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REVIEW

Colin Koopman (ed.), "Special issue: Foucault across the disciplines," *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 24, no 4, October (2011).

The essays that appear in this special issue of the *History of the Human Sciences* are the produce of a conference held in March 2008 at the University of California, Santa Cruz, entitled 'Foucault Across the Disciplines.' The editor of these collected essays, Colin Koopman, describes the intention of the two-day summit as an attempt "to further amplify some of the many cross-disciplinary lines of inquiry, which Foucault's thought has contributed to and in some cases singularly enabled in the 25 years since his early death." The boundaries crossed, or at least touched upon among the published lectures include philosophy, political science, art history/theory, and choreography.¹ Some articles do a better job of crossing disciplinary boundaries than others. Of the nine, which includes Koopman's introduction, Ian Hacking's 'Dérailson' is the most noticeably insular piece. If considered apart from the aim of this collection, it is an excellent and thoughtful reflection on the various editions of Foucault's *Histoire de la folie* and the importance of the term *Dérailson*. Ultimately, however, Hacking's article appears largely unaffected by the general theme of this collection.

The majority of the articles, a total of five, address Foucault's thought in relation to politics, where 'politics' connotes either: (individual) ethics, a salient feature of his later works, or the more conventional sense used in political science/theory. Arnold I. Davidson, Amy Allen, and Hans Sluga employ the former connotation.

Davidson's 'In praise of counter-conduct' hones in on Foucault's 1977-1978 public lectures: *Security, Territory, Population*, as the key to understanding the transition in his thought from "the political to the ethical dimension of sexuality." More specifically, the conceptual lynchpin bridging what some consider the disparate parts of Foucault's later works is found by Davidson in Foucault's 1st March 1978 lecture, where Foucault discusses the notion of 'conduct' in its double signification. Here conduct becomes the act of conducting someone else's actions as well as one's own. Unsatisfied with merely attempting to graph the trajectory of Foucault's thought, Davidson also sees this lecture as a significant contribution to the development of an *askesis* that attempts to incorporate ethical politics. What is signified with Foucault's notion of *counter-conduct*? A "sphere of revolt that incites a process of productivity" as

¹ Presentations not included: Paul Rabinow, Jana Sawicki, Martin Jay, Hayden White, Mark Poster, and Karen Barad. See: <http://humweb.ucsc.edu/foucaultacrosstheisciplines/foucault.htm> for a complete audio archive of the event.

inherited forms of individuality are refused and new forms of subjectivity are promoted. The aim of counter-conduct, in other words, is to extirpate collective modes of individualization, such as the medicalization of masturbation, for new venues of autonomous force relations, which the modern age is seen to be in want of.

In a similar vein, Allen and Sluga discuss Foucault's notion of agency. Like Davidson, Allen defends Foucault from charges of incoherency, but this time, in respect to his analyses on technologies of domination. She denies that there is a contradiction in how Foucault considers the self an effect of power relations, while nonetheless capable of critical self-transformation (what Davidson discusses in terms of counter-conduct). Though Allen does acknowledge limits to Foucault's analysis. "The lack of a fully developed explanation of the collective dimension of the politics," leads her to conclude that though Foucault's politics of self is not incoherent or contradictory, it remains unsatisfactory. Adding a Habermasian supplement to account for the collective dimension of politics, Allen's argument is similar to that made by Bent Flyvbjerg.²

Also touching on the dualism in Foucault's notion of agency, Sluga suggests that this is akin to, if not inspired by, a similar polarity found in Nietzsche's thought. Consider how Nietzsche views action a result of the will to power, while the will to power itself is a purported aspect of agency. Foucault is seen to address these topics categorically, writing on the former in the 1970's and the latter in the 1980's. The difference with Sluga's article is that he does not attempt to find a reconciliatory lynchpin or unearth a hidden coherency. He lets it lie as the "deep and troubling ambiguity inherent in our use of the concept of power." Proceeding to his conclusion, he provides another definition of Foucauldian politics. "Politics has to be understood," Sluga writes, "as a process that reproduces itself at ever higher levels of coordination, as a system of nested strategic relationships." The difference he wishes to illuminate is that between political relations and politically constituted relations, that is, the difference between a current relation that is politicized and a current relation that has been politically constituted but not yet politicized.

In contrast to the essays by Davidson, Allen, and Sluga, where politics is viewed in respect to an individual and ethical dimension, something akin to *askesis*, James Ferguson and Mark Bevir study Foucauldian politics in the more traditional sense of the term—politics as political theory or political science.

In 'Political Science after Foucault,' Bevir discusses a school of thought in political science much indebted to Foucault's work on governmentality: postfoundationalism. Bevir attempts to amalgamate three streams of influence postfoundationalism is most indebted to—Marxism, post-Marxism, and New Left—by outlining their mistakes and identifying their strongpoints. The proposed research agenda focuses on conflict and contingency, favouring an empiricist approach over formal and synchronic modes of explanations that move towards reification and determinism.

On the topic of Foucauldian empiricism, Ferguson lays out Foucault's endorsement of "empirical experimentation" in order to overcome what he sees as "sterile" forms of political

² Bent Flyvbjerg, "Habermas and Foucault: thinkers for civil society?" *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. no. 49, issue no. 2, June (1998).

engagement that have spawned from overemphasizing Foucault's "critiques of power." Like Bevir, Ferguson employs Foucault's thought in the hopes of developing a new approach, one which Ferguson calls "a left art of government." The idea is, rather than pre-emptively denouncing neo-liberal courses of action, leftists should try them out to see if they could be effective tools. To illustrate his point, Ferguson looks at a social assistance program in South Africa where the government attempted to tackle poverty by giving cash directly to citizens. So, though this move is based on a neo-liberal understanding of economics—that to spur economy you need citizens to participate in the market—Ferguson argues that leftists should not write it off as a tactic for demobilizing the poor (as Marx thought). According to Ferguson, Foucault would urge that we must assess it empirically through experimentation, rather than evaluating an initiative ideologically or theoretically.

