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Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics by Hubert L. Dreyfus; Paul Rabinow; Michel Foucault and the Subversion of Intellect by Karlis Racevskis; Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Western Culture: Toward a New Science of History by Pamela Major-Poetzl
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BOOK REVIEWS

Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics. By Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. 2nd edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983. 271 p.

Michel Foucault and the Subversion of Intellect. By Karlis Racevskis. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983. 172 p.

Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Western Culture: Toward a New Science of History. By Pamela Major-Poetzl. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983. xiii, 281 p.

The work of Michel Foucault assumes greater importance with each passing year. Yet the confusion and controversy that gather around him have not diminished over time. In most academic circles Foucault's books are still greeted with uneasiness, skepticism, and ridicule. This is a predictable response to ideas that challenge the status of conventional intellectual activity. It is not surprising that many scholars suspect Foucault of serving up yet one more fashionable critique of "the West" in pretentious form. His books are difficult, though the nature and necessity of that difficulty is itself disputed. He ignores established conventions of evidence and argumentation. Despite such grounds for doubt the evidence of his own scrupulousness and seriousness suggests that we should pay attention to what he has to say. But this is not easy. While there is some general agreement on the outline of Foucault's project, there is still a great deal of confusion about what Foucault is doing. Three recent books on Foucault help to clarify possible answers to this question. They are no substitute for reading Foucault himself, but they can help to orient one to the main concerns of his work.

Major-Poetzl, Racevskis, and Dreyfus and Rabinow agree on Foucault's importance. Each volume offers a useful summary of some aspect of Foucault's work. And the authors all take as their subject the general body of Foucault's thought, rather than focusing on the particulars of any of his individual studies. Beyond this common enterprise these books differ in significant ways. Their authors really offer us conflicting Foucaults: they disagree about the context of Foucault's work and present quite different accounts of the relationship of knowledge and practice. The authors also contest the meaning and goals of the archaeological and genealogical activities. Such disagreement extends to the merits of Foucault's earlier works and their relationship to the work on prisons and sexuality. These disputes can be turned to our use; they point up tensions within Foucault's work and the frequent misunderstandings of those who read him.

The problem with the Major-Poetzl volume is that it focuses too exclusively on the earlier works of an author who has had a good deal more to say. This fault is compounded in an epilogue dismissive of the later work. Perhaps this response arises because Foucault's recent ideas threaten the interpretation Major-Poetzl offers of his thought. She tells us that her book originated when she read Foucault and heard an echo of something else, the language of modern physics. "It is the similarity between archaeology and field theory that has made me wonder if

Foucault's abstract and seemingly artificial constructions might actually be the first step in the formation of a new science of history independent of the nineteenth-century model of evolutionary biology" (p. ix). But this insight, far from helping her to a new understanding or explanation of Foucault, becomes a source of indecision. At times she devotes herself to giving an account of Foucault which seeks to locate him within the history of modern science. Foucault thus becomes little more than an illustration of "the formation of a new paradigm" (p. 104). At other times she seems an advocate of Foucault's "new method" of doing history: Foucault's contribution is portrayed as comparable to that of Bloch or Braudel. What she finds attractive in his approach is the common-sense notion that history should catch up with the times and adopt analogies from physics. Ironically her argument for change is presented within the conventions of traditional intellectual history. Her book never escapes from its own confusion; she has no real justification for the adoption of physics as a model for history. She cannot decide whether Foucault is a symptom of or a contribution to theoretical change. She also fails to demonstrate the significance of her accurate observation that Foucault makes use of terms and analogies from modern physics. Is his use of such terms strategic and opportunistic, or does he give greater ontological significance to them? Major-Poetzl cannot tell us.

There is nothing indecisive about the interpretation offered by Racevskis. His style is sweeping and engaging. He is full of admiration for what Foucault has achieved: "My principal aim has been to outline an intellectual strategy that I consider to have been profoundly liberating in its effects, to examine what I view as his successful attempt at dismantling the systems of constraints with which Western civilization has established the norms and limits of humanity" (p. 15). The reader cannot but notice how sharply this claim contrasts with Foucault's own more modest estimation of his work. But then Racevskis gives us a Foucault who has always and single-mindedly pursued his project. There is scarcely a suggestion in Racevskis' book that Foucault has ever taken a false step or altered his emphasis. He provides an interesting introduction to Foucault, but his account springs from a very particular reading of Foucault's work.

