

## Madness in/as/from Mental Illness: A Critical Commentary on Foucault's Concept of Madness

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Mikhaila Sarita

University of the Philippines – Baguio | [mpsarita@up.edu.ph](mailto:mpsarita@up.edu.ph)

In “Truth and Power”, an interview with Michel Foucault and Paul Rabinow, Foucault is primarily concerned about the direct and inseparable relationship between knowledge and power, and the lack of interest of contemporary intellectuals to discuss this relationship, *concretely* and *in detail*. Foucault forthwith arrests the weaknesses of the Marxist tradition at the time by asserting how it becomes an infertile ground for discourse surrounding science and its tenability. Most importantly, he begins the discussion by invoking the issue of psychiatry and medicine; the latter as a less dubious science than the former yet influenced by social structures. That is, psychiatry represents a shift in the discursive regime”; a transformation to the response to the question, “*what constitutes a scientific proposition?*”, hence, “*what is verifiable or falsifiable?*”

However, the elucidation of Foucault's ideas in “Truth and Power” are not as comprehensive compared to his other works because it relies entirely on a short interview with Foucault, where every question requires concise and precise answers in a brief amount of time. Therefore, I supplement “Truth and Power” with *Madness and Civilization* where Foucault articulates his position and problematizes the role of the State in character formation more explicitly. In this essay, I agree with Foucault's conclusion that the issue of madness is in the “political, economic, and institutional regime of the production of truth.” Furthermore, I argue that political and economic analyses are mutually inclusive with the greater reckoning of power relations at large, particularly with regard to psychiatry and internment. To do this, I first critique an argument Foucault makes in “Truth and Power” that understates political-economic analyses which is central to his conception of madness. Consequently, I will demonstrate how this is evident in his other work, *Madness and Civilization*. Then, I argue that a concrete and comprehensive political and economic analysis of madness is necessary to a complete understanding of power.

Forthwith, I want to address two phrases, in particular, that Foucault uses: “no doubt fairly limited importance” and “small importance” in *Madness and Civilization*. It appears that Foucault states a presupposition that his own prejudgment rooted in the state of the discourse of his time, which is not true of *all* economic analyses of psychiatry and internment. Indeed, by employing the terms “fairly” and “tendency” to qualify his judgment, he recognizes the intricacies and complexities of the subject in his statements. However, his answers further into the interview gives the impression that for Foucault, analyses on the level of economy are contradictory, if not, paradoxical, to a more *concrete* and *detailed* analysis of the level of power itself.

According to Foucault, the mechanics and exercise of power have never been ascertained by intellectuals on both ends of the political spectrum. As he explains in the latter part, this is on account of the role that the intellectual has moved from being the bearer of the universal in its conscious, elaborate form to working on more specific sectors with a more immediate and concrete awareness

of struggles.<sup>1</sup> This is the *status quo* in which Foucault situates his genealogical approach, a form of history that can “account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework.”<sup>2</sup> The ideological approach of Marxism is dispensed of, as posing the problems in terms of state apparatuses does not suffice. Surely, in a discussion of power, there is a need to go “beyond the limits of the state.”<sup>3</sup> Power has established control at the level of both the individual and the population.

Furthermore, Foucault dedicates chapter seven and eight of *Madness and Civilization* to considering the role of the State in the discourse of madness. In the preceding chapter, he briefly explains the rising demand for a political and economic analysis of the relationship between wealth, progress, institutions, and madness in the 18th century. He specifically used Montesquieu’s contrast between Roman and English suicide as a jumping-off point and Spurzheim’s synthesis as an exemplar. Following Spurzheim, he states, “The liberty of the mercantile state is ‘milieu’ and to this very degree it is the determining element of madness.”<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, in “The New Division,” Foucault elaborates on the historical movement from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in which the insane have become too “innocent” to remain confined in prison.<sup>5</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was unjust for the sane, however criminal, to be restricted in the same space as madmen in prison. During this time, crime was intertwined with madness and vice-versa, as if they were each other’s essence.<sup>6</sup> However, the notion of injustice was reversed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a shift that is contemporaneous with the revolution: it became unjust for the insane to be treated the same as criminals.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the attitude towards the confinement of the mad shifted during the emergence of the industrial period, in which the economy is contingent on poverty (scarcity of commodities and money) and population (labor with the potential to create wealth).<sup>8</sup> However, a poor population is antithetical to the growth of the economy in this era—labor cannot be scarce. Therefore, confinement of the mad was limited to certain categories, and madmen were awarded an amount of freedom.

