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# Michel Foucault

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both their scholarship and their ability to make often complex ideas accessible to a diverse audience.

It will always be possible to question the list of key thinkers that are represented in this series. Some may question the inclusion of certain thinkers; some may disagree with the exclusion of others. That is inevitably going to be the case. There is no suggestion that the list of thinkers represented with the *Continuum Library of Educational Thought* is in any way definitive. What is incontestable is that these thinkers have fascinating ideas about education, and that taken together, the *Library* can act as a powerful source of information and inspiration for those committed to the study of education.

Richard Bailey  
Birmingham University

## Foreword

Does the world need yet another Foucault primer? The question kept resonating for some weeks after I received the invitation to write a foreword to this book. It was Lynn Fendler who raised it in her own peculiar way, humble and witty as usual. However elusive the notion of the 'needs of the world' might be, the *what for* of a Foucault primer is an issue that deserves to be taken seriously.

Apparently, we know much more about Foucault than we can account for. Libraries could be filled with the thousands of books, dissertations, and articles that have been written on the French philosopher. Most of his concepts and texts have been dealt with extensively, putting them in relation to the history of philosophy, political debates, or social history. It can be said, without sounding pretentious, that few other thinkers have been as influential as Foucault in the last decades.

Yet, there is always a sense of obscurity, of ungraspability, when it comes to Foucault. This perception of ambiguity is probably linked to his refusal to embrace any established system and to his will to continuously dismantle any fixed boundary (his 'tendency to be contrarian,' as Fendler puts it), which made his prose more opaque than what we are used to. He used sophisticated words and constructed elaborated statements to argue for a new understanding of the notions of truth, knowledge, subject, and power. His quest for a poetic language in the social sciences and in philosophy was based on his belief that form was as important as content. Therefore, my first answer would be that yes, we need many more readings to help us understand the complexities and nuances of a path-breaking thought written in an intricate language.

But Lynn Fendler's book is not simply 'another primer.' Being as she is an intelligent, rigorous, relentless reader, she gives us one of the

more thorough studies of Foucault's work that can be asked for. The text initiates with an intellectual biography that locates Foucault in the context of philosophical, historiographic, and political traditions in continental Europe, an undertaking that would make many scholars sink in the middle of the venture but from which Fendler emerges out bright and clear. It then moves to an analysis of Foucault's central ideas and a brilliant summary of his most important books, essays, courses, and interviews. It is laudable that the author includes in this summary initially oral texts such as interviews and lectures, thus providing us with a more complete canvas of Foucault's work than we usually get when he is reduced to what was published during his lifetime. The playfulness and provocativeness of his thought appear more evidently in this type of text, and Fendler uses this to draw us nearer to one of his signature marks.

In addition to this wonderful analysis, the author discusses the reception of Foucault's work in different geographies (French, German, and Anglo philosophies) and fields (history, education, and feminism), and advances some arguments about the relevance of his ideas for today's social theories and educational practices.

Besides its erudition and breadth, this text is formidable in its pedagogic qualities. The author is always concerned about being accessible for all kinds of readers, avoiding jargon terms and theoretically-charged statements. I particularly value the many times in which Fendler explicitly points to the distance between some of Foucault's ideas and our intuitive beliefs. For example, she remarks that the notion of 'governmentality' goes against the commonsensical opposition between 'government' and 'people,' suggesting instead that the very mentality of people is intrinsically linked to governmental practices. Another instance she provides is related to the controversial knowledge/power relation in Foucault's theory, which has usually been misunderstood as the truism that the more knowledge a person has, the more power she holds. These kinds of interventions are especially welcome in a milieu in which the taken-for-granted conceptualizations act as an excuse for lousy readings and 'anything goes.' Fendler does not compromise with simplifications or banalizations of a difficult thought, and yet she succeeds in making it amenable and understandable. That is quite an achievement in academic writing.

Equally remarkable are the analogies she builds between some of Foucault's most difficult concepts, such as 'technologies of the self' and 'discourse,' and daily life examples (breakfast choices and the internet, respectively). Fendler also brings stories from her own teaching to show how each one of us is caught in power relations, rejecting the idea that critical thinkers are beyond and above political struggles or positionings. There is a continuous dialogue between everyday life and theory that is one of the keys for this book's readability.

Finally, what I find the most notable feature of Lynn Fendler's text is that she does all this without enclosing any final idea of what Foucault 'really is.' As she states herself, 'there is no "Real Foucault" out there.' To be faithful to Foucault's thought, one has to abandon the notion that there will be something like a truly authentic version of his ideas, or a univocal definition of concepts. Instead, she reads his work as an impulse to 'think our lives afresh,' to ask us how we cannot be 'governed quite so much,' to reach for new experiences of freedom.

So, coming back to the initial question that Lynn Fendler half-jokingly posed me, I would answer that yes, Lynn, we need another Foucault primer. But not *any* other Foucault primer: *your* Foucault primer. Thanks for giving us this book for introducing yet another audience to the exciting world of Foucault's ideas.

*Inés Dussel*