5 the practices within institutions for dealing with the subjects – medical treatment for the insane, punishment regimes for the guilty, moral discipline for the sexually deviant – whose conduct is being regulated and organized according to those ideas;

6 acknowledgement that a different discourse or *episteme* will arise at a later historical moment, supplanting the existing one, opening up a new *discursive formation*, and producing, in its turn, new conceptions of 'madness' or 'punishment' or 'sexuality', new discourses with the power and authority, the 'truth', to regulate social practices in new ways.

4.2 Historicizing discourse: discursive practices

The main point to get hold of here is the way discourse, representation, knowledge and 'truth' are radically *historicized* by Foucault, in contrast to the rather ahistorical tendency in semiotics. Things meant something and were 'true', he argued, *only within a specific historical context.* Foucault did not believe that the same phenomena would be found across different historical periods. He thought that, in each period, discourse produced forms of knowledge, objects, subjects and practices of knowledge, which differed radically from period to period, with no necessary continuity between them.

Thus, for Foucault, for example, mental illness was not an objective fact, which remained the same in all historical periods, and meant the same thing in all cultures. It was only *within* a definite discursive formation that the object, 'madness', could appear at all as a meaningful or intelligible construct. It was 'constituted by all that was said, in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its development, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own' (1972, p. 32). And it was only after a certain definition of 'madness' was put into practice, that the appropriate subject – 'the madman' as current medical and psychiatric knowledge defined 'him' – could appear.

Or, take some other examples of discursive practices from his work. There have always been sexual relations. But 'sexuality', as a specific way of talking about, studying and regulating sexual desire, its secrets and its fantasies, Foucault argued, only appeared in western societies at a particular historical moment (Foucault, 1978). There may always have been what we now call homosexual forms of behaviour. But 'the homosexual' as a specific kind of social subject, was *produced*, and could only make its appearance, within the moral, legal, medical and psychiatric discourses, practices and institutional apparatuses of the late nineteenth century, with their particular theories of sexual perversity (Weeks, 1981, 1985). Similarly, it makes nonsense to talk of the 'hysterical woman' outside of the nineteenth-century view of hysteria as a very widespread female malady. In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973), Foucault charted how 'in less than half a century, the medical understanding of disease was transformed' from a classical notion that

disease existed separate from the body, to the modern idea that disease arose within and could be mapped directly by its course through the human body (McNay, 1994). This discursive shift changed medical practice. It gave greater importance to the doctor's 'gaze' which could now 'read' the course of disease simply by a powerful look at what Foucault called 'the visible body' of the patient – following the 'routes ... laid down in accordance with a now familiar geometry ... the anatomical atlas' (Foucault, 1973, pp. 3–4). This greater knowledge increased the doctor's power of surveillance vis-à-vis the patient.

Knowledge about and practices around *all* these subjects, Foucault argued, were historically and culturally specific. They did not and could not meaningfully exist outside specific discourses, i.e. outside the ways they were represented in discourse, produced in knowledge and regulated by the discursive practices and disciplinary techniques of a particular society and time. Far from accepting the trans-historical continuities of which historians are so fond, Foucault believed that more significant were the radical breaks, ruptures and discontinuities between one period and another, between one discursive formation and another.

4.3 From discourse to power/knowledge

In his later work Foucault became even more concerned with how knowledge was put to work through discursive practices in specific institutional settings to regulate the conduct of others. He focused on the relationship between knowledge and power, and how power operated within what he called an institutional *apparatus* and its *technologies* (techniques). Foucault's conception of the *apparatus* of punishment, for example, included a variety of diverse elements, linguistic and non-linguistic – 'discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulations, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophic propositions, morality, philanthropy, etc. ... The apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain co-ordinates of knowledge. ... This is what the apparatus consists in: strategies of relations of forces supporting and supported by types of knowledge' (Foucault, 1980b, pp. 194, 196).

This approach took as one of its key subjects of investigation the relations between knowledge, power and the body in modern society. It saw knowledge as always inextricably enmeshed in relations of power because it was always being applied to the regulation of social conduct in practice (i.e. to particular 'bodies'). This foregrounding of the relation between discourse, knowledge and power marked a significant development in the *constructionist* approach to representation which we have been outlining. It rescued representation from the clutches of a purely formal theory and gave it a historical, practical and 'worldly' context of operation.

