

Foucault vs. Habermas: Celebrity Deathmatch

Bachelor of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Winter Term 2026/27



Source: Gemma 4 (UFR Standard Vision)

Instructor

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Times and Rooms

Tuesdays & Thursdays, 14–16h, Room
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Course Description

Jürgen Habermas (1929–2026) and Michel Foucault (1926–1984) are arguably two of the most important intellectuals of the 20th century, not just as social and political philosophers, but also more broadly in the social sciences and humanities. Both also were controversial, political engaged thinkers, who sparked important debates. While Foucault, due to his early death, was unable to respond to Habermas' challenge to him (and French post-structuralism in general) in his 1983 lectures on *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (first published in 1998 [1985]), the discussion between them was taken up by other theorists instead. In the ensuing so-called Foucault-Habermas debate, Habermas and the "Habermasians" argue for a critical theory based on a Kantian quasi-transcendental understanding of reason, a normatively charged concept of power and a commitment to a "modern" conception of social theory. This position stands in stark contrast to Foucault and the "Foucauldians", who put forward critical theories based on a Nietzschean historicization and naturalization of reason, a normatively ambiguous re-conceptualization of power and a "postmodern" refusal to engage with general theories about "society" in favor of a fragmentary, interventionist understanding of the social.

In the seminar, we will revisit this tension between two importantly attempts to formulate a post-metaphysical philosophy capable to underpin a critical diagnosis of the present. In order to understand the stakes of the debate, the seminar introduces the central concepts, arguments and theoretical backgrounds of Foucault's and Habermas' political and social philosophy before turning to their (more or less direct) arguments against each other and the "Foucault-Habermas" debate. Here, we will focus on the three issues highlighted above: the starkly different conceptions of critical theory, the competing analyses of power and its relation to reason; and the contrasting ideas about the relation between theory and praxis, resulting in different conceptions of the figure of a public intellectual.

General Reading

Jürgen Habermas (1998 [1985]): *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures*. Translated by Frederik Lawrence. Cambridge: Blackwell.

Samantha Ashenden and David Owen (eds.) (1999): *Foucault contra Habermas. Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.

Michael Kelly, (ed.) (1994): *Critique and Power. Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*. Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press.

Michel Foucault (1997): What is Enlightenment? In: Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. I. London: Penguin, 303–319.

A great resource for texts by and about Jürgen Habermas is <https://www.habermasforum.dk>.

Learning Goals

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able

- to explain the basic concepts and social theories of Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, and
- to connect the Foucault Habermas debate to systematic questions in critical theory, political philosophy or social and political theory in general.

Attendance

Standard LAS attendance policies apply. Generally, students should inform the instructor about their absence ahead of time, if possible. Students can miss **3 sessions** in a work group without having to give specific reasons. Students may miss another **3 sessions** if they hand in the necessary proof defined in the general LAS attendance guidelines (cf. ILIAS Info Board). In this case, instructors may ask students to prepare make-up work.

Assessment and Assignments

Pass/fail assignments: Regular and active attendance. Furthermore, students must participate in the moderation of two sessions, prepared in small groups. Details will be discussed in the first week of the seminar.

Graded assignments: The final assessment is a term paper (3.000–4.000 words) due by **15 March 2027** (as an electronic copy via email; re-sit: 15 May 2027). Students must discuss the topic with the instructor before they start writing. For philosophy students who need more than 6 ECTS, the term paper becomes 1,000 words longer for every ECTS point (e.g. 5.000–6.000 words for 8 ECTS; 7.000–9.000 words for 10 ECTS).

Exam registration takes place in HISinOne during the first two weeks of the semester. There is a withdrawal period in the third week of the semester.

Course Outline/Schedule

#	Date	Required Reading	Optional Reading
1	20.10.2026	Overview	
2	22.10.2026	Jürgen Habermas (1985a): "Untiefen der Rationalitätskritik." — OR — Michel Foucault (2019): "The Founders Room/Discourse on Power."	Currently, the best biographies are: Didier Eribon (1991), <i>Michel Foucault</i> . Stefan Müller-Doohm (2016), <i>Habermas: A Biography</i> .
3	27.10.2026	Jürgen Habermas (1985b), "Remarks on the Concept of Communicative Action", 151–178.	William Outhwaite (1994), <i>Habermas: A Critical Introduction</i> .
4	29.10.2026	Jürgen Habermas (1985b), "Remarks on the Concept of Communicative Action", 151–178	Jürgen Habermas (2001a), <i>On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction</i> .
5	03.11.2026	Jürgen Habermas (1981), "The Dialectics of Rationalization: An Interview with Jürgen Habermas."	Jürgen (Habermas 2025), <i>Things Needed to Get Better: Conversations with Stefan Müller-Doohm and Roman Yos</i> .
05.11.2026		No Class	
6	10.11.2026	Michel Foucault (1977 [1975]), <i>Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison</i> , 3–31.	Garry Gutting (2005), <i>Foucault. A Very Short Introduction</i> .
7	12.11.2026	Michel Foucault (1998 [1973]), "Truth and Juridical Forms", 1–16.	Michel Foucault (1998 [1977]), "Truth and Power."
8	17.11.2026	Michel Foucault (2016), "The Meshes of Power."	Michel Foucault (1978 [1976]), <i>The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction</i> .
9	19.11.2026	Taking Stock (no text)	
24.11.2026		No Class	
26.11.2026		No Class	
01.12.2026		No Class	
10	03.12.2026	Jürgen Habermas (1998 [1985]), <i>The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity</i> , 238–265.	Charles Taylor (1984), "Foucault on Freedom and Truth." William E. Connolly (1985), "Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness."
11	08.12.2026	Jürgen Habermas (1998 [1985]), <i>The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity</i> , 266–293.	Nancy Fraser (1981), "Foucault on Modern Power. Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions."

