of power, knowledge and discourse, with influence in the development of a lot of 'posts' - post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-Marxism, post-structuralism, etc. Foucault often concentrated on the ignored, the forgotten or the overlooked in his studies. In looking at the written confession of a murderer from generations ago, or looking at prisoners in present society, Foucault looks not only at the way power operates in practical settings, but what underpins the kind of power relationships. Heavily influenced by the events of 1968, with various forms of war and open rebellion going on across the globe (including

Foucault's native French society), he had an inherent distrust for the kinds of power and society relationships considered standard. His work with prisoners and those classified as mentally ill challenged prevailing notions of the intentions of incarceration and even classification - perhaps we can see even more clearly in today's mass-media-saturated society the inconsistencies, not only of application, but of intention in the development of considering who is a criminal (and what their punishment and rehabilitation is likely to be) and who is considered mentally ill - the shift care to confinement and isolation (effective removal) from society gains new meaning from Foucault's analysis. Foucault looks at power from a very basic position, not that of macroscopic geopolitical entities, but rather interpersonal relationships on a more local level, even exploring the way society uses body and sexuality as a root resource in formulating power relationships. It is worth noting that this issue is over the idea of the 'body', and not the 'individual', which for Foucault are not strictly synonymous. Looking at the history of sexuality (the freer periods of sexual frankness vis-à-vis the more strict and reserved periods such as the Victorian age) leads to another set of power relations often internalised and often overlooked. One of the useful features of the text is the side-bar boxes inserted at various points. For example, during the discussion on Foucault's development of Power and Institutions, there are brief discussions, set apart from the primary strand of the text, on the Marxist idea of ideology, developing further this idea should the reader not be familiar with it, or at least not in the way with which Foucault would be working with ideas derived from it. Each section on a key idea spans approximately twenty pages, with a brief summary concluding each, which gives a recap of the ideas (and provides a handy reference). Some of the concluding sections in this volume (unlike other volumes in the series) are not as handy as a recap, but do connect the primary ideas with the next chapter. The concluding chapter, After Foucault, highlights some key areas of development in relation to other thinkers, as well as points of possible exploration for the reader. Foucault's thought vis-à-vis feminist thought is dramatic and interesting, given Foucault's generally androcentric (and often misogynistic) stance in writing - still the issues of power relations and society are crucial to feminist critique. His post-colonialist ideas, again springing from the reformulation of power relationships in society after a dominant, foreign power is displaced, influenced further thinkers such as Edward Said. Foucault has (perhaps unintentionally) become useful for the anti-psychiatric lobby, as Foucault sees much defined as madness to be social construct rather than actual ailment (Foucault saw talk-therapy as a kind of modernised 'confessional'). There was only one point at which I had a serious disagreement with Mills in her analysis of Foucault. At one point in discussing his tendency toward not developing fully thought-out theories, she speculates that his kind of approach could possibly be used 'to justify fascism or to

deny the existence of the Holocaust'. I would disagree with this assessment, given that this would not in fact discredit systems of power, but merely replace one with another. If fascism or Holocaust-deniers were not a power-in-potential, that might be true. But then, this is a point upon which much discussion could continue! As do the other volumes in this series, Mills concludes with an annotated bibliography of works by Foucault (primarily those available in authoritative English translation), works on Foucault, and even internet references. While this series focuses intentionally upon critical literary theory and cultural studies, in fact this is only the starting point. For Foucault (as for others in this series) the expanse is far too broad to be drawn into such narrow guidelines, and the important and impact of the ideas extends out into the whole range of intellectual development. As intellectual endeavours of every sort depend upon language, understanding, and interpretation, the thorough comprehension of how and why we know what we know is crucial.

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