You may wonder to what extent this concern with discourse, knowledge and power brought Foucault's interests closer to those of the classical sociological

theories of ideology, especially Marxism with its concern to identify the class positions and class interests concealed within particular forms of knowledge. Foucault, indeed, does come closer to addressing some of these questions about ideology than, perhaps, formal semiotics did (though Roland Barthes was also concerned with questions of ideology and myth, as we saw earlier). But Foucault had quite specific and cogent reasons why he rejected the classical Marxist problematic of 'ideology'. Marx had argued that, in every epoch, ideas reflect the economic basis of society, and thus the 'ruling ideas' are those of the ruling class which governs a capitalist economy, and correspond to its dominant interests. Foucault's main argument against the classical Marxist theory of ideology was that it tended to reduce all the relation between knowledge and power to a question of *class* power and *class* interests. Foucault did not deny the existence of classes, but he was strongly opposed to this powerful element of economic or class *reductionism* in the Marxist theory of ideology. Secondly, he argued that Marxism tended to contrast the 'distortions' of bourgeois knowledge, against its own claims to 'truth' – Marxist science. But Foucault did not believe that *any* form of thought could claim an absolute 'truth' of this kind, outside the play of discourse. *All* political and social forms of thought, he believed, were inevitably caught up in the interplay of knowledge and power. So, his work rejects the traditional Marxist question, 'in whose class interest does language, representation and power operate?'

Later theorists, like the Italian, Antonio Gramsci, who was influenced by Marx but rejected class reductionism, advanced a definition of 'ideology' which is considerably closer to Foucault's position, though still too preoccupied with class questions to be acceptable to him. Gramsci's notion was that particular social groups struggle in many different ways, including ideologically, to win the consent of other groups and achieve a kind of ascendancy in both thought and practice over them. This form of power Gramsci called **hegemony**. Hegemony is never permanent, and is not reducible to economic interests or to a simple class model of society. This has some similarities to Foucault's position, though on some key issues they differ radically. (The question of hegemony is briefly addressed again in Chapter 4.)

hegemony

What distinguished Foucault's position on discourse, knowledge and power from the Marxist theory of class interests and ideological 'distortion'? Foucault advanced at least two, radically novel, propositions.

1 Knowledge, power and truth

The first concerns the way Foucault conceived the linkage between knowledge and power. Hitherto, we have tended to think that power operates in a direct and brutally repressive fashion, dispensing with polite things like culture and knowledge, though Gramsci certainly broke with that model of power. Foucault argued that not only is knowledge always a form of power, but power is implicated in the questions of whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not. This question of the

power/knowledge

application and *effectiveness* of **power/knowledge** was more important, he thought, than the question of its 'truth'.

Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to *make itself true*. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has real effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true'. Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practices. Thus, 'There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations' (Foucault, 1977a, p. 27).

According to Foucault, what we think we 'know' in a particular period about, say, crime has a bearing on how we regulate, control and punish criminals. Knowledge does not operate in a void. It is put to work, through certain technologies and strategies of application, in specific situations, historical contexts and institutional regimes. To study punishment, you must study how the combination of discourse and power – power/knowledge – has produced a certain conception of crime and the criminal, has had certain real effects both for criminal and for the punisher, and how these have been set into practice in certain historically specific prison regimes.

regime of truth

This led Foucault to speak, not of the 'Truth' of knowledge in the absolute sense – a Truth which remained so, whatever the period, setting, context – but of a discursive formation sustaining a **regime of truth**. Thus, it may or may not be true that single parenting inevitably leads to delinquency and crime. But if everyone believes it to be so, and punishes single parents accordingly, this will have real consequences for both parents and children and will become 'true' in terms of its real effects, even if in some absolute sense it has never been conclusively proven. In the human and social sciences, Foucault argued:

> Truth isn't outside power. ... Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned ... the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.
>
> (Foucault, 1980, p. 131)

2 New conceptions of power

Secondly, Foucault advanced an altogether novel conception of power. We tend to think of power as always radiating in a single direction – from top to bottom – and coming from a specific source – the sovereign, the state, the ruling class and so on. For Foucault, however, power does not 'function in the form of a chain' – it circulates. It is never monopolized by one centre. It 'is

deployed and exercised through a net-like organization' (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). This suggests that we are all, to some degree, caught up in its circulation – oppressors and oppressed. It does not radiate downwards, either from one source or from one place. Power relations permeate all levels of social existence and are therefore to be found operating at every site of social life – in the private spheres of the family and sexuality as much as in the public spheres of politics, the economy and the law. What's more, power is not only negative, repressing what it seeks to control. It is also *productive*. It 'doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but ... it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be thought of as a productive network which runs through the whole social body' (Foucault, 1980, p. 119).