Compared to the five essays addressing Foucault's politics, Hacking's interesting though thematically distant study, and Koopman's introduction, the last two essays are set in more unfamiliar territory for readers of Foucault.

In the penultimate essay, 'Archaeological choreographic practices: Foucault and Forsythe,' Mark Franko discusses the impact of Foucault's thought on the American born choreographer William Forsythe. Reflecting on Forsythe's incorporation of Foucault's understanding of corporeality, agency, and inscription, Franko seeks to resolve an apparent impasse in Foucault's thought: how the body is seen as both a pre-discursive biological given and a site of historical inscription. Franko suggests that if we begin to think of the body as a medium, as that through which we move, "not in the sense of a passive medium, but in the sense of an artistic medium, which is also a medium of pleasure," then this tension is dissolved.

The last article of the collection, written by Catherine M. Soussloff, studies Foucault's interpretation of art. She makes the double effort of discussing how Foucault differs from traditional art historians, while at the same time the analyses he provides—in his infamous reading of Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, his essay on Belgian Surrealist Rene Magritte, *This is Not a Pipe*, and other essays on Manet and Fromanger—are similar to the thought of Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan. Foucault's gaze, as the "philosopher-art historian," is ultimately depicted as oscillating between what is and what is not represented in order to unveil how paintings exist in and therefore reflect their historical system of knowledge.

One of the pleasant surprises about this collection is the absence of any attempt to locate Foucault as working primarily within one particular discipline. For as percipient as Gary Gutting and Béatrice Hans are, their recent debate on whether Foucault was primarily an historian or a philosopher seems an impossible, undesirable, and largely unimportant question.³ Much less a product of one particular discipline, Foucault's work is clearly the result of interdisciplinary studies. However, when we consider the interdisciplinary nature of Foucault's own work, a certain question inevitably arises about this collection: why is there such a focus on Foucault's political works (in both connotations of the term)? Foucault wrote vigorously

³ Gutting's review of *Michel Foucault's Critical Project*, can be found here: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23402-foucault-s-critical-project>. Han's response was posted on her website: <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~beatrice>. Gutting re-addresses the issue briefly in "Foucault, Hegel, and Philosophy," in *Foucault and Philosophy*, edited by Timothy O'Leary and Christopher Falzon (Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010), 30-31.

from 1961 until his death in 1984, and his attention to politics only really emerged in the last decade of his life. Yet only three of the nine essays here discuss works prior to *Surveiller et Punir* (1975), which is to say nothing of the near complete absence of any reference to his earliest works (1954-1961) on psychology and psychoanalysis.

A possible explanation for this can be found in Koopman's introduction. Here Koopman relishes the general absence of Freud and Marx during the discussions at the conference, and considers it a "testament to Foucault's remarkable departure from the theoretical apparatuses that had preceded him." He sees the possibility of discussing Foucault's thought without reference to these "fashionable forms of *Ideologiekritik*" as proof of its novelty, which is by and large heralded by its pragmatism and applicability. The result of this *ratio*, however, is a general absence of the three disciplines Foucault was concerned with earlier in his career: psychology, literary theory, and (the philosophy of) history. That there is no discussion of Foucault's impact on historical studies may be justified by the topic's prior and thorough coverage in other work.⁴ However, the recent surge of interest in what Simon During has dubbed 'Foucault's Linguistic Turn'—which marks the period when Foucault wrote a monograph and over a dozen essays on literary theory (1961-1966)—is perhaps less justifiable.⁵ As Timothy O'Leary has discussed, Foucault's conception of fiction or the 'experience book' is very much tied to an empirical and pragmatic end.⁶ It considers how we write and read texts.

The result of this is that the Foucault of this collection is largely a 'later' Foucault. Left to the wayside is the empiricism of his earlier works, where the terminus of an experiment had less to do with the knowledge or strategies procured as it did with the act of experimentation and its effects on the experimenter.

So despite the many good pieces in this collection, a danger exists, but not the right one. Through its claim "that there is still much we can learn from Foucault across the disciplines about how to cross the disciplines," it assumes: we're looking for ways to apply Foucault's thought, of imitating its strategies, and unearthing its practical application. In the numerous attempts to resolve the tension in Foucault's thought, to absolve it of charges of incoherency, and to reveal its latent applicability, something gets lost. It is something equally profound, if only morbidly profound. It appears where, like at the end of *Death and the Labyrinth*, Foucault strikes his readers with a devastating blow; where, after summarizing the book, he ends with the strike of a hammer: "So you think this has justified your spending so many pages..."⁷ Palpable in this collection is the attempt to justify spending so many of Foucault's pages.

⁴ See: Alan Megill, "The Reception of Foucault by Historians," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 48. 1 (1987). See also: Jeffrey Weeks, "Foucault for Historians," *History Workshop*, no. 14, Autumn (1982).

⁵ Simon During, *Foucault and Literature: Towards a Genealogy of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁶ O'Leary has written on this subject on numerous occasions. For a succinct account, see: "Foucault, Experience, Literature," *Foucault Studies*, no. 5, (January 2008), 5-25.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*, translated by Charles Ruas (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986), 167.

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