For Racevskis the archaeological approach of the early works offers the central theme of Foucault's activity. He tells us that the archaeological method is the means by which "a genealogical purpose can be realized" (p. 16). Even though Racevskis discusses all of Foucault's work through the *History of Sexuality*, he seems most in sympathy with the mood of the early books. Given this enthusiasm for Foucault it is peculiar then that Racevskis turns to a Lacanian model of human thought in order to explicate Foucault's meaning. For Lacan the subject arises within the Symbolic dimension of thought. The Symbolic makes possible a relationship to the world which forms the basis for all human experience. Yet this domain is impossible to describe or contain within any representation of the world because it is the basis for all representation. Humans do not give meaning; rather they are given in meaning. Whenever a subject so constituted reverses this order and establishes a consciousness centered upon the self, Lacan suggests that the subject has fallen into the grip of the Imaginary. The difficulty with the Imaginary dimension is that it fosters the illusion in the subject that it (the subject) has captured the "real," has achieved unmediated access to the world. For Lacan and Racevskis this is a dangerous knowledge; it involves the delusion that one has discovered the foundation of thought. The consequence of such a claim to privileged knowledge is the exclusion of all that is "other" to this knowing self. When this mirage is acted upon in the world, humanity is denied and divided.

Racevskis believes that Foucault offers us a method for exposing the Imaginary character of modern thought and restoring contact with the Symbolic. According to Racevskis, Foucault provides us with the critical tools for rediscovering ourselves as "subjects in and of our own discursive practices" (p. 20). He does this by exposing the rules of discourse which at once constitute an "episteme" and deny the absence of any foundation for discourse. Once the rules are described the episteme itself dissolves and thought is liberated. We are again in touch with that dimension which makes all thought possible. This destructive activity thus turns out to be positive, for it negates the Imaginary which is after all the negation of life. We are open to the play of the Symbolic. But this freedom does involve an obligation: Foucault's discourse must resist all temptation to closure. He must sustain his activity "in a permanent state of irresolution" (p. 116).

The strengths and weaknesses of this interpretation of Foucault spring from the same source. Racevskis properly emphasizes the importance of the insight into the interpretative dimension of human activity. For the many who are still uninitiated into the ways of the new literary criticism, this difficult point bears repeating. Something important does happen when we give up the quest for "Truth." It is at once disorienting and liberating to resign from the search for origins or true meaning or the truth of the subject. Foucault uses this insight to criticize all systems which claim truth for themselves. But having said this much, Racevskis goes too far in reducing Foucault to this single insight. It even oversimplifies the complexities of the archaeological enterprise. His capitalization of Symbolic and Imaginary throughout the book is a sure tip-off. He offers us a celebration of the Symbolic as a kind of bottomless well of possibilities which only the folly of the Imaginary denies us. What else can one make of a sentence such as the following: "As soon as [the Imaginary's] mechanisms are revealed against the background of the Symbolic as the uncontrolled designs of chance, its hold has been broken" (p. 65). Or again: "The first apparent purpose is to dissolve the subject, to dismantle the founding notion of a subjective consciousness; then, in the void thus created at the center of discourse, it becomes possible to develop a new kind of awareness that will radically alter our thinking about discourse" (p. 30).

There are elements of a useful summary of Foucault here, but Racevskis gets the emphasis wrong. His summary is too neat and his conclusions too satisfying. Foucault himself is more modest in his activities. He has avoided the flights indulged in by Racevskis. He is more respectful of the power and complexity of what Racevskis subsumes under the heading of the activity of the Imaginary. He has resisted the grand claim of liberation. What is missing in Racevskis is Foucault's detailed description of the subtle and sinister influences of power in constituting subjects. Racevskis may not intend this result, but he writes at such a high level of generality that it seems unnecessary to discuss specific discourses and their consequences. Foucault's contribution is made to appear as beginning and ending with an insight. There is nothing in the book of his brilliant wrestling with specific discourses; rather, after the initial enthusiasm one grows bored with the repetition of a gesture. The radical epistemological step is necessary, but the measure of Foucault's importance is his inventiveness and integrity in going on.