The punishment system, for example, produces books, treatises, regulations, new strategies of control and resistance, debates in Parliament, conversations, confessions, legal briefs and appeals, training regimes for prison officers, and so on. The efforts to control sexuality produce a veritable explosion of discourse – talk about sex, television and radio programmes, sermons and legislation, novels, stories and magazine features, medical and counselling advice, essays and articles, learned theses and research programmes, as well as new sexual practices (e.g. 'safe' sex) and the pornography industry. Without denying that the state, the law, the sovereign or the dominant class may have positions of dominance, Foucault shifts our attention away from the grand, overall strategies of power, towards the many, localized circuits, tactics, mechanisms and effects through which power circulates – what Foucault calls the 'meticulous rituals' or the 'micro-physics' of power. These power relations 'go right down to the depth of society' (Foucault, 1977a, p. 27). They connect the way power is actually working on the ground to the great pyramids of power by what he calls a capillary movement (capillaries being the thin-walled vessels that aid the exchange of oxygen between the blood in our bodies and the surrounding tissues). Not because power at these lower levels merely reflects or 'reproduces, at the level of individuals, bodies, gestures and behaviour, the general form of the law or government' (Foucault, 1977a, p. 27) but, on the contrary, because such an approach 'roots [power] in forms of behaviour, bodies and local relations of power which should not at all be seen as a simple projection of the central power' (Foucault, 1980, p. 201).

To what object are the micro-physics of power primarily applied, in Foucault's model? To the body. He places the body at the centre of the struggles between different formations of power/knowledge. The techniques of regulation are applied to the body. Different discursive formations and apparatuses divide, classify and inscribe the body differently in their respective regimes of power and 'truth'. In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, Foucault analyses the very different ways in which the body of the criminal is 'produced' and disciplined in different punishment regimes in France. In earlier periods, punishment was haphazard, prisons were places into which the public could wander and the ultimate punishment was

inscribed violently on the body by means of instruments of torture and execution, etc. – a practice the essence of which is that it should be public, visible to everyone. The modern form of disciplinary regulation and power, by contrast, is private, individualized; prisoners are shut away from the public and often from one another, though continually under surveillance from the authorities; and punishment is individualized. Here, the body has become the site of a new kind of disciplinary regime.

Of course this 'body' is not simply the natural body which all human beings possess at all times. This body is *produced* within discourse, according to the different discursive formations – the state of knowledge about crime and the criminal, what counts as 'true' about how to change or deter criminal behaviour, the specific apparatus and technologies of punishment prevailing at the time. This is a radically historicized conception of the body – a sort of surface on which different regimes of power/knowledge write their meanings and effects. It thinks of the body as 'totally imprinted by history and the processes of history's deconstruction of the body' (Foucault, 1977a, p. 63).

4.4 Summary: Foucault and representation

Foucault's approach to representation is not easy to summarize. He is concerned with the production of knowledge and meaning through discourse. Foucault does indeed analyse particular texts and representations, as the semioticians did. But he is more inclined to analyse the whole *discursive formation* to which a text or a practice belongs. His concern is with knowledge provided by the human and social sciences, which organizes conduct, understanding, practice and belief, the regulation of bodies as well as whole populations. Although his work is clearly done in the wake of, and profoundly influenced by, the 'turn to language' which marked the *constructionist* approach to representation, his definition of *discourse* is much broader than language, and includes many other elements of practice and institutional regulation which Saussure's approach, with its linguistic focus, excluded. Foucault is always much more historically specific, seeing forms of power/knowledge as always rooted in particular contexts and histories. Above all, for Foucault, the production of knowledge is always crossed with questions of power and the body; and this greatly expands the scope of what is involved in representation.

The major critique levelled against his work is that he tends to absorb too much into 'discourse', and this has the effect of encouraging his followers to neglect the influence of the material, economic and structural factors in the operation of power/knowledge. Some critics also find his rejection of any criterion of 'truth' in the human sciences in favour of the idea of a 'regime of truth' and the will-to-power (the will to make things 'true') vulnerable to the charge of relativism. Nevertheless, there is little doubt about the major impact which his work has had on contemporary theories of representation and meaning.

4.5 Charcot and the performance of hysteria

In the following example, we will try to apply Foucault's method to a particular example. Figure 1.8 shows a painting by André Brouillet of the famous French psychiatrist and neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–93), lecturing on the subject of female hysteria to students in the lecture theatre of his famous Paris clinic at La Salpêtrière.

ACTIVITY 7

Look at Brouillet's painting (Figure 1.8). What does it reveal as a representation of the study of hysteria?

