

Foucault: The Legacy. A Conference Report

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In 1980 Le Monde conducted an anonymous interview with a 'masked philosopher'. Weary of celebrity and straining to be heard from under the heavy weight of his previous work, Michel Foucault wanted to address readers who would listen to his words rather than his reputation. In this interview, with the lyricism that often characterised his style, he dreamed of a new type of critique:

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring a work, a book, a sentence, and idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes - all the better. Criticism that hands down sentences send me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms.
(1997:323)

At a conference which took place in July 1994 at the beach resort of Surfers Paradise in Australia, it was clear how far Foucault's work encourages precisely this sort of departure from the normal constraints of criticism and interpretation. The aim of the conference was to bring together researchers from all disciplines who used Foucault's work in any way in their own work. The response was overwhelming from Australia and New Zealand and unexpectedly from countries such as Finland, South Africa and Venezuela as well as, of course, from Britain and the United States and Canada testifying to the enormous geographical spread of the influence of Foucault's work. Equally surprising was the sheer range of subject matter ranging from the most esoteric subjects in philosophy and literature to professional disciplines such as nursing, education, accounting, management, law and architecture. Issues which had been scarcely if ever addressed by Foucault in his work such as feminism, the third world and the plight of indigenous peoples (notably in Australia) were also discussed at some length. What this geographical and

disciplinary diversity also tended to emphasise is that Foucault is now far more discussed outside of France than within its borders.

Two other things in particular emerged during the course of the conference, one was the sheer quantity and variety of painstaking and patient empirical work using even just one or two of Foucault's insights as a springboard. Secondly, what also became apparent was the tremendous impact of the work Foucault produced during the 1970s and of two items in particular: *Discipline and Punish* and a lecture titled 'Governmentality' which originally appeared in English translation in 1979. Why the heavy reliance on these two texts? First of all, there is a perception that *Discipline and Punish* and the texts Foucault wrote after this date are much easier to read than his earlier work. The poetic and highly abstract tone of such books as *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* while welcomed enthusiastically by a few is still regarded as highly dubious by others. This was particularly clear in the early reception of Foucault's work by English and American critics. As M. Howe wrote in 1974 in *Nation* it was more than obvious that Foucault's following 'must consist largely of masochists and those who can admire while they do not understand, for Foucault although ultimately intelligible is flamboyantly difficult. He is the soul of panache and perversity'. On the other hand, if still prone to the occasional flight of fancy, *Discipline and Punish* is a far plainer, more sober text.

Secondly, questions of discipline and power, surveillance and normalisation seem to strike a particular chord and instances of these mechanisms can be found in every imaginable domain of current human endeavour. Some of the more cynical critics have claimed, however, that the discussion of 'power' in foucauldian terms allows intellectuals to appear politically radical without actually having to get their hands dirty. But this criticism, if sometimes accurate, ignores the very real effects that such research is producing in a number of the professional disciplines. To take for example just two areas health and accounting:

In the health field, a number of nursing educators and sociologist discussed a variety of topics relating to old age and nursing homes, the status of nurses as professionals, the conflict between medicine and midwifery, intellectual disability and sexuality, AIDS, the history of hygiene education as well as issues of public health and lifestyle. A number of Foucault's ideas were called upon to shed new light on these matters. Stephen Katz, a sociologist from Trent University in Canada in a paper titled 'Foucault and Gerontology: Aging Bodies and elderly populations' discussed the medicalisation of the aged body which he argued 'can be seen as a key genealogical episode in the construction of the modern aged subject'. He also referred to the 'governmentality of the aged population', namely how that population is administered and governed in contemporary society. Sue Crane,

a nursing academic from Deakin University described a research project she is conducting in conjunction with nurses, managers and domestic staff at a nursing home in Melbourne. Her approach combined a feminist perspective with a Foucauldian examination of some of 'the technologies of power' at work within the home. She posed in particular the question 'women as a self-surveillance mechanism?' Sarah Winch noted also in relation to aged care that 'a number of salient disciplinary techniques and technologies emerge which surveillant, control and constitute the aged body as a docile entity capable of only spasmodic resistance'. Another speaker, Kim Walker, also used Foucault's later work on subjectivity to discuss 'Nursing and the problem of the modern subject' a paper which described 'the ways in which nurses have become the subject of, and subjected to those 'régimes of truth' which insert themselves in the discourses and institutions of nursing'. Also of interest were two papers on accounting given by four lecturers in Accounting. In a paper titled 'A Foucauldian genealogy of income' the two authors, Alagiah and Gaffikin questioned 'the forms within which individuals are able and are obliged to recognise themselves as subjects of income' and other speakers noted that 'accounting is a "mechanism" through which "power" is exercised'.