Dreyfus and Rabinow's book is more difficult and less conclusive than Racevskis'. But the reason for this has nothing to do with an uncertainty about how to approach Foucault's work. Both authors are convinced of Foucault's importance. What is refreshing about Dreyfus and Rabinow is the way they engage with Foucault. They offer an interpretation of Foucault, but they do not pretend to have the last word. They pose questions for Foucault, for the reader, and for

themselves. Thus we become linked in a common inquiry.

Dreyfus and Rabinow locate Foucault within the context of the important contemporary debate over how to study human beings. They feel Foucault has made a significant advance. His method does not so much overturn the dominant modes of analysis, such as structuralism and hermeneutics, as carry them in a new direction. Foucault's method, they claim, combines the "distancing effect of structuralism" with "an interpretative dimension which develops the hermeneutic insight that the investigator is always situated and must understand the meaning of his cultural practices from within them" (p. xii). The value of this approach is that it presents Foucault in terms of issues that even those unfamiliar with recent French philosophy can appreciate.

Dreyfus and Rabinow begin by drawing a sharp distinction between Foucault's archaeological and genealogical works. They describe an important continuity of concern, but they also discover a fundamental shift in strategy. For them Foucault's archaeological mode of analysis is the result of an overreaction; in trying to distance himself from traditional forms of explanation oriented by the subject, he came under the influence of structuralism. What Foucault attempted in the archaeological approach was to discover the rules of discursive formation. These rules operate independently of any of the contents or practices found in any particular episteme. They help us to describe discourse without being seduced by it. The rules have no causal power; they define a space within which discourse appears. "What Foucault claims to have discovered is a new domain of serious statements which, although experienced as dependent on nondiscursive practices by those within them, can be described and explained by the archaeologist as an autonomous realm" (p. 57). The point of such a discovery for Foucault is to avoid the forms of explanation that remain trapped by the discourse about "Man," a discourse of recent appearance. Foucault struggles to define a realm of intelligibility that resists the indefensible ontological claims of traditional historical explanation.

For Dreyfus and Rabinow the failure of the archaeological method is already implicit in *The Order of Things*. The problem arises from Foucault's desire to discover an autonomous realm of discourse. Such a desire betrays the wish for a privileged position for the interpreter. But the archaeology cannot explain how an observer escapes from the limits of the episteme. Just as important for Foucault, and for Dreyfus and Rabinow, is the failure of the archaeology to discover a relation to practice. Practice and the nondiscursive become simply the relays of discourse; they do not influence its appearance or character. The lack of a causal connection is another way of describing the problem, even as one recognizes the difficulty that lies in causal claims. Dreyfus and Rabinow make the compelling point that for one as concerned with specific issues and practices as Foucault, this abstracted position is untenable. He wants to talk about "serious" discourse, but the archaeological method leaves him unable to establish rules for what counts as serious discourse and what its special significance is. He is left unable to justify the importance of his own interpretations.

Still, the archaeological turn has not been without its value. This perspective makes possible a distancing from the conventional landscape of social theory. It unsettles the identity of that which we think we know, and opens up access to that which we have condemned to incomprehension and otherness. The archaeological has a vital philosophical function; it "still isolates and indicates the arbitrariness of the hermeneutical horizon of meaning" (p. 106) and reminds us that there is no certainty beyond interpretation. In contrast to Racevskis, however, Dreyfus

and Rabinow do not see this as a move that liberates; rather it plunges us back into complexity. Foucault's significance finally is his ability to go on from this point in serious and meaningful ways.

The genealogical method is the decisive breakthrough for Foucault. At its heart is "an inversion of the priority of theory to that of practice" (p. 102). Dreyfus and Rabinow argue that Foucault has come to question his own earlier practice. He takes seriously his inability to locate the observer within the archaeological method. Foucault comes to see that this failure reproduces that of the sciences of "Man." "Neither the methodological self-consciousness of the human scientists involved nor the theory they propound can explain why, at certain times certain types of human sciences are established and survive, and why they have the objects, subjects, concepts, and strategies they do" (p. 102). In his earlier work Foucault subsumed practice in discourse; now he reveals that theory is another element of practice. The prison constitutes the body as the object which the social sciences come to know. The confessional practices of the discourse on sexuality produce the never-ending quest for the meaning of the subject. The conundrum of human beings as subjects and objects which has bedeviled social theory is here cast in a new light. Foucault suggests that structural and hermeneutical approaches are not in conflict; rather they are appropriate in one sense to their tasks of understanding. But far from offering a neutral study of the human being in its objective and subjective dimension, they constitute that individual in their knowledge and practice.

