Although he has written a good deal about linguistics and a number of critical analyses of important literary figures, his major concern, by his own admission, has been in the study of the history of the sciences humaines. This part of his work—Michel Foucault's "archaeological" study of the human sciences—will be the focus of this essay review.

Before we discuss this work, however, a few words about the intellectual background of Foucault's work might be helpful. French structuralism is clearly an important influence on Foucault's work, even though Foucault does, as he maintains, depart from this tradition. Whereas structuralism focuses on the logical inner relationships of the elements of language, myth, cognition, and so on, Foucault is more interested in what might be called the "prehistorical" relationships in discourse. This should become clearer later. Secondly, Foucault is obviously influenced by French historical scholarship. It is against the background of the work of such men as L. Feuchtwanger, P. Braudel, and G. Canguilhem, who look for the deeper strata of history, that Foucault strikes out on his own path. He shows an affinity also to the work of J. H. van den Berg, whose "historical psychology" stresses the shifts, breaks, and discontinuities in human history. In summary, Foucault's work can be seen as an attempt to join many lines of research into a unique synthesis.

Foucault has published three books on the history of the human sciences—Madness and Civilization, The Birth of the Clinic, and The Order of Things. A common theme runs through all three of these books. This common theme is Foucault's conviction that two major revolutions have taken place since the Middle Ages and that each of these revolutions, around 1650 and 1800, ushered in new ways of talking about (and thus conceptualizing) man and nature. Thus, these revolutions brought about new ways of doing science. With reference to the human sciences in particular, the first revolution in 1650 made them possible for the first time in history; the second revolution in 1800 changed them radically from proto-scientific into the general shapes in which we still have them, though perhaps not for long, says Foucault.

And what is the nature of these revolutions? Here we enter the heart of Foucault's system of thought and analysis. Both these revolutions were revolutions of the épistémè, the "field of knowledge." At any time in history, according to Foucault, there is a "field of knowledge," a finite range of what can be known as thought. Each age has limits on its vision, things which cannot be conceptualized, expressed, thought, or known. The épistémè at any given time is the range of what can be known; and this range of the knowable is defined by, and discovered in, the modes of discourse of an age. Language is the final measure of what can be thought, said, and known. And so, a different way of defining an "epistemic revolution" is to say that it is a time of "mutations in discourse" which make possible (or rather, inevitable) new outlooks, new ways of thinking, and new practical conclusions. Such mutations occurred, says Foucault, around 1650 and 1800 in the origin and change of the theory and practice of the human sciences.

In two of his works on the history of the human sciences, Foucault concentrates on the period between 1650 and 1800, a period he calls the "Classical Period." His task is to elucidate the essence of this period by an "archaeological" analysis of the discourses about folly/madness (in Madness and Civilization) and about natural history, the analysis of wealth and value, and general grammar (in The
Order of Things). In the third book, The Birth of the Clinic, Foucault focuses on the change in medical viewpoints at the turn of the eighteenth century into the Modern Period. But he is never the pure historian interested only in a given period of the past. His eye is always on the future, and each work implicitly and often explicitly comments critically on the human sciences (whether psychiatry, clinical psychology, or medicine) of the Modern Period, which began around the year 1800. So his works are attempts to explain and criticize the present state of affairs in the human sciences by tracing, with emphasis on the Classical Period, the history of the present-day human sciences came to be. His aim is to disprove the humanistic interpretation of the history of science as the inevitable progress of rational enlightenment. If one but scratches the surface a bit, and digs a little deeper in the manner of an "archaeological" investigation, says Foucault, he will find that things are not so simple.

For instance, in Madness and Civilization Foucault shows us that the history of psychiatric practice, contrary to popular opinion, is not a model of progressive liberation from antihumanistic attitudes and practices. Rather, in the Middle Ages the "fool" was afforded the freedom and the right to mix with society to a greater degree than ever allowed since that time. He was accorded a degree of dignity as one who had been "taught" by supernatural powers. The progressive secularization of the attitude towards the madman has not led to his liberation but, successively, to his confinement with other social misfits (for economic motives), to his segregation in confinement with only criminals (for ethical motives), and then—the so-called "grand liberation"—to complete segregation from all society, including criminals (for medical and moral motives). In other words, the history of folly reveals a progressive segregation and alienation of the madman from society for reasons extraneous to the actual nature of his "folly," which remains as ineffaceable as ever. It is anything but the history of liberation.