However, I find this politico-economic analysis of madness lacking because madness is only incidental to the rising necessity of labor in a burgeoning capitalist economy. Although this case is indeed salient and concrete, it does not suffice to provide a detailed *comprehensive* account of madness and the State. The consequences of which may lead to the presumption of limited and small importance of the State within the broader framework of meta power. Spurzheim, who better articulated the emergence of madness in liberal England, also failed to illustrate the concrete and particular details of this rising phenomenon. Therefore, what I am attempting to do is highlight Foucault’s shortcomings in his political and economic analyses of madness, and that those analyses he referenced to does not diminish the potential role of the State in the overall mechanisms of power on the account of madness.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol.3*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Rober Hurley (New York: The New Press, 2001), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 118.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 123.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (Manhattan: Penguin Random House, 1965), 217.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 223.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 228.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 224.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 231.

Similarly, an article parallel to this interview is “Psychiatric Power” published in 1991 based on his lecture at Collège de France from 1973 to 1974. The article further exposes Foucault’s tendency to obfuscate the power of the State in psychiatry and internment. While the focus of my paper is madness, in a more general sense, I still argue that making the State and political economy a footnote is counter-intuitive to his objective of describing a meta-power concretely and comprehensively. It is intriguing to note how Foucault, having worked as a psychologist in Hospital Saint-Anne (a public hospital in Paris, France now called Sainte-Anne Hospital Center) in the early 1950s,<sup>9</sup> would overlook the economic implications of a Psychiatric internment. Admittedly, in *Mental Illness and Psychology*, he does explain earlier how the mad were ostracized from society starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and even emphasizes the omnipresence of the Hôpital Général all over France, where “madmen” were indefinitely interned.<sup>10</sup> He further observes that the cardinal sin was no longer, as it was in the Middle Ages, pride or greed, but *sloth* in the bourgeois world.<sup>11</sup> Although, he would later claim that Psychiatric internment has fairly limited economic importance—an evident Marxist orientation.

Moreover, Foucault seems to understate the effects of the State and political economy. One cannot help but wonder if Foucault, having died early in the—and due to the—AIDS epidemic, instead lived through it and witnessed the substantial and despicable role that the State played in the AIDS epidemic in America would have had then profundity to illuminate the role of the State in his own words, along with meta-power. Although he is an *early*<sup>12</sup> victim of the AIDS epidemic, signs of government neglect may already be subsistent, like that in the case of Rep. Philip Burton and Rep. Ted Weiss’ introduction of the first legislation in 1982 to allocate funding for AIDS research—who later died in committee.<sup>13</sup> To clarify my phrasing, *died due to the AIDS epidemic*; it remains ambiguous if Foucault contracted the disease accidentally or intentionally due to suicide.<sup>14</sup>

To further note, this critical commentary is not an attack on his character, especially as I empathize with Foucault, who also survived a suicide attempt early in his life, was politically active, and earnestly fought for marginalized people. However, I have to consider at least that Psychiatric power is posed negatively as an unintended, yet politically and economically instantiated, consequence of the State’s machinations. As Foucault elucidates the trend of madness-mental illness from the 18th and 19th centuries, transitioning from “psychiatry” to “anti-psychiatry”, has been to de-Pasteurize<sup>15</sup> and move towards a negative conception of madness-mental illness from a positive one<sup>16</sup>. While mental health is now typically seen as a spectrum, not as an absence of mental illness; the patient-doctor relationship remains to be an imbalanced relationship between authority, and powerlessness, in the part of the patient deciding on their diagnosis-intervention.

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<sup>9</sup> Hubert Deyfus, “Foreword” in *Mental Illness and Psychology*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (Oakland: University of California Press, 1962), vii–xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (Oakland: University of California Press, 1962), 67.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Gutting, “Michel Foucault,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified August 5, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/foucault/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Timeline of the HIV and AIDS Epidemic,” HIV.gov, accessed August 9, 2023, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline/>.

<sup>14</sup> John Carvalho, “Fact and Fiction: Writing the Difference between Suicide and Death,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 4 (2006), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0004.006>.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, “Psychiatric Power,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rainbow, trans. Robert Hurley et.al., (New York: The New Press, 2001), 38–60.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, 73.