The genealogist must begin by refusing the usual presentation of objects and the typical analysis of subjects. He does not do this because they are fictions which hide some deeper truth. Neither are they simple truths which form a foundation for an objective science. He questions them because the sciences of humanity take their reality for granted. They do not do so accidently. They do so to increase the hold of power and as a result of the investment by power. The claim to "truth" is revealed by Foucault as a move in a struggle. Therefore Foucault renounces such a quest. He does not aim to reveal one more truth or to find one more layer of meaning. These are no longer useful tactics. For him all knowledge is always engaged and involved in the struggles of power. Dreyfus and Rabinow suggest that "Foucault replaces ontology with a special kind of history that focuses on the cultural practices that have made us what we are" (p. 122).

The challenge for Foucault is to find some way to carry on such a project. The landscape is littered with the terms of traditional social and intellectual history, terms which treat as absolute that which is constituted, not elsewhere, but before our very eyes. Foucault's inventiveness is measured by his ability to discover strategies. This approach has infuriated his critics among historians and social scientists. They see him playing fast and loose with the evidence. But these critics do too little justice to Foucault's own meticulous scholarship, and one can in turn accuse them of avoiding the damaging conclusions of Foucault's work. Foucault's standard of seriousness is not their own. His criterion is how knowledge serves our pragmatic concerns in the present. His strategies are not to be judged by the canons a discipline establishes for discovering truth; we must see how useful they are for disclosing what we need to know. There is no point at which analysis ends. We cannot expect these strategies to provide more than they are meant to provide. There is no totalizing theory to put an end to all of this. Foucault has replaced, or rather opposed, such a theory with an analytics of power.

Power remains an elusive concept for Foucault, but he has employed it with great skill and marvellous results. It has opened up a new series of metaphors to

describe human activity, metaphors which also undermine all efforts to establish them as new certainties. Power describes a field of shifting arrangements and forces. There is no one center that is all-powerful, nor is anyone without or outside of power. Analysis begins with the surface play of forces; Foucault calls this his "lighthearted positivism." Knowledge is examined not for its truth but for what it does and how it participates in practices. Foucault's use of the concept of power suggests something else as well: despite the ambitions of modern "bio-power" to master all, the field of power contains many points of contest and many forms of resistance. There can never be a final overthrow of power, but neither can power's grasp ever be total. Foucault does not console us with hopefulness or hopelessness. For him all knowledge is always dangerous.

Consistent with their approach Dreyfus and Rabinow conclude both their volume and the new Afterword with the questions they still have concerning Foucault's project. They do think Foucault's thought is more than simply critical and negative. They are convinced of its positive thrust. After all, his goal is not to undermine all human practices equally, but only those that he perceives are especially dangerous. What concerns them is that Foucault has provided us with no criterion for judging why one practice is more dangerous than another. Foucault has carried out his genealogical exercises with considerable success, but he has resisted giving us a more detailed explanation of his method. When challenged to supply a positive vision of what humanity might become, Foucault responds with a statement like the following: "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are" (p. 216). Such remarks are puzzling. His method demands that he be elusive and resist the appeal to established truths. He has also disclosed in a new and disturbing fashion some of the sinister consequences of traditional humanism. Yet one feels the force of these same values still at work in his thought.

Perhaps the point is that there can be no explanation apart from engagement in analytical activity. There is no one criterion in Foucault's work, but rather a series of judgments arrived at as he studies and argues. He wants to avoid the danger of focusing upon his values; he wants us to look at practices, and he supplies us with new ways of questioning them. Such conclusions arise most forcefully out of the transcriptions of discussions with Foucault. There are jabs and thrusts; there are numerous moments of insight. But there is no grand conclusion. He has the patience to refuse a move that would undercut everything else he has been saying. This activity may seem endless, appropriate only for an initiate into a rigorous intellectual fraternity. But gradually one's sense of the taken-for-granted human world alters. Certain anxious questions dissolve to be replaced by a different understanding of the problems. Dreyfus and Rabinow remind us of the difficulties that remain. Yet they also help us to see that at a time of increasing despair Foucault continues to be a point of opposition and excitement. He has something to say about our most serious issues. He is more than a passing fad. We are still in the process of understanding his originality.

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