

## Foucault Studies

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### REVIEW ESSAY

**Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983*, edited by Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), ISBN: 978-1403986665**

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With the translation of this 1983 lecture course, the first of two-parts, with the translation of a second, *The Courage of Truth*, expected in 2011, also devoted to the government of self and others, given in 1984, and concluded just before Foucault's death, we are now in a better position to grasp the significance of its author's "journey to Greece." We do not read Foucault's focus on Greco-Roman antiquity after 1980 as a retreat from a concern with the problems of modernity. Indeed, it seems to us that Foucault's interpretation of ancient texts, Euripides's *Ion*, Thucydides's account of Pericles's call to arms against Sparta before the Athenian assembly, the figure of Socrates in Platonic dialogues such as the *Apology*, and the *Gorgias*, Plato's letters recounting his involvement in the politics of Syracuse, or the account of the Cynic Diogenes's dialogue with Alexander the Great, Foucault's focus on truth-telling or *parresia* in the ancient world, are all also directed to the issues confronting both political theory and philosophy in the *modern* world. Indeed, taking his point of departure in the lecture course from one facet of Kant's philosophy, not "the question of the conditions of possibility of true knowledge," Kant's analytic of truth, his epistemology, but rather that other dimension of Kant's thinking, "what could be called an ontology of the present, of present reality, an ontology of modernity, an ontology of ourselves," (20-21) Foucault explores the prospects of extricating ourselves from our "self-incurred" tutelage, our present mode of subjectivity through which we exist under the authority of others.

What Foucault at the very outset of the lecture course refers to as his "general project" is "the history of thought," by which he means "the focal points of experience" on the basis of which "forms of possible knowledge, normative frameworks of behavior, and potential modes of existence for possible subjects" (3) can *historically* arise. It is then, an account of what Foucault designates as an inquiry into "matrices of experience," (41) and their particular historical locus, that he recapitulates at the outset of the 1983 course, and that he insists has constituted his "general project." His specific concern here is with one such focal point of experience, one such mode of being, that of "free-spokenness" or *parresia*, as it first appeared in Greco-Roman Antiquity, and then as it has reappeared, albeit in historically unique forms, in modernity. In our view, Foucault's insistence on how he saw his project is not intended to preclude

alternative visions or methodologies; it is not a claim to have established *the* correct method for grappling with social being. Rather, his methodological recapitulation appears to us to constitute Foucault's mode of differentiating his project from those of others, and establishing the bases for his own *way*.

Moreover, Foucault's extremely close readings of the ancient texts, which are a hallmark of his lecture courses after 1980, do not seem to us to constitute claims, for example, to having gotten Euripides or Plato "right"; do not seem to us to be primarily aimed at challenging other interpretations proffered by specialists in the ancient world. Rather Foucault offers alternative readings, readings that expose dimensions of the ancient texts that may indeed be heterodox, and off the beaten track with respect to prevailing interpretations, but which shine a light on the issues and dilemmas that confront us in the contemporary world. As close readings, though, Foucault provides us with interpretations that are firmly grounded in the texts themselves, even as they express a uniquely Foucauldian perspective and focus.

The specific focus of Foucault's complex readings of ancient texts, the unique emphasis, philosophical and political, that characterize his interpretations, are such that in order to confront Foucault's own perspective the reader is dependent to an extraordinary degree on the quality of the translation of the lectures with which he/she is grappling. Thus, even before we engage with the issues raised by Foucault, it is important to comment on Graham Burchell's excellent translation of the lecture course itself. It is perhaps a comment on the acuity of Foucault's own understanding of power relations that far more people will read Foucault in English translation than in the original French. That places an enormous burden on his translators, and Foucault is now fortunate to have in Burchell not only a single translator for the whole series of his lecture courses at the Collège de France, but one who is committed to presenting Foucault in English with a scrupulous respect for the content of the original. Thus, Burchell has corrected the mistakes of earlier translators of Foucault, by insisting that Foucault's *de soi* in the title be translated as "of self," not "of *the* self," thereby avoiding the substantialization of a self that Foucault so carefully avoided. Burchell also has an understanding of the very cadence of Foucault's language as a lecturer, and a familiarity with the texts that Foucault is interpreting. Moreover in the notes Burchell has not only provided us with current English translations of the texts that Foucault cites, but also with his own English translations of the French translations that Foucault utilized (which often differ from the standard English translations). Indeed, as numerous editorial notes demonstrate, Burchell has even corrected mistakes in the transcriptions of the original tapes of the lectures for the French edition, as well as a few obvious slips that Foucault made in delivering the lectures in Paris. Contemporary translations are typically better than those of the past in their fidelity to, and knowledge of, the content of the original, but Burchell's is a model of the translator's art.

