



## THINKER IN BOXES

# MICHEL FOUCAULT

**Team:** Poitiers Corps de Observé

**Position:** Deep extra cover

**Status:** Not very alive

No matter what you think of modern French philosophy and the whole thing about people dressing all in black, gathering in the darkest corner of the nearest Starbucks and sharing the angst-ridden contemplation of critical nuances of this, that, or the other, you still gotta love a guy who started his career by writing about insanity.<sup>a</sup> **Michel Foucault** (1926–1984) is a love-him-or-hate-him kind of political philosopher, and the haters have probably had a significant influence on how and where his work has had an impact on the study of politics. In the United States, Foucault's work is most often associated with critical theory or poststructuralism and the related challenges to the conceptual and philosophical foundations of scientific approach to the study of politics. Many academics perceive this approach as a threat to the very nature of their research, and since that research is also the source of said academics' livelihood, that tends to provoke a bit of hostility. These hostile reactions have probably limited the interest in and the exploration of the many insights Foucault offered into power and the dynamics of society.

In addition to his discussion of the panopticon and how its dynamics related to political and social control,<sup>b</sup> Foucault's work was central to bringing discussions of the structure of knowledge—particularly as it related to language and representation of concepts—into the study of politics.<sup>c</sup> It's probably safe to say that the poststructuralist and postmodern research traditions, which became significant in the discipline during the 1980s, follow directly from Foucault's work, and research traditions that examine how knowledge, or identity, or meaning are constructed through discourse and politics, such as the constructivist perspective on international politics, owe a significant intellectual debt to Foucault.

<sup>a</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Madness in the Classical Age* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961).

<sup>b</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

<sup>c</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970).