Brouillet shows a hysterical patient being supported by an assistant and attended by two women. For many years, hysteria had been traditionally identified as a female malady and although Charcot demonstrated conclusively that many hysterical symptoms were to be found in men, and a significant proportion of his patients were diagnosed male hysterics, Elaine Showalter observes that 'for Charcot, too, hysteria remains symbolically, if not medically, a female malady' (1987, p. 148). Charcot was a very humane man who took his patients' suffering seriously and treated them with dignity. He diagnosed hysteria as a genuine ailment rather than a malingerer's excuse (much as has happened, in our time, after many struggles, with other illnesses, like anorexia and ME). This painting represents a regular feature of Charcot's treatment regime, where hysterical female patients displayed before an audience of medical staff and students the symptoms of their malady, ending often with a full hysterical seizure.

FIGURE 1.8 André Brouillet, *A clinical lesson at La Salpêtrière (given by Charcot)*, 1887.

The painting could be said to capture and represent, visually, a discursive 'event' – the emergence of a new regime of knowledge. Charcot's great distinction, which drew students from far and wide to study with him (including, in 1885, the young Sigmund Freud from Vienna), was his demonstration 'that hysterical symptoms such as paralysis could be produced and relieved by hypnotic suggestion' (Showalter, 1987, p. 148). Here we see the practice of hypnosis being applied in practice.

Indeed, the image seems to capture *two* such moments of knowledge production. Charcot did not pay much attention to what the patients said (though he observed their actions and gestures meticulously). But Freud and his friend Breuer did. At first, in their work when they returned home, they used Charcot's hypnosis method, which had attracted such wide attention as a novel approach to treatment of hysteria at La Salpêtrière. But some years later they treated a young woman called Bertha Pappenheim for hysteria, and she, under the pseudonym 'Anna O', became the first case study written up in Freud and Breuer's path-breaking *Studies in Hysteria* (1974/1895). It was the 'loss of words', her failing grasp of the syntax of her own language (German), the silences and meaningless babble of this brilliantly intellectual, poetic and imaginative but rebellious young woman, which gave Breuer and Freud the first clue that her linguistic disturbance was related to her resentment at her 'place' as dutiful daughter of a decidedly patriarchal father, and thus deeply connected with her illness. After hypnosis, her capacity to speak coherently returned, and she spoke fluently in three other languages, though not in her native German. Through her dialogue with Breuer, and her ability to 'work through' her difficult relationship in relation to language, 'Anna O' gave the first example of the 'talking cure' which, of course, then provided the whole basis for Freud's subsequent development of the psychoanalytic method. So we are looking, in this image, at the 'birth' of two new psychiatric *epistemes*: Charcot's method of hypnosis, and the conditions which later produced psychoanalysis.

The example also has many connections with the question of *representation.* In the picture, the patient is performing or 'representing' with her body the hysterical symptoms from which she is 'suffering'. But these symptoms are also being 're-presented' – in the very different medical language of diagnosis and analysis – to her (his?) audience by the Professor: a relationship which involves *power.* Showalter notes that, in general, 'the representation of female hysteria was a central aspect of Charcot's work' (p.148). Indeed, the clinic was filled with lithographs and paintings. He had his assistants assemble a photographic album of nervous patients, a sort of visual inventory of the various 'types' of hysterical patient. He later employed a professional photographer to take charge of the service. His analysis of the displayed symptoms, which seems to be what is happening in the painting, accompanied the hysterical 'performance'. He did not flinch from the spectacular and theatrical aspects associated with his demonstrations of hypnosis as a treatment regime. Freud thought that 'Every one of his "fascinating lectures"' was 'a little work of art in construction and

composition'. Indeed, Freud noted, 'he never appeared greater to his listeners than after he had made the effort, by giving the most detailed account of his train of thought, by the greatest frankness about his doubts and hesitations, to reduce the gulf between teacher and pupil' (Gay, 1988, p. 49).

ACTIVITY 8

Now look carefully at the picture again and, bearing in mind what we have said about Foucault's method of and approach to representation, answer the following questions:

1 Who commands the centre of the picture?
2 Who or what is its 'subject? Are (1) and (2) the same?
3 Can you tell that knowledge is being produced here? How?
4 What do you notice about relations of power in the picture? How are they represented? How does the *form* and *spatial relationships* of the picture represent this?
5 Describe the 'gaze' of the people in the image: who is looking at whom? What does *that* tell us?
6 What do the age and gender of the participants tell us?
7 What message does the patient's body convey?
8 Is there a *sexual* meaning in the image? If so, what?
9 What is the relationship of you, the viewer, to the image?
10 Do you notice anything else about the image which we have missed?

READING F

Now read the account of Charcot and La Salpêtrière offered by Elaine Showalter in 'The performance of hysteria' from *The Female Malady*, reproduced as Reading F at the end of this chapter. Look carefully at the two photographs of Charcot's hysterical women patients. What do you make of their captions?

