

## **Foucault's Archaeology of the Human Sciences: A Critical Reflection on *The Order of Things***

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Paper Received on 23-12-2025, Accepted on 26-01-2026

Published on 27-01-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.01.181

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### **Abstract**

Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* inaugurates a distinctive archaeological method to interrogate the history of thought. Tracing epistemes from Renaissance similitude, through Classical representation, to Modern historicity, the work foregrounds discontinuity, not continuity, in the constitution of knowledge. Foucault discloses the emergence of "man" as a recent creation within biology, economics, and philology, only to herald his disappearance through the counter sciences of psychoanalysis, ethnology, and linguistics. The study emphasizes rules of formation, discursive practices, and the conditions of possibility that structure domains of knowledge. While Eurocentric in orientation, the text destabilizes humanistic centrality, problematizes subjectivity, and situates knowledge within cultural and historical orders, establishing Foucault as a radical historian of epistemes.

**Key Words:** Archaeology, Human Sciences, Episteme, Discourse, Historicity

### **Introduction**

*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, published in 1966 is the magnum opus of Michel Foucault. Providing a new perspective to or method of looking at the construction of knowledge from the very outset, the book lures the reader to explore it more and to unravel the history of thoughts and historicity of epistemes through the method, what Foucault says, 'archaeological'. The eventual exploration presents the episteme in each period that guides the

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production and circulation of knowledge and shows how man, a recent intervention, becomes the object of science; and how he disappears from the scene paving the way for counter sciences that enjoy much popularity today, though these have come to embrace broader aspects than what Foucault had originally discussed. What is idiosyncratic in Foucault's book is that although archaeology seeks to trace the history of thought, it doesn't do so in a sequence like in history; rather the book emphasizes discontinuity, not continuity, and brings to the fore how modern thoughts have emerged through a series of discontinuous events, within what space of order knowledge was constituted, on the basis of what historical a priori, and in what positivity ideas could surface and sciences could be established.

### **Discussion**

While Philosophers before Foucault had been content in just exploring the fields superficially and discourse on its excellences and defects, Foucault devoted his attention to the basic questions of how it came into existence at the first place. It is interesting that Foucault doesn't start the theory on human sciences from human sciences; rather he starts from the renaissance period of life, labour, and language; and when he comes to human sciences, we discover him saying that they are not sciences at all. In his attempt, Foucault is not concerned to show the progress of knowledge towards an objectivity, but "to bring to light is the epistemological field, the *episteme* in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility" (Foucault xxiii-xxiv). So, taking different ages – Renaissance, Classical, and Modern - into account for his study, Foucault shows how the system of thoughts was ordered and historicized in a specific way and, towards the end, the emergence of a new episteme, with the death of 'man', through establishing his triad of psychoanalysis, ethnology and linguistics. The aspects that Foucault addresses in the book and the area he explores through his archaeological method were relatively neglected and unexplored; Foucault can be said to be the first man to expand his ideas on the order in the history of thoughts.

Earlier pure science was given much importance owing to its order and systematic arrangement over time as shown by Thomas Kuhn. The other non-formal sciences that covered study of different aspects of Language, living beings and commodities were given scant attention as they lacked the necessary history,

regularity and order. Also, the modern human sciences and other fields like linguistics, ethnology etc. were not treated at par with them, largely due to their lack of historicity and justification of epistemological formation. Foucault says that order is intrinsic and inevitable to every culture and “is, at one and same time that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression” (Foucault xxi). It is the order embedded in every system that arranges knowledge, presents to us in rationality and positivity, and decides our interaction with world. It is not overly discernible, but is consumed blindly. So, Foucault, through his archaeological methods, tries to trace the order of those fields in the history of thought and to show how they were structured and arranged in the specific epistemic periods, the discursive formations entailed to them and how knowledge became knowledge. As he says, through this archaeological method, he has tried to reveal the rules of formations (used by naturalists, economists, and grammarians) by studying them in isolation. And what unique to the method is that Foucault attempts to explore the order of things in the face of disorders and discontinuities and brings out a field that accounts the veritable ideas and systems and discourse of a particular period (like resemblance and similitude in Renaissance, representation in classical era or analogy and succession in modern). One of the greatest interventions of this method in the whole epistemological method is its discovery of how man was inducted as an object and the death of man in modernity. The book has political aspects as well. Although it doesn't explicitly appear so, it attempts to engage with the established structure of thought and also problematizes subjectivity of man in the guiding of thoughts. While putting Foucault's key arguments in the book succinctly or paraphrasing the book involves danger owing to the packed erudition, thoughts, and allusions unique to it, the advance of knowledge with the underlying episteme can be laid out along with the disorders and emergence of new episteme and knowledge.

