

## A Last Interview with French Philosopher Michel Foucault

Editor's Note: This is an interview conducted by Jamin Raskin in 'late March '1984, and published in the newspaper *City Paper* vol.8 no.3, 27 July — 2 August 1984. Raskin states that this is 'reconstructed to the best of my ability from notes, as Foucault did not want to be taped '(one should therefore be cautious in treating this as a source of Foucault's thoughts); that quote comes from the lengthy preamble to the interview, a preamble I have cut entirely.

**Raskin:** Monsieur Foucault, you are very kind to consent to an interview.

**Foucault:** In general, this is not something I like to do. There are translation problems, and of course problems of time. But you are a student and I pass my life with students. I gave an interview, in any case, to *Vanity Fair*, and if I am right, they asked me about two subjects: sex and politics. You Americans are not much interested in philosophy (laughter)... They asked me about Mitterand. Did you see it?

**Raskin:** No, I'm sorry. What did you say?

**Foucault:** I told them that philosophers should maintain a certain critical distance from politicians. It is known that corruption is often the result of intellectuals serving politicians — very often. I have not wanted to form a part of that very long historical process. Not that they would have me in any case...

**Raskin:** And what do you think of Mitterand?

**Foucault:** In the absence of anything better, I shall support the program of the Socialists. I recall something (Roland) Barthes once said about having political opinions "lightly held." Politics should not subsume your whole life as if you were a hot rabbit.

**Raskin:** You must mean, then, politics in the sense of electoral politics since much of your work, especially *The Archeology of Knowledge*, tries to show that politics appears everywhere, doesn't it?

**Foucault:** Exactly. Philosophers do not have to be engaged in the European Parliamentary elections or on the front page of *Le Monde* every day to exercise an influence. One does not have to be seen at the opera with famous personages. We should be aiding the students, workers, and everyone in the experiment of discovering meaning in everyday life. Philosophers, or perhaps I should say myself — I want to turn the gaze of time. Change the perspective. It's difficult enough with so much ambiguity in the world; I don't need to pass my time with politicians.

**Raskin:** You speak with some disapproval about the American appetite for sex, and yet you have written hundreds of pages about sexuality. One might say that this is one more example of French elitism...

**Foucault:** The type of sex they want to know about is the vulgar type which sells their magazines and has nothing to do with the poetic sensibility, sensuality, the appreciation of bodily love, the family of emotions and attitudes one can follow from Greek times to the Victorian era, where interest in sexuality reached dramatic levels.

**Raskin:** You think sex is bad today.

**Foucault:** Sex is boring today. I cannot even write about it anymore. I will give you a simple example. In early Greek times, one of the great characteristics of healthy sexuality was the occasional denial of satisfaction and desire. To see a beautiful young person and then not to touch him was a supreme virtue. This is a kind of aesthetic we do not value today. We do not comprehend denial.

**Raskin:** Do you think it is possible to create a social situation where beautiful aesthetic values and political themes concerning justice are honoured?

**Foucault:** Sometimes I fear that the young are so impressed with change and revolution, with the instrumental nature of political ideology, that they ignore what's going on in the present. Do not disquiet yourself about change in the future. You are in the face of responsibility enough with the crises in all of the institutions and structures where you study or eat or work. Therefore, I say study history, not the future. Study history to prepare for the future. One ought to read history into the artefacts and the news of the moment. Then the domains of past and present unite.

**Raskin:** That is what you mean when you use the word "archaeology" in the curious way you have used it.

**Foucault**<sup>1</sup>: I mean that everything possesses an interior history, a history of both the physical and spiritual type. Political, too, if you please. But I am afraid now, my friend, that our time is up. There is someone at the door. There is always someone at the door.

**Raskin**: May I ask a final question? It's the one I wanted most to ask. Do the structuralists have a way to go from the interpretation and unlocking of events and ideas to the remaking, the reconstruction of the world?

**Foucault**: I can suggest one thing. Search for what is good and strong and beautiful in your society and elaborate from there. Push outward. Always create from what you already have. Then you will know what to do.

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<sup>1</sup> This response is attributed to Raskin in the original publication, which context reveals is almost certainly an error — Ed.