5 Where is 'the subject'?

We have traced the shift in Foucault's work from language to discourse and knowledge, and their relation to questions of power. But where in all this, you might ask, is the subject? Saussure tended to abolish the subject from the question of representation. Language, he argued, speaks us. The subject appears in Saussure's schema as the author of individual speech-acts (*paroles*). But, as we have seen, Saussure did not think that the level of the *paroles* was one at which a 'scientific' analysis of language could be conducted. In one sense, Foucault shares this position. For him, it is *discourse*, not the subject, which produces knowledge. Discourse is enmeshed with power, but it is not necessary to find 'a subject' – the king, the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, the state, etc. – for *power/knowledge* to operate.

On the other hand, Foucault *did* include the subject in his theorizing, though he did not restore the subject to its position as the centre and author of representation. Indeed, as his work developed, he became more and more concerned with questions about 'the subject', and in his very late and unfinished work, he even went so far as to give the subject a certain reflexive awareness of his or her own conduct, though this still stopped short of restoring the subject to his/her full sovereignty.

Foucault was certainly deeply critical of what we might call the traditional conception of the subject. The conventional notion thinks of 'the subject' as an individual who is fully endowed with consciousness; an autonomous and stable entity, the 'core' of the self, and the independent, authentic source of action and meaning. According to this conception, when we hear ourselves speak, we feel we are identical with what has been said. And this identity of the subject with what is said gives him/her a privileged position in relation to meaning. It suggests that, although other people may misunderstand us, *we* always understand ourselves because *we were the source of meaning in the first place.*

However, as we have seen, the shift towards a constructionist conception of language and representation did a great deal to displace the subject from a privileged position in relation to knowledge and meaning. The same is true of Foucault's discursive approach. It is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produces knowledge. Subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the *episteme*, the *discursive formation*, the *regime of truth*, of a particular period and culture. Indeed, this is one of Foucault's most radical propositions: the 'subject' is *produced within discourse.* This subject *of* discourse cannot be outside discourse, because it must be *subjected to* discourse. It must submit to its rules and conventions, to its dispositions of power/knowledge. The subject can become the bearer of the kind of knowledge which discourse produces. It can become the object through which power is relayed. But it cannot stand outside power/knowledge as its source and author. In 'The subject and power' (1982), Foucault writes that 'My objective ... has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects ... It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word *subject*: subject to someone else's control and dependence, and tied to his (*sic*) own identity by a conscience and self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to' (Foucault, 1982, pp. 208, 212). Making discourse and representation more historical has therefore been matched, in Foucault, by an equally radical historicization of *the subject.* 'One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework' (Foucault, 1980, p. 115).

Where, then, is 'the subject' in this more discursive approach to meaning, representation and power?

Foucault's 'subject' seems to be produced through discourse in *two* different senses or places. First, the discourse itself produces 'subjects' – figures who personify the particular forms of knowledge which the discourse produces. These subjects have the attributes we would expect as these are defined by the discourse: the madman, the hysterical woman, the homosexual, the individualized criminal, and so on. These figures are specific to specific discursive regimes and historical periods. But the discourse also produces a *place for the subject* (i.e. the reader or viewer, who is also 'subjected to' discourse) from which its particular knowledge and meaning most makes sense. It is not inevitable that all individuals in a particular period will become the subjects of a particular discourse in this sense, and thus the bearers of its power/knowledge. But for them – us – to do so, they – we – must locate themselves/ourselves in the *position* from which the discourse makes most sense, and thus become its 'subjects' by 'subjecting' ourselves to its meanings, power and regulation. All discourses, then, construct **subject-positions**, from which alone they make sense.

subject-positions

This approach has radical implications for a theory of representation. For it suggests that discourses themselves construct the subject-positions from which they become meaningful and have effects. Individuals may differ as to their social class, gendered, 'racial' and ethnic characteristics (among other factors), but they will not be able to take meaning until they have identified with those positions which the discourse constructs, *subjected* themselves to its rules, and hence become the *subjects of its power/knowledge*. For example, pornography produced for men will only 'work' for women, according to this theory, if in some sense women put themselves in the position of the 'desiring male voyeur' – which is the ideal subject-position which the discourse of male pornography constructs – and look at the models from this 'masculine' discursive position. This may seem, and is, a highly contestable proposition. But let us consider an example which illustrates the argument.