The book adopts a unique method to reveal the nature of the order, how things were structured, and, in a genealogical sense, how they originated and where from; and shows how there have been transformation of the triad comprising language, life and wealth over the time and period. Foucault's distinct approach also underlines the

discontinuities in the history of thoughts like Kuhn has highlighted the paradigm breaks in science, but Foucault's approach is more effective and engaging. So, when the renaissance episteme could no longer account for the things and the order could no longer hold things together, there emerged the classical episteme – the dialectic of signs and representation. The prose of the world and the constitutive similitude vanished to pave way for a new order of things. He also shows the contribution of great thinkers like Bacon and Descartes in critiquing the renaissance episteme that helped in ushering in a new order in classical age. The system of resemblance and similitude was replaced by that of identity and difference and signs became binary. A new triad emerged that of general grammar - natural history and analysis of wealth. The whole world of classical episteme, the general grammar that ordered the language, the natural history that accounted for the characterization of living beings and the analysis of wealth that redefined the system of wealth, value, and commodity were made possible because of the introduction of this dialectic of identity and differences. Now the domain of knowledge of the world could be constituted through a universal algebra, what the archaeology terms Mathesis. The existence of a great taxinomia or the table also made possible all the elements of knowledge that could be arranged as signs in a particular order. And thus, the triad could exist in the taxinomia in the classical episteme with their nuances according to the four functions – attribution, articulation, designation, and derivation. This system guided the discursive formations of the classical age. However, the method also discovers another discontinuity or disorder in the order of things when representation could no longer account for the things and the table collapsed at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Foucault is a historian and his primary concern lies in historicizing the thoughts and domain of knowledge. He shows that at the end of eighteenth century, as Sade remarks, a complex net of human desires and real time emerges and it leads the order to be replaced by History as the guiding principle of a modern episteme. History employs its methods of succession and analogy in place of classical identity and differences to connect the distinct structures in the analysis of production, organically structured beings, and language groups, tries to show their temporal order, and historicize them connecting them to the great chain of History. Considered as empirical sciences owing to their methods of analysis, a new epistemological configuration governed by historicity arises. The new industrial progress, foregrounding of organic structures and the history of language becomes the new

norms of explanation and redefines the domains. So, hereafter, the representation of objects of desire doesn't give value to commodity, rather it is the production and labour that cannot be reduced to representation. In the sphere of natural beings, it is the organic structure and not the representative visible elements that gave them their value; and for language, it is the inflectional system that defined it in absolute terms. The interiority and historicity of thoughts are now under analysis; and eventually modernity gives birth to the empirical sciences like economics, biology, and philology. The mathesis was no more in play; rather it is history and its methods that characterized the modern order of materials, life, and words.

The concern of Foucault here is not of Kuhn or of Kant. He is not concerned about the epistemological break or showing qualities of mind that made knowledge possible. Rather he attempts to historicize the thoughts. In attempting to show the recent creation of man, Foucault says that while the dissociation of table of natural history and analysis of wealth paves way for another unity in their respective domains, the break of general grammar paves way for appearance of language, whose unity was irrecoverable. While the other two domains are advancing in positivity, the words and the language are marked with a loss of subjectivity. This leads modern episteme to find a human race centered around language, to give it that positivity and subjectivity. And this is how, for the first time in Western thought, as a remarkable event, that 'man' enters the domain of positivity through language and becomes a category of modern episteme. This 'man' is a recent creation, as Foucault says, who lives, speaks, and works in accordance with biology, economics, and philology, redefines them, though aware of his own finitude and subjectivity, and attempts to know the domains and analyze them. He now takes up a privileged position, 'the place belonging to the king'; he now becomes the center of all knowledge and discourse. He is at the center of both historicity and origin. The creation of 'man' in modern age surfaces four categories, corresponding to the general table, - the dual position of positivities with finitude, the position as empirico- transcendental being, the interrelation of consciousness and unthought and the return to origin. This anthropological quadrilateral also leads to another triad of positivities in the modern episteme, the one that takes man as its object, the triad of sociology, psychology, and literary studies, which together form the domain of Human Sciences.

