

**(Spring 2026)**

## **Reading Foucault**

Responsible Faculty Instructor:

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Assistant Professor

Credits: 4

Credits Type:

Cross-registration:

Pre-requisites: Political Theory/Science

### **Course Description (Course Vision):**

Michel Foucault's work offers one of the most sustained and influential engagements with the question of the subject in modern philosophy. Rejecting the autonomous, self-grounding subject of Enlightenment thought, Foucault traces how subjectivity is historically produced through discourses, power relations, and practices of the self. This course follows the trajectory of Foucault's thought — from archaeology to genealogy, through the analytics of governmentality, and into the late work on ethics and care of the self — to examine how he reconfigures the terrain of philosophy, politics, and critique. Alongside Foucault's primary texts, students will engage with critical interlocutors — from Marxist, feminist, and post-structuralist theorists — to assess the political stakes of Foucault's conception of the subject. The course foregrounds how Foucault displaces sovereignty and law as organizing concepts of political philosophy, and instead reorients critique around the production, governance, and transformation of subjectivity.

### **Teaching Methodology:**

- The course will be conducted in an intensive seminar format, prioritizing close reading and sustained collective engagement with key texts. Students are expected to arrive well-prepared, ready to inhabit the arguments, trace their tensions, and confront the aporias they open. Rather than centering passive reception, class time will be devoted to dialogue, debate, and conceptual

excavation — an effort to think both with and against Foucault in order to clarify the stakes of his work for our present conjuncture.

- Students will write weekly reflection papers (500–700 words) that grapple with the readings, formulate critical questions, and begin to map connections between the philosophical debates and contemporary scenes of legal, political, and technological governance. Each student will also be responsible for leading at least one session, offering a close reading of the assigned text(s) and framing the discussion through a set of provocations or problems.
- Pedagogically, the course emphasizes the active integration of theory and practice: moving between conceptual debates and current political realities to develop analytical precision and critical depth.

## Intended Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Explain Foucault's archaeological, genealogical, and ethical approaches to the subject.
2. Analyze how Foucault's concepts of power, discourse, and governmentality reframe the problem of agency and freedom.
3. Critically engage with Marxist, feminist, and Habermasian critiques of Foucault.
4. Evaluate Foucault's relevance for contemporary debates about biopolitics, neoliberalism, and identity politics.

## Reading List (Up to 10 select readings):

- **Foucault, Michel.** "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 32–50. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
- **Foucault, Michel.** *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Preface & Conclusion. New York: Vintage, 1973.
- **Foucault, Michel.** "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, 139–164. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.
- **Foucault, Michel.** *Discipline and Punish*. Part 3, Chapter 3: "Panopticism." New York: Vintage, 1979.

- **Foucault, Michel.** *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1.* Part 5: “Right of Death and Power over Life.” New York: Pantheon, 1978.
- **Foucault, Michel.** “The Subject and Power” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 208–226. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- **Foucault, Michel.** “Governmentality” in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 3. New York: New Press, 2000.
- **Agamben, Giorgio.** *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Introduction. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.
- **Nancy Fraser.** “Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions.” *Praxis International* 1 (1981): 283–301.
- **Judith Butler.** “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” (Chapter 1 excerpt) from *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

## Weekly Reading Plan (Weekly Outline):

A weekly plan is provided below:

Modules	Week(s)
<b>Module One: Introduction: Why the Subject?</b>  This module introduces Michel Foucault within the tradition of Enlightenment critique. We explore how Foucault reinterprets Kant's question, “What is Enlightenment?” For Kant, critique was a call to think for oneself and exercise moral autonomy. Foucault, however, uses it to develop a <i>history of the present</i> : a method for examining how current forms of knowledge, power, and subjectivity are historically and socially constructed. Students will consider how critique exposes assumptions, norms, and institutions that make concepts like freedom, truth, and the self appear natural and inevitable. What does it mean to write a history of the present? How does critique become a tool to interrogate freedom, truth, and the self?	Week 1-2
<b>Module Two: Archaeology and the Death of Man</b>  In this module, we focus on Foucault's archaeological phase through <i>The Order of Things</i> . Foucault shows how different historical periods are governed by specific epistemes—structures of knowledge that shape what can be known and said. His claim that the human subject is a recent invention—the “death of man”—challenges the idea of a fixed, universal human center of knowledge. Students will explore how knowledge, language, and social	Week 3-4

<p>practices co-produce subjects and objects, and reflect on the contingency of categories such as “man,” “society,” and “nature.”</p>	
<p><b>Module Three: Genealogy, Power, and History</b></p> <p>This module examines Foucault’s shift from archaeology to genealogy, tracing how power relations produce truths and shape subjects. Genealogy highlights that knowledge is not neutral but emerges from historically specific, contested practices and power structures. Students will explore how institutions, norms, and everyday practices define what is accepted as true and who is recognized as a legitimate subject. This module emphasizes that power is productive: it creates possibilities, identities, and hierarchies rather than only constraining behavior.</p>	Week 5-6
<p><b>Module Four: Discipline and the Making of Subjects</b></p> <p>Here, we analyze how disciplinary power produces individual subjects. Drawing on <i>Discipline and Punish</i>, students will examine how institutions—such as schools, prisons, and hospitals—shape behavior, capacities, and identities through surveillance, examination, and normalization. The panopticon metaphor illustrates how power operates invisibly, prompting subjects to regulate themselves. Students will consider how discipline is historically specific, tied to knowledge production, and deeply embedded in social practices.</p>	Week 7
<p><b>Module Five: Biopower and the Production of Life</b></p> <p>This module examines Foucault’s concept of biopower, which operates at the level of populations. Beyond disciplining individuals, power manages life itself—health, reproduction, mortality, and public behavior. Students will explore how biopower produces hierarchies, exclusions, and vulnerabilities, shaping who thrives and who is marginalized. The module encourages reflection on the ethical and political implications of governing life and how institutions, knowledge, and norms intersect to regulate populations. How does power manage life? What is the difference between sovereign power and biopower?</p>	Week 8-9
<p><b>Module Six: Ethics and the Care of the Self</b></p> <p>Foucault’s later work shifts attention from external forms of power to the ways individuals relate to themselves. This module explores the care of the self (<i>epimeleia heautou</i>), focusing</p>	Week 10-11

<p>on how people cultivate self-knowledge, self-discipline, and ethical practices. Students will consider the tension between autonomy and constraint, reflecting on how these practices are historically situated and shaped by social power. This module links Foucault's ethics to earlier discussions of discipline, genealogy, and biopower, showing how power, knowledge, and selfhood intersect. How can we think of freedom not as liberation from power, but as practices within power relations?</p>	
<p><b>Module Seven: Beyond Foucault — The Fate of the Subject</b></p> <p>In this concluding module, we situate Foucault alongside other thinkers. Baudrillard's <i>Forget Foucault</i> critiques his focus on discursive power. What are the limits of Foucault's framework? How do gender, sovereignty, and capitalism complicate his account? Agamben's <i>Homo Sacer</i> explores how sovereign power creates "bare life" and zones of exception. Lacan examines how unconscious structures, desire, and language shape subjectivity, highlighting aspects absent in Foucault's work. Derek Kerr considers the political economy of governmentality, showing limits in analyzing state and market structures. Feminist critiques explore how gender, embodiment, and intersectional hierarchies shape subject formation. Students will critically assess the limits and possibilities of Foucault's framework and synthesize insights from these comparative and feminist perspectives.</p>	<p>Week 12-14</p>
<p><b>Revision Week</b></p>	<p>Week 14</p>