

Foucault Studies

© Cecile Brich 2008

ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No 5, pp. 105-107, January 2008

REVIEW

Brent Pickett, *On the Use and Abuse of Foucault for Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2005). ISBN: 0739109758

This book sets out to offer a new appraisal of Foucault's political thought, and to demonstrate that aspects of it can be re-appropriated in support of a liberal democratic position. Although this certainly represents a largely original argument, the present volume fails to lay it out fully and rigorously enough to make it compelling. Three of the five chapters are previously published articles reprinted side by side without substantial further work, so that the resulting patchy ensemble disappointingly lacks the depth and sustained development one might have expected from such a promising book title.

The introduction betrays a startling disregard for nuance and consideration of alternative readings. The author categorically states, for instance, that: "Because Foucault ignores both the positive and even ambiguous aspects of modernity, his historical narratives lose some of their plausibility. Foucault's one-sided description of the West is not an argumentative tactic. It is sincere, as is revealed by the intense loathing of modernity often displayed in his writings" (p.3). Such a loaded and limited interpretation of Foucault's critique of modernity might be felt by many not to augur a particularly subtle understanding of his politics, and indeed it is sadly followed by more of the same.

The first chapter purportedly reviews Foucault's writings on power, but focuses rather narrowly on discipline and bio-power, cursorily running over the best-known relevant passages of *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. This, however, by no means functions as a basic introduction to Foucault's thoughts on power, as key concepts are mostly gestured at rather than explained in any detail. Further, clumsy syntax leaves many logical links unclear to those not already familiar with Foucault's writings.

The second chapter interestingly attempts to trace the development of notions of resistance through the course of Foucault's career, and suggests that it can be divided into three phases, covering the Sixties, the early Seventies, and the work from *Discipline*

and Punish onwards respectively. While much could have been said about the relationship between transgression and resistance, or the dynamics of power relations and agonism for instance, this chapter is again frustratingly brief, superficial, and yet likely inaccessible to readers relatively new to Foucault's thought. The term "agonism" itself is not even defined, nor the context of its use ever hinted at.

In the remainder of the book, the author proposes a distinction between two strands in Foucault's political pronouncements. One strand, which he labels the "Postmodern Foucault", refers to Foucault's notorious refusal to commit to a set of principles worth defending, or to a political program worth fighting for. In various other statements, however, Foucault does not altogether oppose democratic practices, so that Pickett contends that there also exists a "Modern Foucault". However, none of the textual evidence for the latter is quoted at sufficient length to allow the reader instantly to see what Pickett's argument rests on. The discussion swiftly moves on to the well-rehearsed reasons why the Postmodern Foucault is thought not to offer a viable basis for any effective resistance movement, while the "Modern Foucault", Pickett suggests, is not incompatible with morally-motivated human agents as drivers of resistance.

The subsequent chapters go on to build on these shaky foundations to speculate about the kind of right that Foucault might have envisaged in his reference to "the possibility of a new form of right" ("Two Lectures", *Power/Knowledge*, p.108). Foucault, however, did not expand on what this new kind of right would involve, so that Pickett has little to go on. Undeterred, he nonetheless offers elaborations on what he sees as the only possible kinds of right that Foucault could have envisaged, only to conclude that "Foucault's sketchy proposal for a new form of rights is unworkable" (p.95). Readers who take seriously Foucault's repeated claims that his writings should not be read as "a theory" will have little time for such alleged demonstrations of the many failings and lacunae in Foucault's so-called "political program". While there is much in Foucault's work that could and should be used, or abused, for politics, it may be argued that its crucial strength is precisely not to be a finite, watertight political strategy, but rather a loose collection of methods to begin to question a potentially infinite number of unacceptable situations.

The concluding chapter attempts to argue that the "Modern Foucault" supports participatory democracy. Based on a rather hasty description of a few references to notions of freedom in Foucault, which are here forcefully interpreted as essentially liberal humanist, Pickett proceeds to argue that Foucault can therefore be read as "a strong democrat". Indeed, Pickett intriguingly states, "The connection between the Foucaultian idea of freedom, as I describe it here, and many forms of positive freedom is that both [sic] require democracy and participation as prerequisites of freedom." (p.102) On the strength of this somewhat sophistic piece of reasoning, Pickett boldly asserts that his "Modern Foucault" is in essence a democrat, as indeed "A strong democratic agenda

shows more promise for dismantling disciplinary controls" (p.119). Once again, the evidence is scarce, the argument poorly constructed, and the point ultimately unconvincing.

Despite Pickett's introductory claim that he "will be at pains to provide extensive quotation and citation in support of [his] interpretations" (p.6), the primary texts are rarely quoted, highly subjectively paraphrased, and inadequately referenced. Many central concepts drawn both from Foucault and from other theorists are dropped into the discussion without a hint of introduction or clarification of what Pickett takes them to mean. "Power relations", "agonism" or Connolly's "slack" are cases in point, where neither gloss nor references are provided. Readers are thus left wondering whether the author's interpretation of these notions bears any relation to their own understanding. As Pickett's analysis of Foucault often appears rather idiosyncratic, this lack of basic definition of terms at the outset is unsettling to say the least. Though Pickett's basic contentions could potentially make a useful contribution to political theory, this book fails to develop its thesis adequately, and the reader is ultimately let down by its loose argumentation, unaccountable logical leaps and frustratingly vague and confusing syntax.

Cecile Brich, Leeds University