#	Date	Required Reading	Optional Reading
12	10.12.2026	Jürgen Habermas (1998 [1985]), <i>The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity</i> , 294–326.	Michel Foucault (1998 [1971]), “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.”
13	15.12.2026	Michel Foucault (2024), “What is Critique?”	Judith Butler (2002), “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue”
14	17.12.2026	Michel Foucault (1997), “What Is Enlightenment?”	Jürgen Habermas (2001b): Conceptions of Modernity: A Look Back at Two Traditions
15	22.12.2026	Jürgen Habermas (1994), “Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present”	Thomas R. Flynn (1989), “Foucault and the Politics of Postmodernity.”
23.12.2026– 06.01.2027		WINTER HOLIDAYS	
16	07.01.2027	Amy Allen (2009), “Discourse, Power, and Subjectivation: The Foucault/Habermas Debate Reconsidered”	David Owen (1996), “Foucault, Habermas and the Claims of Reason”
17	12.01.2027	James Tully (1999), “To Think and Act Differently: Foucault’s Four Reciprocal Objections to Habermas’ Theory”	Peter J. Verovšek (2022), “The Reluctant Postmodernism of Jürgen Habermas: Reevaluating Habermas’s Debates with Foucault and Derrida.”
18	14.01.2027	James Tully (1999), “To Think and Act Differently: Foucault’s Four Reciprocal Objections to Habermas’ Theory”	James Tully (2002), “Political Theory: An International Journal of Political.”
19	19.01.2027	Thomas Biebricher (2011), “The Practices of Theorists: Habermas and Foucault as Public Intellectuals”	Linda Martín Alcoff (2003), “Does the Public Intellectual Have Intellectual Integrity?”
20	26.01.2027	Martin Saar and Frieder Vogelmann (2026), “Impure Reason: Foucault and Critical Theory”	Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson (2018), “Philosophical Practice Following Foucault.”
21	28.01.2027	Open Session	
22	02.02.2027	Open Session	
23	04.02.2027	Final Discussion, Part I	
24	09.02.2027	Final Discussion, Part II	

Bibliography

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- Connolly, William E. (1985): Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness. In: *Political Theory* 13, 365–376.
- Eribon, Didier (1991 [1989]): *Michel Foucault*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Erlenbusch-Anderson, Verena (2018): Philosophical Practice Following Foucault. In: *Foucault Studies* (25), 55–83.
- Flynn, Thomas R. (1989): Foucault and the Politics of Postmodernity. In: *Noûs* 23, 187–198.
- Foucault, Michel (1977 [1975]): *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
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- (2016): The Meshes of Power. In: Jeremy W. Crampton and Stuart Elden (eds.), *Space, Knowledge and Power*. London: Routledge, 153–162.
- (2019): The Founders Room/Discourse on Power. In: Simeon Wade, *Foucault in California*. Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 97–116.
- (2024 [1978]): *What is Critique?* In: Henri-Paul Fruchaud, Daniele Lorenzini and Arnold I. Davidson (eds.), *What is Critique? and The Culture of the Self*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 19–61.
- Fraser, Nancy (1981): Foucault on Modern Power. Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions. In: *Praxis International* 10, 272–287.
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- (1985b): Remarks on the Concept of Communicative Action. In: Gottfried Seebass and Raimo Tuomela (eds.), *Social Action*. D. Reidel: Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster, 151–178.
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- (1998 [1985]): *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures*. Translated by Frederik Lawrence. Cambridge: Blackwell.
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- Owen, David (1996): Foucault, Habermas and the Claims of Reason. In: *History of the Human Sciences* 9 (2), 119–138.
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Declaration of Originality

Students have to submit the following declaration with all written assignments:

I declare that I am the sole author and composer of this assignment. I have listed all sources and learning aids that I used, including generative AI, for example ChatGPT, Grammarly, Perplexity, NotebookLM, and for all instances of such use. I declare that I have acknowledged the work of others by providing precise and detailed references of said work.

I hereby also declare, that this assignment has not been prepared for another examination or assignment, either wholly or excerpts thereof.