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REVIEW

Philippe Artières, Jean-François Bert, Philippe Chevallier, Pascal Michon, Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, Judith Revel and Jean-Claude Zancarini (textes choisis et présentés par), *Les mots et les choses de Foucault. Regards critiques 1966-1968* (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2009), ISBN: 978-2841333479

It might be considered very anti-foucauldian, at first sight, to write the commentary of this collection of commentaries of *Les mots et les choses* (1966) compiled and edited by some of the present day best known Foucault scholars in France. This volume actually presents a set of reactions brought about by Foucault's "*archéologie des sciences humaines*," between 1966 and 1968, authored by some of the most prominent French intellectuals—philosophers, historians, sociologists—and originally published in the most meaningful philosophical and political journals of the time in France: Raymond Bellour (*Les Lettres françaises*), François Châtelet (*La Quinzaine littéraire*), Madeleine Chapsal (*L'Express*), Gilles Deleuze (*Le Nouvel Observateur*), Jean-Paul Sartre (*L'Arc*), Michel Amiot (*Les Temps modernes*), Olivier Revault d'Allonnes (*Raison présente*), Michel de Certeau (*Études*), Jean d'Ormesson (*La Nouvelle Revue française*), Pierre Burgelin (*Esprit*), Georges Canguilhem (*Critique*), Roger Garaudy (*La Pensée*), Jean-Claude Margolin (*Revue des sciences humaines*), Bernard Balan (*La Pensée*).

Among this number of articles, only Michel de Certeau's "*Les sciences humaines et la mort de l'homme*," (173-197) and Georges Canguilhem's "*Mort de l'homme ou épuisement du Cogito?*" (247-274) have been published in English prior to the here reviewed work.¹ As a result, the papers included in this collection, as well as the journals in which they were first published, have remained better known to the French public than to the Anglophone one. As the editors point out in their excellent general Introduction (7-35) and in the brief presentations that precede each paper, all these contributions, taken together in their specific context of self and hetero reference, provocation and response, bring back not only the reception of Foucault's work at the time of its publication, the resistances it aroused as well as the further developments that it originated, but also the intellectual and philosophical context that made all of it possible in France in the first half of the 1960s. This collection of "*regards critiques*" is much more than a collection of commentaries on *Les mots et les choses*, since, by means of its different receptions and its original openings, these "*regards critiques*" provide the opportunity of reassessing one of the most meaningful phases of the history of the French philosophical

¹ Michel de Certeau, "The Black Sun of Language: Foucault," in Brian Massumi (trans.), *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 171-184; and George Canguilhem, "The Death of Man, or Exhaustion of the Cogito?" in Gary Gutting (ed.) & Catherine Porter (trans.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 74-94.

scene, one that was concerned mostly, at that time, with the debates *between* and *within* the various forms of Phenomenology, Marxism, Existentialism, and Structuralism.

Just by lingering on the journals in which the contributions of this volume were published—from an explicit communist commitment (*Les Lettres françaises*; *La Pensée. Revue du rationalisme moderne*) to a Christian obedience (*Études*), from a wider intellectual interest in the literary and political current news (*Le Nouvel Observateur*; *L'Express*), to academic news in the field of humanities (*Revue des Sciences humaines*)—one can form a clear overview of the different political and philosophical alignments that received Foucault's *archaeology* in the 1960s. In general, the attitudes expressed in the pages of these journals are a critical illustrative account of the progressive changeover, in the French philosophical context, from the intellectual hegemony of the existentialistic humanism to the supremacy of structuralism (cf. Chapsal, "La plus grande révolution depuis l'existentialisme.") (57-71) And actually, except for the contributions of Deleuze, Canguilhem and De Certeau which problematize Foucault's use of the concept of "structure" from an epistemological and methodological point of view, almost all the reviewers included in the volume agree in considering Foucault as one of the most representative example of the structuralist *vague* hanging over the French intellectuals during the 1960s (in particular Sartre, "Jean-Paul Sartre répond," (75-89) and Garaudi, "Structuralisme et 'mort de l'homme'." (277-299)

The main resistances that the opponents to structuralism put forward, in relation to Foucault's *archaeology* of the *episteme*, concern the meaning of history and the role that man plays in it. Sartre's contribution is clearly the most meaningful in this respect. What Sartre cannot accept in Foucault's *archaeology* is the refusal of a dialectical conception of history that inevitably ends up by disclaiming subjectivity as the driving force of praxis (on this point, see also Margolin, "L'homme de Michel Foucault.") (333, 339) Like many other criticisms to Foucault's *archaeological* perspective presented in this volume, this position has a strong political connotation. And actually the most part of those authors that, like Sartre, accuse Foucault of wrongly replacing the movement of history with the immobility of the structures, claim Marx's capability of "taking both ends of the chain: the structure, that is the structuring by the past, as well as the creative activity of man generating structures" (Garaudi, (286) Cf. also Revault d'Allonnes, "Michel Foucault: Les mots et les choses.") (160)

