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### Gregg Lambert, "The Elements of Foucault"

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[See table of contents](#)

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**Gregg Lambert.** *The Elements of Foucault*. University of Minnesota Press 2020. 144 pp. \$92.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781517908775); \$23.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781517908782).

Gregg Lambert's *The Elements of Foucault* provides a reading of Michel Foucault's thought that connects Foucault's understandings of power and knowledge with his later works on governmentality and biopolitics. By analyzing Foucault's writings and lectures, as well as those of his interlocutors and relevant contemporaries, Lambert illuminates a way to apply Foucault to not only the contemporary neoliberalization of society in the twenty-first century, but also as a tool with which to analyze power relations generally. By breaking down Foucault's thought to its fundamental elements and arranging them using a geometrical philosophical approach, Lambert provides a defense of Foucault that can aid political philosophers in articulating power relations within oppressive contexts while giving credence to the potential for human agency and change.

Using both Foucault's well-known books and other lesser-known lectures and writings that became available in English long after Foucault's death in 1984, the book's primary purpose is to present a holistic picture of Foucault's thought that overcomes the limitations of contemporary 'discursive polemics' through the application of Descartes' '*more geometrico*' (9). This is done to 'suspend some of the most stubborn opinions concerning Foucault's own conceptualizations of power' (13) and invite readers to examine Foucault through Lambert's alternative lens that illustrates the depth and consistency of Foucault's understandings of power, from its disciplinary form to its more recent neoliberal iterations.

The book contains three articles, with the second being by far the longest and divided into three subsections. In the first article, Lambert provides an introduction coupled with some commentary on Foucault's works and secondary literature. This includes dividing Foucault's writing into 'four ages' (5), the first consisting of Foucault's works in the early 1970s on discourse and representation, the second focusing on power relations on a micro-scale, the third focusing on sexuality and its repression, and the fourth culminating with biopolitics (5-6). Lambert identifies a key critique that Foucault's conceptualization of power is too broad and omnipresent to allow for resistance, which Lambert hopes to counter by examining Foucault's lectures and the geometrical approach (6-14).

Article two begins with a subsection explaining the geometrical approach, stating it comprises 'postulates' that are 'demonstrative rather than didactic,' which instead of logical propositions are each 'rather more like an instruction concerning how to draw a figure,' just like in Euclidean geometry (17). The figure in this approach is identified as Foucault's concept of a *dispositif*, a term which describes systems of power-knowledge relations and discourse (17-18). Lambert interprets Foucault as believing that power cannot be rationalized since it 'is not something that can first be possessed and subsequently alienated like a property or commodity' and 'is not a natural being but rather artifice, a technique, or a strategy' (22). Furthermore, attempts to theorize power relations in the analytic philosophy tradition risk perpetuating future exploitation by not accounting for the overarching 'historical *dispositifs* of power relations' (23). This is extrapolated to outline an 'axiomatized method' (28) that seeks to subtract intuitive definitions from concepts to describe them as neutrally as possible (23-29). Applying the geometrical approach, Lambert depicts Foucault's



understanding of power as a sphere without a center to convey that power does not stem from sovereignty but rather flows through *dispositifs*, with ‘real social space’ (33) being curved to account for accumulated knowledge and subjectivities, much to the chagrin of Foucault’s interlocutors who seek to reassert sovereign power’s centrality (29-39).

In the second subsection of article two, Lambert delves into the genealogy and deeper meaning of Foucault’s concept of *dispositifs*. Lambert differentiates related terms such as apparatus, machine, and mechanism, which can imply ‘part of a more general order to which its function is assigned to the superstructure, and the primary term belongs to the mode of production’ (46) from Foucault’s evolving understanding to incorporate ‘the overall strategy and the various concrete tactics and techniques invented to shape and condition the possibilities of living will’ (47). Strategies to control sexuality are provided as an example of a *dispositif* Foucault uncovered (50-54). While Louis Althusser places emphasis on ‘a central Subject to which all other subjects refer in their functioning as subjects’ (61) in a Platonic sense, Foucault does not have this centrality in his *dispositifs* or such unity between subjects within them (54-62). Lambert suggests that Foucault’s insistence on not rationalizing power may have stemmed from Georges Canguilhem’s critique of Descartes’, and in a similar vein, Marx’s, idea of power relations as mechanistic. This critique challenges Descartes’ central point in power relations being God, and Marx’s being the state (62-69).

Article two’s third subsection examines Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics in the context of neoliberalism, which at the time Foucault was writing on the topic, was starting to take hold. Lambert outlines German ordoliberalism as an example of what Foucault would have observed regarding this emergence, which places more emphasis on the market economy and normalizes ‘processes of subjectification in order that subjects be integrated into the free market society without overt coercion or the potentially disintegrating reaction caused by power’s overt manifestation as a violent, dominating, or repressive force’ (75). Foucault observes that this shift restricts state power over economic life and, through processes of subjectification which Foucault describes as governmentality, goes beyond traditional understandings of power as ‘administrative control’ or ‘a clearly outdated theory of political economy’ (80). Lambert differentiates Foucault’s thinking from Gilles Deleuze’s idea of a society of control, in which subjectification expands to totalize more and more of individual existence, or inflationary theories of the state that highlight state power as a fundamental risk to society, to show that Foucault instead observes an evolution of governmentality approaches that erode subjects’ political power and exert control through Bentham-esque panopticism (80-103).

The third article elaborates on Foucault’s understandings of nascent neoliberalism and biopower as hinging on power as ‘a normative autonomous agency’ consisting of ‘strategies directed toward populations and concrete techniques’ on the scale of ‘individual subjectivities’ (107). To resist such forces, Foucault suggests submitting to normative forms of subjectivity, which appears to involve developing power strategies to go against dominant ones (105-108). Lambert juxtaposes Foucault’s view on biopower against those of Deleuze’s aforementioned control society idea and Giorgio Agamben’s reassertion of a central point of sovereignty (108-114). Lambert counters Agamben by citing a 1978 lecture in which Foucault claims that he is not dismissing sovereignty completely but

rather arguing that older *dispositifs* continue to exist alongside new ones (114). Lambert adds that the *dispositifs* intersect in Canguilhem's concept of milieu, which entails an environment in which individuals interact with each other and material aspects (114-115). Lambert argues that for Foucault, 'the sovereign is precisely the permanent conjunction' of natural science and social aspects of the human experience, or at least the sovereign will need to work to alter the milieu to enact change among humanity (115-116).

Lambert's analysis does much to help show the lasting importance of Foucault's perspective. The attention to detail and the inclusion of Foucault's lectures help give voice to potential counters Foucault would likely raise, or did raise, to interlocutors' critiques. Given the complexity of the concepts analyzed, it may help readers to add some diagrams to parts where the geometrical approach is applied, such as for example the subsection in article two on method where Foucault's understanding of power relations is described in Euclidian terms (29-39). A diagram of Foucault's power relations could be contrasted with geometrical diagrams of conventional interpretations of power with a central point. The concluding argument introducing Canguilhem's milieu ends rather abruptly and could benefit from some elaboration on its potential implications, especially in tandem with elaboration on how Foucault's understanding of biopower can be applied to interpret resistance. For future research, I would be interested in Lambert's views on the Foucault-Habermas debate using his geometrical approach. I would recommend the book for scholars with an advanced understanding of political philosophy as a resource for understanding Foucault, as it is a worthy addition to Foucauldian sub-canon and historiography.

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