5.1 How to make sense of Velasquez' *Las Meninas*

Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1970) opens with a discussion of a painting by the famous Spanish painter, Velasquez, called *Las Meninas*. It has been a topic of considerable scholarly debate and controversy. The reason I am using it here is because, as all the critics agree, the painting itself does raise certain questions about the nature of *representation*, and Foucault himself uses it to talk about these wider issues of the subject. It is these arguments which interest us here, not the question of whether Foucault's is the 'true', correct or even the definitive reading of the painting's meaning. That the painting has no one, fixed or final meaning is, indeed, one of Foucault's most powerful arguments.

The painting is unique in Velasquez' work. It was part of the Spanish court's royal collection and hung in the palace in a room which was subsequently destroyed by fire. It was dated '1656' by Velasquez' successor as court

FIG
Die
Las
165

painter. It was originally called 'The Empress with her Ladies and a Dwarf'; but by the inventory of 1666, it had acquired the title of 'A Portrait of the Infanta of Spain with her Ladies In Waiting and Servants, by the Court Painter and Palace Chamberlain Diego Velasquez'. It was subsequently called *Las Meninas* – 'The Maids of Honour'. Some argue that the painting shows Velasquez working on *Las Meninas* itself and was painted with the aid of a mirror – but this now seems unlikely. The most widely held and convincing explanation is that Velasquez was working on a full-length portrait of the King and Queen, and that it is the royal couple who are reflected in the mirror on the back wall. It is at the couple that the princess and her attendants are looking and on them that the artist's gaze appears to rest as he steps back from his canvas. The reflection artfully includes the royal couple in the picture. This is essentially the account which Foucault accepts.

ACTIVITY 9

Look at the picture carefully, while we summarize Foucault's argument.

FIGURE 1.9
Diego Velasquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656.

Las Meninas shows the interior of a room – perhaps the painter's studio or some other room in the Spanish Royal Palace, the Escorial. The scene, though in its deeper recesses rather dark, is bathed in light from a window on the right. 'We are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn looking out at us,' says Foucault (1970, p. 4). To the left, looking forwards, is the painter himself, Velasquez. He is in the act of painting and his brush is raised, 'perhaps ... considering whether to add some finishing touch to the canvas' (p. 3). He is looking at his model, who is sitting in the place from which we are looking, but we cannot see who the model is because the canvas on which Velasquez is painting has its back to us, its face resolutely turned away from our gaze. In the centre of the painting stands what tradition recognizes as the little princess, the Infanta Maragarita, who has come to watch the proceedings. She is the centre of the picture we are looking at, but she is not the 'subject' of Velasquez' canvas. The Infanta has with her an 'entourage of duennas, maids of honour, courtiers and dwarfs' and her dog (p. 9). The courtiers stand behind, towards the back on the right. Her maids of honour stand on either side of her, framing her. To the right at the front are two dwarfs, one a famous court jester. The eyes of many of these figures, like that of the painter himself, are looking out towards the front of the picture at the sitters.

Who are they – the figures at whom everyone is looking but whom we cannot look at and whose portraits on the canvas we are forbidden to see? In fact, though at first we think we cannot see them, the picture tells us who they are because, behind the Infanta's head and a little to the left of the centre of the picture, surrounded by a heavy wooden frame, is a mirror; and in the mirror – at last – are reflected the sitters, who are in fact seated *in the position from which we are looking*: 'a reflection that shows us quite simply what is lacking in everyone's gaze' (p. 15). The figures reflected in the mirror are, in fact, the King, Philip IV, and his wife, Mariana. Beside the mirror, to the right of it, in the back wall, is another 'frame', but this is not a mirror reflecting forwards; it is a doorway leading *backwards* out of the room. On the stair, his feet placed on different steps, 'a man stands out in full-length silhouette'. He has just entered or is just leaving the scene and is looking at it from behind, observing what is going on in it but 'content to surprise those within without being seen himself' (p. 10).

5.2 The subject of/in representation

Who or what is *the subject* of this painting? In his comments, Foucault uses *Las Meninas* to make some general points about his theory of representation and specifically about the role of the subject:

1 'Foucault reads the painting in terms of representation and the subject' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p. 20). As well as being a painting which shows us (represents) a scene in which a portrait of the King and Queen of Spain is being painted, it is also a painting which *tells us something about how representation and the subject work*. It produces its own kind of knowledge.

Representation and the subject are the painting's underlying message – what it is about, its sub-text.

2 Clearly, representation here is *not* about a 'true' reflection or imitation of reality. Of course, the people in the painting may 'look like' the actual people in the Spanish court. But the discourse of painting in the picture is doing a great deal more than simply trying to mirror accurately what exists.