In The Birth of the Clinic Foucault attacks the myth that the "progress" of medical practice at the beginning of the Modern Age was the result of the step-by-step accumulation of scientific (i.e., positivist) knowledge and truth. Rather, he shows that what looks like progress was in fact only a change in modes of discourse (and in turn a change in "medical perception") which was not brought about by advances in the science of medicine but which, on the contrary, preceded and conditioned the very "discovery" of new "facts" and "scientific theories" which constituted that development. The change was one from a system (and vision) based upon nosology, or classification, of diseases into species and classes to the positivist medicine of empirical (but not at all unbiased) observation in the "clinic." Again Foucault, by a sort of linguistic alchemy, reveals an underside of history which has not before seen the light of day.

But it is undoubtedly in The Order of Things that Foucault delivers his broadside against the humanistic interpretation of the human sciences. It is here that he resists, or attempts to reveal, the precarious underpinning of the human sciences. And they are precarious precisely because they depend upon a mode of discourse which, being historically situated, may well be coming to its end. It is at this point that Foucault plunges into the thickest of his prose and most complex of his thinking. His is no simple task; he is trying to convince us that the real source of the human sciences is not man, their supposed object, but rather a system of discourse which—and here is his shocking, but serious assertion—is itself the basis of "man." That is, Foucault claims that "man"—by which he means man as we know him: man as an object of knowledge—is a product of discourse. In different words, "man" is the creation of man's current way of talking about man. For how do we posit knowledge about ourselves? By language, by discourse, says Foucault, in our "human sciences" of biology, sociology, psychology, economics, and linguistics, all of which he tries to reveal as resting on the "silent," "unconscious" bed of discourse. And so what Foucault reveals is not the history of the human sciences but the nonhistory of the human sciences. For whatever the human sciences are, he says, they are not (objective, value-free) sciences. Whatever good they provide, they possess no degree of "scientificity." And they shall disappear, along with "man," in the unexplained (and inexplicable?) march of history. Just listen, says Foucault, and you will hear it happening.

It is not easy to read, much less to understand, much that Foucault writes, and so the publication of Foucault's The Archaeology of Knowledge seemed a fortunate event. In this book Foucault sets out to explicate what he was doing in his former historical works. It becomes clear very soon, however, that The Archaeology of Knowledge presents only a "theoretical" methodology and that the match between Foucault's theory and practice is tenuous to say the least; often it is nonexistent. In other words, The Archaeology of Knowledge claims a lot more than is apparent in the former works. This is partly inevitable because, according to his ready admission, Foucault did not possess or even try to possess a consistent methodology while actually engaged in his historical research. His method, even at the time of the writing of The Archaeology of Knowledge, is always in transition. He argues for this as a virtue, saying that, after all, he is searching for a new level of truth which no one has investigated before and for which, consequently, there are no tried and true methods. But even more, as a matter of principle, so to speak, one must not have principles before a study. Principles, he says, should emerge during the course of study, as the result of interaction with the materials and issues at hand. Each study will occasion its own principles of research.

To some extent this is perfectly arguable, but it is not a sufficient explanation for the inconsistency between the theory of The Archaeology of Knowledge and the practice of his former works. A better explanation lies in the fact that The Archaeology of Knowledge, besides being written with hindsight, is clearly an apologetic work, written in self-defense as much as for self-explanation. It is a work as passionately involved in knocking down opposition as in setting up a practicable methodological framework that could provide a guide to future "Foucaultian" research. And indeed, in the end, no unifying vision or plan is offered. Nonetheless, The Archaeology of Knowledge is a valuable work for gaining a grasp of what Foucault is doing. It does not provide a perfect grasp, but until Foucault develops a more systematic methodology it will remain an important companion guide to his historical works. What follows is a very brief summary of Foucault's approach to history based upon what he says in The Archaeology of Knowledge.

As a primary premise, Foucault maintains that "we must renounce the convenience of terminal truths." In other words, history must be studied and written from the perspective of those who lived it. The historian must give up the privileged position he is in, knowing whither past history has led. He must not judge or
perceive the past through his own eyes and concepts, but through the terms of the period which he is studying. This plea for a historicist perspective is certainly neither new nor, for the historian, extremely debatable.

But what is to be studied? What is the “really real” of history for Foucault? Language is that reality, not man, for language is that which defines the limits of what is known at any given time. This is the domain which Foucault wishes to study: the domain of the épistémé. To study the épistémé of any given period, the historian must go to the printed word and investigate the discursive use of language in that period. But the historian, says Foucault, must use documents in a radically new way, as “monuments.” That is, he ought to approach them “archaeologically,” uncovering the layers of signification. He must look at the text “vertically,” not horizontally. The point is not to read through the texts in order to capture the theme, evidence, and conclusions. Rather, one must look, says Foucault, for the “positive unconscious” of knowledge, or language; for the “strategies” of discourse; for the “limits” of the “preconceptual”; for the “positivity” of a discourse; for the “zero point” or the “moment of silence” before discourse begins.