The explicit concern of this lecture course is the several understandings of *parresia*, political and philosophical, in the ancient world, though Foucault is also engaged in outlining how that concept migrated from philosophy to theology in the Middle Ages, in the form of Christian pastoral, only to then reappear in modern political theory and philosophy. Indeed, in our

view, Foucault was also engaged in *re-functioning* truth-telling, frank speech, or “free-spokenness,” as significant issues for contemporary political theory and philosophy. As the fruit of his “ethical turn” around 1980, Foucault’s final cycle of lecture courses at the Collège de France entailed a linkage between *êthos* and the political, what can be described as a veritable *ethical politics* in which care of self, the fashioning of one’s self, and the relation to others, what can be broadly termed the “government” of others, are firmly linked. And it is that complex of issues, together with the possibility of the creation of new modes of subjectivity, that are Foucault’s central concerns in the final cycle of lecture courses at the Collège. As the editor of the French edition of the lecture course, Frédéric Gros, points out in the important “Course Context” that accompanies the text: “The 1983 lectures make it clear, as far as Foucault was concerned, the extent to which this historical study of practices of subjectivation did not turn him away from politics.” (386) Foucault links a person’s effort at “directing others” to the “attempt to constitute an appropriate relationship to themselves.” (43) Both of these endeavors, for Foucault, entail *parresia*: “you can see that with *parresia* we have a notion which is situated at the meeting point of the obligation to speak the truth, procedures of governmentality, and the constitution of the relationship to self.” (45) That relationship to self, the complex of experiences linked to care of self—which as Foucault shows was connected to the government of others in the ancient world—is the axis around which Foucault’s ethical politics revolves. Indeed, as we read Foucault, his ethical politics *is* a politics of care of self. Foucault, then, does not separate the political and care of self, and it is precisely the connection of the two that is so original in the final Foucault.

*Parresia*, truth-telling or free speech, to which Foucault also devoted a lecture course at the University of California at Berkeley in 1983 (subsequently published as *Fearless Speech* by Semiotext(e)), is, then, a central concern of the final Foucault’s ethical politics. Foucault enumerates several aspects of *parresia* as it first emerged in the ancient Greco-Roman world. The act of truth-telling entails the risk of “costly consequences for those who have told it,” (56) including even the risk of death when one speaks truth to power. A parrhesiastic enunciation is an expression of what one “genuinely thinks,” (64) thereby entailing a commitment to that truth, to which the person binds him/herself. And, by virtue of a parrhesiastic utterance, one expresses one’s own freedom as well as one’s courage. (65-66) Truth and *parresia*, then, do not pertain to the domain of epistemology or a doctrine of knowledge, but rather to one’s being-in-the-world, to one’s socio-political existence. The truth at issue here is what one takes to be the truth, and the parrhesiast is the person “who risks this truth-telling in a pact with himself....,” (66) so this expression of truth is constituted by a set of procedures in which “one brings to light what is posited as true....” (81)

On that basis, Foucault explores both democratic and autocratic *parresia*, the former arising in a democratic *politeia* like Periclean Athens, where all citizens have the equal right to speak in the assembly, *isegoria*, and where some make use of their *parresia* to engage in “discourse which persuades, a discourse which may confront other discourse and will triumph only through the weight of its truth and the effectiveness of its persuasion...” (105) For Foucault, Pericles is the exemplar of a democratic *parresia*, though Foucault is quick to point out that an

ordinary farmer may also exemplify it. Yet this democratic *parresia* must be clearly separated from the “bad *parresia*” of the demagogues or sophists, whose primary interest is in flattering the crowd. Their “false truth,” the ascendancy of which marks the decadence of Athenian democracy after the war with Sparta, is distinguished by its flattery of prevailing opinion, its exclusive desire to please its audience, and to gain power for oneself, in contrast to, for example, “the singular courage of the person who, like Pericles, is able to turn against the people and reproach them in turn,” (183) risking one’s own reputation, influence, and even safety in the service of one’s parrhesiastic pact. By contrast a very different kind of *parresia* arises in an autocratic polity, where there is no *isegoria*, and where, as in the case of Plato at the court of Dionysius of Syracuse, the issue is one of engaging in a psychagogic as opposed to a political *parresia*, where one attempts to guide the one in power, or failing that to courageously speak truth to power even perhaps at the risk of one’s own life. Indeed, in both its forms, *parresia* is not simply a question of discourse or *logos*, but primarily of *ergon*, action, “a mode of life, a way of being...” (219)