Moving away from the more directly professional interests, Patricia Stamp from York University in Canada used Foucault's ideas to argue that aid donors to the third world in fact exert a form of 'pastoral power' which undermines the recently won sovereignty of these nations and in fact submits them to a new but perhaps less visible colonial yoke. It is often argued that the ideas of Foucault and of other French thinkers of the same generation are quite irrelevant to third world concerns, but Stamp found that third world practitioners in the field were in fact keenly interested in applying Foucault's ideas to the problems they faced.

Foucault had little if anything to say on the subject of Australian history, but this has not prevented the growth of a significant body of work influenced by his thought. Speakers addressed matters relating to colonialism, Aboriginal Australians, environmentalism and feminism amongst others. Three very interesting papers dealt with epistemology, art and science in colonial and modern Australia basing their analyses on *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. One of the speakers, a well known local artist Sally L'Estrange, whose botanical illustrations were on display at the conference discussed her paintings and the history of botanical illustration using Foucauldian notions of genealogy. Another Australian artist, Anna Eggert, unfortunately unable to be present at the conference, likewise looks to Foucault for inspiration. A recent exhibition of her work featured women's clothes made of lead which she explained were designed to demonstrate the rigidity of the mechanisms of discipline and control exercised over bodies, particularly female bodies.

Perhaps one of the strongest currents of thought in contemporary English and Australian research on Foucault is that which explores and develops in detail, notions of 'governmentality' and questions of the formation of the subject and the self through governmental, institutional and administrative mechanisms. Much of this work is historical in nature and aims at breaking down traditional ideas of the State and dichotomies between public and private. It also sets out to show how far governmental, administrative and institutional practices produce certain types of citizen or 'subjects'. A significant number of papers at the conference addressed these concerns applying them to governmental strategies at work in Québec, China, Australia, New Zealand and Britain. Other topics debated in this context included liberalism, the public administration of culture, urban planning, computer technology, the role of the intellectual, public relations, delinquency, feminism and environmentalism. Many other things were discussed at the conference, too numerous to do justice to here, demonstrating very clearly the growing impact of Foucault's ideas even in areas far removed from his own interests.

But the immense popularity of Foucault's work is not without its problems. As J. Proust remarked perceptively in 1968 in *La Pensée* 'the danger will come from Foucauldians if there ever are any' (1968:24) and a little later in 1974, the American historian George Huppert noted the risk of some of Foucault's theses 'more or less vaguely understood... becoming articles of faith among intellectuals'. Now that Foucault's work has become firmly established in the curricula of a number of universities in the Anglo-Saxon world - in spite of continuing fierce resistance from many quarters- his work runs the risk of becoming just another tedious orthodoxy. Indeed, in many ways, this is already the case and particular versions of his thought are exerting all the terrorist effects that such orthodoxies usually generate. Paradoxically Foucault's very efforts to subtract his work from this fate have become some of the most entrenched items of dogma. His famous description of theory as a 'tool-box' originally developed in conjunction with Deleuze in their 1972 discussion. 'Intellectuals and power' has been much invoked to support a certain view of intellectual work and the world in general. In addition to this, Foucault's work read outside its original French context often becomes a mysterious object indeed, full of strange, exciting but only half understood allusions. This lends to his work a delphic aura and often phrases and ideas from his work are used to give a cachet of theoretical respectability or an imaginative glitter to an otherwise mundane analysis.

Rather more disturbing perhaps is the way Foucault's work is being recuperated by bureaucrats and management experts (at least in Australia and New Zealand) in much the same way Roland Barthes' semiotic analyses were diverted by advertisers. If Foucault described the perfection and efficiency of certain administrative mechanisms of surveillance and discipline,

his intent always remained highly critical. Some analysts trained in Foucauldian method are now either employed by the civil service or act as consultants to government and industry. These researchers strip Foucault's thought of its radical purpose and focus on perfecting those very rationalities that he sought to undermine and deal with the problem of resistance within the same framework.

But as Foucault himself often insisted, an author cannot dictate how his work is going to be used and interpreted. Certainly, Foucault did not always take his own advice and on a number of occasions sought to correct wild (and not so wild!) interpretations of his work, but in the final analysis, these 'corrections' did no more than provoke fresh departures and critical 'errors'. In the preface to the second edition of *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault declares:

I would like this object-event [the book], which is almost imperceptible amongst so many others, to be recopied, fragmented, repeated, simulated, to fall apart and then finally to disappear without the one who happened to produce it ever being able to claim the right of being its master of imposing what he meant, nor prescribing what it should be'. (1972:10)

It would probably be more than safe to say that 22 years ago when he penned this text Foucault could not have known just how far his dream would be realised.

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