This offers little help for the neophyte. What does all this mean? It means simply that for Foucault the central issue is: what makes this discourse possible? What underlying principles and capacities of the language dictate the shape and substance of this given work? In brief, the task of Foucault’s “archaeology” is to unearth and define “the rules of formation of a group of statements.” One discovers these unconscious “rules of discourse” by comparative studies of different “monuments” of discourse. One does not study only one work, or one man’s work. Rather, one studies works of different types in order that the common underlying principles will be more apparent. The surface of the discourses will vary from work to work, but there may be a common épistémé reflected in them both. What one looks for, then, is what is not said. One looks for the unvoiced principles of discourse which are necessarily presupposed by each of the compared discourses. The conclusion of a successful archaeological study is the revelation of a common body of assumptions which in a given time and place are shared by, and make possible, the different discourses of a variety of intellectual disciplines.

Such a task is indeed novel. The question remains: is it possible? For as pointed out above, Foucault’s methodology, as presented in The Archaeology of Knowledge, is often more ambitious than the works it seeks to explain. It only partially explains (or rather, overexplains) what Foucault does in Madness and Civilization and The Birth of the Clinic; and The Order of Things, whose methodology is the closest to being described by The Archaeology of Knowledge, is too “dense” and too often incomprehensible to be offered as proof that an “archaeology,” as described in The Archaeology of Knowledge, is really possible. At the end of The Order of Things, one must admire Foucault’s industry, but all the steps to his conclusions are by no means clear.

Beyond this question of the possibility of “archaeological” history, the most common and certainly most understandable criticism of Foucault is that what he says is neither common nor understandable. His language and style are inevitably seen as excessively difficult, even by those who also see it as “poetic.” And though the translations earn no particular plaudits, it is commonly agreed that the fault lies buried in the original French. Foucault strains the bounds of even that precise language which is much more capable than English of expressing complex and subtle distinctions. Translated into specifics, Foucault creates a mirage of complexity by using five words when one will do; by coining new words rather than using ones already in existence; and by giving peculiar significances to already established words. None of this makes Foucault’s already difficult message any easier to comprehend.

In general, the points of applause and complaint of reviewers have depended upon each reviewer’s own area of specialty. (This will be the case with the present reviewer as well.) This is a unique problem for Foucault, since his imaginative blending of philosophy, history, psychology, and linguistics invites readers from different disciplines. Most reviewers find something to their liking, but inevitably complain about Foucault’s “extraneous” excursions into other disciplines. Another point of division among reviewers—and a crucial problem in the criticism of “committed” research such as Foucault’s—is the ideological stance of each critic. Some are scolded by Foucault’s conclusions and therefore refuse to study his texts carefully while others are so compelled by those same conclusions that they overlook the problems in his arguments. However, almost all reviewers have agreed that, whatever the weaknesses of Foucault’s work, we can never again look at the “Age of Reason” in quite the same way. This result—to have changed the vision of scholars and laymen—is no mean accomplishment.

However, this accomplishment is not the whole story, and we must not allow ourselves to conclude so soon on a positive note. Though much important historical information and many brilliant insights can be found in Foucault’s works, too often it is difficult to see the exact significance of the information he gives because of his use of language and what I call the “density” of his texts. Foucault is quite right to insist that an historical work should provide the context of whatever theme it chooses to investigate. “Folly,” for instance, should be understood as much as possible in the context of the times. Foucault, however, stresses context perhaps too much; it becomes too thick and opaque, obscuring the theme rather than highlighting it. In this sense, he recreates too much. Quote follows quote; comment follows comment; and one wonders what has become of the thread of the story. But in another sense, Foucault recreates (or, as he would say, “transcribes”) too little. For the kinds of generalizations which Foucault formulates, he provides far too little supporting evidence. He relies heavily in all his books upon a rather narrow range of works, preponderantly French, from which he draws conclusions of great proportions. The accusation of a biased selection of sources seems to be justified. This is a problem for all historians, of course, but most current historians refrain from the impulse to overdraw their sources into a philosophy of history. And if they were going to claim that man was not an object of “science” until after 1800, they would probably feel obliged, as Foucault does not, to explain why the

1. With reference to the translations: I have compared the French and English editions and found the English translations to be generally quite accurate, even if awkward at times. As I hope is clear from what has been said, the blame for this is not entirely the translators’. Given the technical nature of many of the discussions, however, the translators might have supplied more of the original French terms in parentheses after the English “equivalents” in the text. Also, it should be noted that the English Madness and Civilization is a translation (with some additions) of the abridged French version.
works of Aristotle, Locke, Vico, Hume, Condillac, etc., do not qualify as contrary examples.