Today the diatribe between existentialism and structuralism, as well as its political implications, are no more topical. What's more, we can appraise *Les mots et les choses* in light of the full development of Foucault's thought. To give credence to Foucault's retrospective remarks, we could go so far as to recognize even in *archaeology* the space of possibility for the subject, outlined by the philosopher in his last works and lectures. The amazement, the dismay, the uncertainty before the *archaeological* subversion of the traditional methods and categories of philosophy have given way, among the interpreters, to a more academic search for philosophical influences and lineages. Yet, the debate is still heated about Foucault's epistemological style, and the methodological problem of how writing the history of knowledges is still topical. In this respect, one is reminded of the questions about the "kind of knowledge" (Amiot), (119) or the "epistemological space" of the *archaeological* discourse (Revault d'Allonnes) (167) as regards the sciences that it analyzes. This is a problem that has haunted not only the first interpreters of Foucault's *archaeology*—some of which have concluded on its "relativism" (Revault d'Allonnes) or "culturalist relativism" (Amiot)—but also a few of the most influential present day Foucault scholars. We can consider, for instance, the case of Jür-

gen Habermas, who reproved archaeology for presenting “the methodological paradox of a science that writes the history of the human sciences with the goal of a radical critique of reason.”² Worth mentioning is also Béatrice Han’s *Foucault’s Critical Project*³), where it is claimed that genealogy, in Foucault’s thought, is circumscribed to nothing but the function of rescuing archaeology from the relativism it had run into.

This debate is far from being closed in these last years, taking into consideration that the paradoxical immanence of archaeology praised by Deleuze in his review of 1966, (70) of this “method—according to De Certeau—that is the signifier of a signified which is impossible to enunciate,” (176) is the core of the current studies into the oxymoric concept of *historical a priori*. Just think, in this respect, of Johanna Oksala’s *Foucault on Freedom*,⁴ or Giorgio Agamben’s *Signatura rerum*⁵; both these works investigate Foucault’s concept of *episteme* precisely by questioning the paradoxical relation that it establishes between historicity and transcendentality.

These questions remain relevant today, not only for Foucault scholars that exert themselves to dispel one of the main misunderstandings of Foucault’s thought—the one which reads archaeology as a sterile and a-historical description of the existing field of different form of knowledge in a specific period (cf. Sartre’s image of archaeology as “magic lantern,” (76) and Balan, “Entretiens sur Foucault. Deuxième entretien,” (345-367)) but also for those philosophers that endeavor to rethink Foucault’s methodology in light of the topical debate about the history of sciences. It is a debate that does not focus especially on Foucault, but that comes to him via the established relation between history and the philosophy of sciences, where the concepts of “*episteme*” and “structure” appear crucial, in so far as they concern the problem of thinking together historicity and the explanatory categories that account for it.

Canguilhem’s paper included in the present volume is the most relevant in this respect, since the way it approaches archaeology by referring to such French epistemologists as Bachelard and Cavailles is nowadays at the heart of the studies on the role played by “the French network” in the outlining of the “historical epistemology.”⁶

Canguilhem’s remark, namely that “it is a paradox that the *episteme* is not an object for epistemology,” but it “is *that for which* a discursive status is sought” (262) is particularly determinant for those current epistemological projects that aim at writing the history of sciences driven by the conviction that—in Foucault’s words—“the history of knowledge can be written only on the basis of what was contemporaneous with it.”⁷ One should just mention, on this point, Ian Hacking’s “historical ontology,” which explicitly refers to Foucault’s archaeology in order to outline his own program of studying “the ways in which the styles of reasoning

² Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, translated by Frederik Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 248.

³ Béatrice Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project*, translated by Edward Pile (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1998] 2002).

⁴ Johanna Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura rerum (The Signature of All Things): On Method*, translated by Luca D’Isanto & Kevin Attel (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

⁶ Cf. Gary Gutting, “Continental Philosophy and the History of Science,” in R. C. Olby *et. al.*, *Companion to the History of Modern Science* (London and New York, 1990), 127-147. See also Jean-François Braunstein, *L’Histoire des sciences: Méthodes, styles et controverses* (Paris: Vrin, 2008), and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *On Historicizing Epistemology*, translated by David Fernbach (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 207.

provide stable knowledges and become not the uncovers of objective truth but rather the standards of objectivity.”⁸ And it is worth remarking that for Hacking too—like in the case of Foucault’s *episteme*—the styles of reasoning are “self-authenticating,” and far from being a vicious circle, such “circularity” of each style is “to be welcomed,” since it just accounts for the fact that rationality is always contemporaneous with the sciences and knowledges that embody it.⁹

Hence, the problems and the questions brought up by the first interpreters of Foucault’s archaeology presented in these “*regards critiques*,” their bewilderment before this “description which is neither a history of ideas nor an epistemology of the knowledge’s paths towards an increasing rationality” (Amiot) (96) still make sense for the philosopher who knows, as Deleuze pointed out in 1966, that knowledge and its conditions cannot be but “synchronic.” (70) In the light of the ongoing epistemological debate in which it is involved, *Les mots et les choses*, this “great sight, which tries to lead us beyond our faculties of thinking” (Bourgelin), (245) this “capital and uncertain work” (De Certeau), (198) thus appears to escape from the criticisms of impudence (Amiot), (93) blindness (Revault d’Allonnes), (154) arbitrariness (D’Ormesson), (214) abstraction and doctrinaireness (Garaudi), (277) that it had attracted during the 1960s. And, far from running into arbitrary relativism, the paradoxical contemporaneousness of the philosopher with the knowledge he belongs to, and of which he writes the history, seems instead to invoke the “modesty”¹⁰ of a history that in Bachelard’s words ought “ceaselessly to be thought and ceaselessly to be started again.”¹¹

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⁸ Ian Hacking, “‘Style’ for Historians and Philosophers,” in *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 198.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁰ Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, 197.

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, “L’actualité de l’histoire des sciences” [1951], in *L’Engagement rationaliste* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), 146.