In my first-hand experience<sup>17</sup> of the discontinuity of scientific development in psychiatry in the Philippines surrounding the adjustment of my medication by different Psychiatrists over the years which was still following a traditional application of scientific experimentation. Now, psychiatry has instead become evidently a “question of victory and submission”.<sup>18</sup> Madness-mental illness is no longer inscribed on the “truth-error-consciousness” but on the axis “passion-will-freedom”<sup>19</sup>, i.e., madness is evaluated more in comparison to normal behavior than delusion, manifesting not as impaired judgement but as a disruption in actions, volition, emotions, decision-making, and autonomy. For example, “I am mentally ill not strictly because I cannot discern reality or that my cognitive abilities have declined due to my mental illness but because I cannot keep up with my hygiene.” Similarly, mental illness becomes an issue of “not praying enough”, “not doing enough”, or “not friendly enough”. To provide further illustration, due to the lack of resources (especially in public hospitals and mental health centers), the patient is no longer discharged when they have become “reasonable” but when they have the willingness to conform to the production of truth machinated only by what the Psychiatrist expects.<sup>20</sup> While a Psychiatrist follows a medical procedure in examining and determining the *sanity* of the patient, it more or less becomes a question of whether or not the Psychiatrist assigned to you believes you—or whether or not they are even available to talk to you. Unlike the 18<sup>th</sup> century way of illustrating the discontinuity through the use of isolation rooms, the ironic difference is that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we may no longer be kept in isolation rooms but in Psychiatric *social* ward, separated from society—we are alienated from society: dominated, pacified, and assimilated. Foucault’s assertion that what is called “mental illness” in modern psychiatry is merely “alienated madness, alienated in the psychology that has itself made possible,” is validated.<sup>21</sup> Foucault also makes a substantial point in reversing the supposed causal relationship of alienation and madness, i.e., one is mad not because they are alienated, but rather, one is alienated because one is mad. As I was mad and I am mad in more ways than one, a hotline calls to ask for help is confronted with an automated message, *sorry you do not have enough load to make this call*. The alienation because of madness is further reinforced.

As I proceed with my last discussion, I contend that while the analyses of the “political economy” of truth may be amiss in its current form, reckoning with power beyond the limits of the State (at the minimum) is not mutually exclusive with addressing meta-power in the form of political and economic apparatuses. Indeed, the conception of power as never anything negative (such as ideological and repressive) is inadequate in “capturing the productive aspect of power.”<sup>22</sup> The State as a meta power “can only take hold and secure its flooring where it is rooted in a whole series of multiple and indefinite power relations that supply the necessary basis for the great negative forms of power.”<sup>23</sup> However, while we attest that this general power behind regimes of truth is the “condition of the formation and development of capitalism” itself, the specific political-economic situation within capitalism should not be undermined in turn. Incidentally, if Foucault truly does not “want to say the State isn’t important”<sup>24</sup>, is it not reasonable to expect more conviction from him in stating why it *is*

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<sup>17</sup> I received in-patient psychiatric care at a mental health institution, as well as out-patient care with multiple Psychiatrists over the years.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, “Psychiatric Power,” 43.

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, “Psychiatric Power,” 42.

<sup>20</sup> The Psychiatrist is also known as “the master of madness” See Foucault, “Psychiatric Power,” 43.

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, 76.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 120.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 123.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 122.

important? Economic analyses may be inadequate, but if nothing else, it is concerned with the oft-concrete production and distribution of power, which can be explained in specific detail.

Furthermore, taking into account the political-economy of power is not necessarily the subordination of the question of power to the economy. Although we have to acknowledge that it was indeed “kept” subordinate in accordance with “a system of interests”, we can nonetheless underscore the great importance of issues such as psychiatry and internment under a political-economic analysis. The issue of psychiatry and internment, at the very least, remains of huge importance even when (supposedly) subsumed under economic concerns. Likewise, political-economy is still constituent in the specific machinations of power, “in its techniques and tactics.”<sup>25</sup> In general, psychiatry and internment reattribute (at the level of institutions) the “failures” of capitalism, through pathologization and criminalization of individuals. In particular, to wit, legitimate concerns over covert political machinations under capitalism, however factual, are often discredited as psychosis or pathologized as symptoms of schizophrenia. To deny the political-economy of psychiatry and internment would be antithetical to the project of ascertaining power itself, *concretely* and *in-detail*.

To conclude, Foucault’s primary concern lies in the intricate relationship between knowledge and power, as well as the lack of attention intellectuals gave to this relation. He critiques the weaknesses of the Marxist intellectual tradition, particularly in its failure to foster discourse on the tenability of science. His theory of discontinuity challenges the linear view of scientific development and highlights the political nature of scientific statements. He argues that intellectuals on both ends of the political spectrum have failed to fully comprehend the mechanics of power; as the Marxists and Freudians focus has been on the ideological and repressive, negative conceptions of power are privileged. As a consequence, he underscores the need to go beyond the limits of the state when reckoning with power. Inasmuch as I generally agree with Foucault’s arguments, his dismissal of the (political-) economic analysis, particularly in relation to psychiatry and internment, perplexes me as someone who similarly struggles with depression and suicide. The importance of considering the political economy should not be understated, as it encompasses the oft-material production and distribution of power. Likewise, accounting for the political-economic aspects does not necessarily subordinate the question of power to the economy, but rather it may provide a nuanced understanding of its manifestations. The issues of psychiatry and internment remain significant under a political-economic lens, as they contribute to the re-attribution of capitalist failures and the pathologizing of dissent. Therefore, considering the political-economy of power is crucial for a detailed and comprehensive ascertainment of the relations of power and their concrete manifestations.

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<sup>25</sup> Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 117.

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