This is a central difficulty for Foucault's thesis. Man was an object of systematic, "scientific" knowledge long before 1800 (or even 1650)—i.e., before it was possible, according to Foucault. Granted, these sciences have changed since then, and Foucault has described well some of these changes. But to show change or development is not to prove that a radical revolution has taken place. This point brings out an issue which is a critical problem for the historical enterprise, namely, change. How does Foucault account for change? How does one historical period develop into the next? How does one épistémè give way to another? Foucault's answer is that one period, or épistémè, does not develop into another; one simply ends and another begins "in the unoccupied spaces" of the old épistémè. There is no connection or logical progression from one state of history to another. The revolutions which Foucault describes are essentially mysterious, and each period in history is radically autonomous.

It is interesting at this point to reflect upon the similarity and difference between Foucault's analysis and that of Thomas Kuhn (in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, revised edition, 1970). According to both, each period of history (and science) has its own "structure," its own "positivity" which is somehow unique. (Foucault's épistémè is paralleled by Kuhn's "paradigm"). Both of them deny linear continuity from one historical period to another; both speak of "revolutions." This common message was a new and significant one for historians of science in the 1960s. But the difference between Foucault and Kuhn is equally significant. Foucault sees the discontinuity between periods as total and inexplicable; Kuhn does not. According to Foucault, the boundaries of the épistémè are the negative conditions of knowledge of which one is never conscious. A new épistémè appears without any apparent relation to human effort. According to Kuhn, however, it is the growing consciousness of the limitations of the given "paradigm" which leads a few intrepid individuals to begin to develop a new paradigm. Though historical development is "revolutionary" at times, it is never unconnected to what went before. The roots of change are to be found in the limitations of any given "paradigm." Whatever the problems in Kuhn's analysis, he provides a more satisfying answer to the problem of change than does Foucault.

As a final criticism, Foucault's theory and practice are at odds; one or the other must be wrong. For if, as the theory goes, each historical period has its own "silent" "field of knowledge" which is somehow sovereign and self-enclosed, how is it possible in historical practice to recreate past épistémès for a public which shares a different "discursive identity"? Historical research, Foucault would maintain, is always a reflection of the current modes of discourse; historical knowledge is predetermined by the "unconscious positivities" of the present épistémè. One cannot escape, for anything beyond the limits of the current épistémè would not be recognized as knowledge; it would not even be conceivable. One could only empathize with past ages if, as Dilthey and others have said but Foucault has denied, there is a common humanity which is transhistorical; otherwise, one merely reads back into history the spirit of the present time. For Foucault, "man" is only of recent, historical origin. The self-reflective feelings and thoughts of this present-day "man" are unique to the post-1800 world. There is no transhistorical humanity.

My criticism is this: if one denies any kind of continuity in history—and it is Foucault's avowed task to demonstrate the radical discontinuity in history—then how is one to explain the possibility of doing history? It seems to me that Foucault's historical practice puts the lie to his philosophical theorizing, that his historical instincts, "almost, one might say, against his will," win out in the end.

I would conclude, then, that Foucault is at his best in his historical work when he subordinates philosophy to history. Madness and Civilization is certainly his best work, with The Birth of the Clinic as an important appendix to that investigation. When his philosophizing takes precedence over the historical material, as in The Order of Things and The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault can be tremendously stimulating but he also takes excessive liberties in applying his linguistic-philosophical approach to historical texts. The historical material is clearly subordinate here; one wonders if the analysis came first, and the search for historical proof second. Given such alternations from philosophical to historical perspectives, it is not surprising that Foucault's work and ideas lack consistency. He is much better in his critical role (exploding the usual myths about the Age of Reason, "mental illness," and the "positivity" of science) than in his role as synthesizer. He gives important bits of information and many new insights, and perhaps even more important, he asks some good new questions. But the answers to these questions have not yet been given in any definitive form, and it is not at all certain that, when the answers come, they will proceed from the use of the "archaeological" approach. Nonetheless, it is difficult not to respect the insight and originality of Foucault's perspective. It is at minimum "suggestive," but it is probably more than that. There is something in the pages of Foucault's books for most historians of the human sciences, even if finding that something may demand some careful reading.

In conclusion, it cannot be said that Foucault's "archaeological" approach is going to revolutionize the field of the history of science. However, Foucault's influence, along with that of others, may well contribute to the development of a more full-bodied approach to the history of science. The history of science has too often been excessively one-dimensional. Whatever the weaknesses of Foucault's approach, one must grant that it attempts to add "depth" and "breadth" to the flat analyses of the past.