In forging a direct link between *parresia* and philosophy, Foucault insists, in this case with respect to Plato, that the “reality of philosophy” is nothing epistemological. It is, rather, “...what the will to truth is in its very reality, what this activity of telling the truth is, what this completely particular and singular act of veridiction called philosophy is (an act of veridiction which may perfectly well be mistaken and say the false moreover).” (228) What is important for Foucault, and his understanding of philosophy, then, is neither gnoseological nor metaphysical, but rather a *practice* directed to oneself as a subject: “The reality of philosophy is this work of self on self.” (242) Foucault’s interpretation of Plato here is surely not that of Leo Strauss or Karl Popper, for example. And Foucault is not denying that there is a Platonic metaphysics, the existence of a world of forms that Plato articulated. But there is more to Plato than the theory of forms, for example, and Foucault is determined to draw his auditors – and now we would say, his readers attention to discourse not as an avatar of logocentrism, as Derrida maintained, but to the role of action, and to discourse as a person’s will to truth. So, as Foucault asserts “...philosophical discourse cannot find its reality, its *ergon*, if it takes the form of *mathemata*,” as mere items of knowledge or formulae of knowledge. (247) So, Foucault’s Plato is decidedly a non-traditional Plato. From Foucault’s *angle* of thinking Plato’s philosophy can be seen as more *ergon* than *nous*, more *pragma* than *logos*. And it is as *action* that philosophy – as *philosophizing* – and politics meet, that there is, as Frédéric Gros tells us, “the assertion of an essential and structuring relationship between philosophy and politics.” (386)

In contrast to Platonic *parresia*, Foucault’s account of Cynic *parresia* – which is just a *propedeutic* to the lecture course of 1984 – situates it in the public arena and not that of the Prince’s soul, and connects “philosophical truth-telling to political action which takes place in the form of exteriority, challenge, and derision.” (287) Thus, Diogenes of Synope, in his encounter with Alexander the Great says that he is a dog because “I bite those who are wicked.” Cynic *parresia*, like Platonic *parresia* is a way of life, but one that involves a discourse of “insult and denunciation with regard to power,” in which one “feels free to say frankly and violently

what he is, what he wants, what he needs, what is true and false, what is just and unjust." (287) Its development in the final lecture course will demonstrate the full extent of Foucault's affinity with Diogenes.

Foucault moves towards the conclusion of the 1983 lecture course by pointing to an inseparability of *parresia* and democracy: "*Parresia* founds democracy and democracy is the site of *parresia*." (300) But the "democracy" that Foucault seeks to instantiate is not the modern representative or parliamentary democracy where elections turn on the flattery of the electorate, but one in which democratic modes or experiments establish equality within an "agonistic field." (300) The concretization of such a vision must now await the elaboration of an ethical politics such as Foucault had only begun to articulate at the very end of his life, though key elements of such a vision populate his writings, his lecture courses, and his interviews.

The bases for such a politics after having shaped the parrhesiastic philosophy of Antiquity were displaced by Christian pastoral as a new and very different mode of *parresia*, one based on renunciation of the world, which transformed the system of truth-telling. (348) However, Foucault concludes this lecture course by pointing to a return of *parresia* to philosophy in modern philosophical thinking, that of Descartes and Kant, but he pointedly tells us, not "as it is currently presented." (346) We can, perhaps, unpack Foucault's somewhat enigmatic claim if we acknowledge that he is not speaking of the Cartesian *cogito* and its certainty, or the Cartesian understanding of *res extensa*, just as he does not mean Kant's transcendental philosophy, both of which are the hallmarks of the way in which Cartesian and Kantian philosophy are currently presented. What Foucault does seem to be pointing towards are the self-experiments that Descartes carried out, and the Kantian vision of Enlightenment as an *Ausgang* or exit for "man" from his tutelage, his immaturity. For Foucault, then, philosophy "as constitution of the subject by himself, seem[s] to ...constitute the mode of being of modern philosophy, or maybe that which, in the mode of being of modern philosophy, takes up the mode of being of ancient philosophy." (354) Here, then, is a vision of modern philosophy, or one way of presenting it, as integral to the ethical politics and democratic vision that Foucault sought to articulate.

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