Human sciences are the result of a new form of knowledge. Where biology, economics, and philology don't have the object to call themselves sciences, human sciences take man as their object and thrive on the already constituted domains. Foucault unravels the formation of human sciences in western thought, but makes it universal, which can be considered as a cultural hegemony of Eurocentrism. Nevertheless, he notes how psychology extending its grid takes the place of biology, how sociology extends itself to sociological representations and culture, the place of economics and how literary studies concerns itself with the stories of human race, the place of philology.

It is interesting to note that while, from the surface, for a lay-reader, the book appears to be laying out history of the constitution of human sciences as a discipline, it is towards the end that the book shows the field, owing to its internal weaknesses, its disjunction with history, and its position of examining own condition of possibility, comes to an end. There was a contradiction between empirical sciences that focused on history and the human sciences that grasped the non-history as its only history. And human sciences, in their attempt to include everything in its 'history', gets dissociated from History proper and disintegrated. This field, as it appears, is a positive domain but not scientific and is self-destructive; the shortcomings, the ahistoricism, the finitude, the excessive reliance on self-representation, the self-examination and criticism of human sciences gave rise to an alternate triad of sciences of human beings: the triad of psychoanalysis, ethnology and linguistics. It is here that Foucault brings Freud into the scene and his idea of 'unconscious' that is inevitable to the modern epistemic triad and analyzes the place of man in the modern episteme. Psychoanalysis takes as its object the unconscious and makes it speak through consciousness; ethnology tries to read the life and the collective culture of the society. In collusion they do great in unraveling the unconscious of the whole culture; and both of them, through introduction of historicity and evading 'man', challenges the human sciences and forms counter science. Linguistics, a science of language, as a counter science, deal with the positivity exterior to man. Thus, the triad contributed to the dissolution of the image of man and formation of counter sciences. And with this, as Nietzsche declared the death of God, Foucault declares the death of Man as an object and category and the humanistic thought that keeps man at the center of all philosophies and knowledge recedes.

## **Conclusion**

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## RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)

[www.rjoe.org.in](http://www.rjoe.org.in) | Oray's Publications | ISSN: 2456-2696

An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

**Impact Factor: 8.373 (SJIF) | Vol. 11, Issue 1 (Jan/Feb/Mar;2026)**

Foucault's vision, his erudition, his insight, and his distinctly different approaches and methods as reflected in the book make him unique among the other philosophers and historians and establish him as an intellectual hero. The book, though packed with complex ideas and thoughts, allusions to different philosophers and scientists, and unique vocabulary, makes clear the episteme that governs the knowledge in each period, the appearance and disappearance of man and the counter sciences, which are very modern in nature. Foucault discusses extensively on History and historicity that have much relevance in the modern writing of History; and though he doesn't talk about politics, he, at the end, heralds a new age which may entail politics of western culture. However, Foucault's focus here is largely on the Eurocentric thoughts and epistemological tradition. Knowledge is a construction of culture and it is true that epistemes vary according to culture. The presence of counter sciences that Foucault discusses can't be denied in ancient or medieval Indian tradition. So, his study shouldn't be over generalized or universalized to study history of thoughts across culture; rather the approach and method should be cautiously applied for the same. Moreover, Foucault, an ardent advocate of power-knowledge relation, doesn't speak much about his views regarding the role of power in epistemological formations. He brings up the role of history, but doesn't justify how forms of knowledge are linked to power entailed in history. So, the book apparently has some shortcomings. Nonetheless, considering its methods and the new ideas it unpacks for the world, *The Order of Things* is phenomenal.

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### How to Cite this article?

Senapati, Soumyakanta, and Lopamudra Jena. "Foucault's Archaeology of the Human Sciences: A Critical Reflection on *The Order of Things*." *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan.–Mar. 2026, Oray's Publications, doi:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.01.181.