3 Everything in a sense is *visible* in the painting. And yet, what it is 'about' – its meaning – depends on how we 'read' it. *It is as much constructed around what you can't see as what you can.* You can't see what is being painted on the canvas, though this seems to be the point of the whole exercise. You can't see what everyone is looking at, which is the sitters, unless we assume it is a reflection of them in the mirror. They are both in and not in the picture. Or rather, they are present through a kind of substitution. We cannot see them because they are not directly represented: but their 'absence' is represented – *mirrored* through their reflection in the mirror at the back. The meaning of the picture is produced, Foucault argues, through this complex inter-play between *presence* (what you see, the visible) and *absence* (what you can't see, what has displaced it within the frame). Representation works as much through what is *not* shown, as through what is.

4 In fact, a number of substitutions or displacements seem to be going on here. For example, the 'subject' and centre of the painting we are looking at seems to be the Infanta. But the 'subject' or centre is also, of course, the sitters – the King and Queen – whom we can't see but whom the others are looking at. You can tell this from the fact that the mirror on the wall in which the King and Queen are reflected is also almost exactly at the centre of the field of vision of the picture. So the Infanta and the Royal Couple, in a sense, share the place of the centre as the principal 'subjects' of the painting. It all depends on where you are looking from – in towards the scene from where you, the spectator, is sitting or outwards from the scene, from the position of the people in the picture. If you accept Foucault's argument, then there are *two* subjects to the painting and *two* centres. And the composition of the picture – its discourse – forces us to oscillate between these two 'subjects' without ever finally deciding which one to identify with. Representation in the painting seems firm and clear – everything in place. But our vision, the way we *look* at the picture, oscillates between two centres, two subjects, two positions of looking, two meanings. Far from being finally resolved into some absolute truth which is *the* meaning of the picture, the discourse of the painting quite deliberately keeps us in this state of suspended attention, in this oscillating process of looking. Its meaning is always in the process of emerging, yet any final meaning is constantly deferred.

5 You can tell a great deal about how the picture works as a discourse, and what it means, by following the orchestration of *looking* – who is looking at what or whom. *Our* look – the eyes of the person looking at the picture, the spectator – follows the relationships of looking as represented in the picture.

We know the figure of the Infanta is important because her attendants are looking at her. But we know that someone even more important is sitting in front of the scene whom we can't see, because many figures – the Infanta, the jester, the painter himself – are looking at them! So the spectator (who is also 'subjected' to the discourse of the painting) is doing two kinds of looking. Looking at the scene from the position outside, in front of, the picture. And at the same time, looking out of the scene, by *identifying with* the looking being done by the figures in the painting. Projecting ourselves into the subjects of the painting help us as spectators to see, to 'make sense' of it. We take up the positions indicated by the discourse, identify with them, subject ourselves to its meanings, and become its 'subjects'.

6 It is critical for Foucault's argument that the painting does not have a completed meaning. It only means something in relation to the spectator who is looking at it. The spectator completes the meaning of the picture. Meaning is therefore constructed in the dialogue between the painting and the spectator. Velasquez, of course, could not know who would subsequently occupy the position of the spectator. Nevertheless, the whole 'scene' of the painting had to be laid out in relation to that ideal point in front of the painting from which *any* spectator must look if the painting is to make sense. The spectator, we might say, is painted into position in front of the picture. In this sense, the discourse produces a *subject-position* for the spectator-subject. For the painting to work, the spectator, whoever he or she may be, must first 'subject' himself/herself to the painting's discourse and, in this way, become the painting's ideal viewer, the producer of its meanings – its 'subject'. This is what is meant by saying that the discourse constructs the spectator as a subject – by which we mean that it constructs a place for the subject-spectator who is looking at and making sense of it.

7 Representation therefore occurs from at least three positions in the painting. First of all there is us, the spectator, whose 'look' puts together and unifies the different elements and relationships in the picture into an overall meaning. This subject must be there for the painting to make sense, but he/she is not represented in the painting.

Then there is the painter who painted the scene. He is 'present' in two places at once, since he must at one time have been standing where we are now sitting, in order to paint the scene, but he has then put himself into (represented himself in) the picture, looking back towards that point of view where we, the spectator, have taken his place. We may also say that the scene makes sense and is pulled together in relation to the court figure standing on the stair at the back, since he too surveys it all but – like us and like the painter – from somewhat outside it.

8 Finally, consider the mirror on the back wall. If it were a 'real' mirror, it should now be representing or reflecting *us*, since we are standing in that position in front of the scene to which everyone is looking and from which everything makes sense. But it does not mirror us, it shows *in our place* the King and Queen of Spain. Somehow the discourse of the painting positions us

in the place of the Sovereign! You can imagine what fun Foucault had with this substitution.

Foucault argues that it is clear from the way the discourse of representation works in the painting that it *must* be looked at and made sense of from that one subject-position in front of it from which we, the spectators, are looking. This is also the point-of-view from which a camera would have to be positioned in order to film the scene. And, lo and behold, the person whom Velasquez chooses to 'represent' sitting in this position is The Sovereign – 'master of all he surveys' – who is both the 'subject of' the painting (what it is about) and the 'subject in' the painting – the one whom the discourse sets in place, but who, simultaneously, makes sense of it and understands it all by a look of supreme mastery.

6 Conclusion: representation, meaning and language reconsidered

We started with a fairly simple definition of representation. Representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning. Already, this definition carries the important premise that things – objects, people, events, in the world – do not have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning. It is us – in society, within human cultures – who make things mean, who signify. Meanings, consequently, will always change, from one culture or period to another. There is no guarantee that every object in one culture will have an equivalent meaning in another, precisely because cultures differ, sometimes radically, from one another in their codes – the ways they carve up, classify and assign meaning to the world. So one important idea about representation is the acceptance of a degree of *cultural relativism* between one culture and another, a certain lack of equivalence, and hence the need for *translation* as we move from the mind-set or conceptual universe of one culture or another.

We call this the *constructionist* approach to representation, contrasting it with both the *reflective* and the *intentional* approaches. Now, if culture is a process, a practice, how does it work? In the *constructionist perspective*, representation involves making meaning by forging links between three different orders of things: what we might broadly call the world of things, people, events and experiences; the conceptual world – the mental concepts we carry around in our heads; and the signs, arranged into languages, which 'stand for' or communicate these concepts. Now, if you have to make a link between systems which are not the same, and fix these at least for a time so that other people know what, in one system, corresponds to what in another system, then there must be something which allows us to translate between them – telling us what word to use for what concept, and so on. Hence the notion of *codes*.

Producing meaning depends on the practice of interpretation, and interpretation is sustained by us actively using the code – *encoding*, putting things into the code – and by the person at the other end interpreting or *decoding* the meaning (Hall, 1980). But note, that, because meanings are always changing and slipping, codes operate more like social conventions than like fixed laws or unbreakable rules. As meanings shift and slide, so inevitably the codes of a culture imperceptibly change. The great advantage of the concepts and classifications of the culture which we carry around with us in our heads is that they enable us to *think* about things, whether they are there, present, or not; indeed, whether they ever existed or not. There are concepts for our fantasies, desires and imaginings as well as for so-called 'real' objects in the material world. And the advantage of language is that our thoughts about the world need not remain exclusive to us, and silent. We can translate them into language, make them 'speak', through the use of signs which stand for them – and thus talk, write, communicate about them to others.

Gradually, then, we complexified what we meant by representation. It came to be less and less the straightforward thing we assumed it to be at first – which is why we need *theories* to explain it. We looked at two versions of constructionism – that which concentrated on how *language* and *signification* (the use of signs in language) works to produce *meanings*, which after Saussure and Barthes we called *semiotics*; and that, following Foucault, which concentrated on how *discourse* and *discursive practices* produce knowledge. I won't run through the finer points in these two approaches again, since you can go back to them in the main body of the chapter and refresh your memory. In semiotics, you will recall the importance of signifier/signified, *langue/parole* and 'myth', and how the marking of difference and binary oppositions are crucial for meaning. In the *discursive* approach, you will recall discursive formations, power/knowledge, the idea of a 'regime of truth', the way discourse also produces the subject and defines the *subject-positions* from which knowledge proceeds and indeed, the return of questions about 'the subject' to the field of representation. In several examples, we tried to get you to work with these theories and to apply them. There will be further debate about them in subsequent chapters.

Notice that the chapter does *not* argue that the *discursive* approach overturned everything in the *semiotic* approach. Theoretical development does not usually proceed in this linear way. There was much to learn from Saussure and Barthes, and we are still discovering ways of fruitfully applying their insights – without necessarily swallowing everything they said. We offered you some critical thoughts on the subject. There is a great deal to learn from Foucault and the *discursive* approach, but by no means everything it claims is correct and the theory is open to, and has attracted, many criticisms. Again, in later chapters, as we encounter further developments in the theory of representation, and see the strengths and weaknesses of these positions applied in practice, we will come to appreciate more fully that we are only at the beginning of the exciting task of exploring this process of meaning

construction, which is at the heart of culture, to its full depths. What we have offered here is, we hope, a relatively clear account of a set of complex, and as yet tentative, ideas in an unfinished project.

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