BOOK REVIEW

Kelly, Mark G. E. (2018). For Foucault: Against Normative Political Theory. Albany: SUNY Press.

Daniil I. Kokin
Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

The most recent book written by Mark G. E. Kelly, Associate Professor at Western Sydney University in Australia, has already received two distinct reviews (see Choat, 2018; Vogelmann, 2018). To justify this new review, I would like to make as comprehensive vision of the book as possible by considering the points made in the previous reviews and enriching them with my comments where necessary. However, according to the rules of the genre, I am obliged to reiterate some elements and considerations that were already mentioned in these reviews. Thus, I will start with the book's outline and its purpose, then I will move to the interpretation of the problem the author raises, his overall thesis and arguments defending his position. Further, I will explore the content of the book taking in consideration other reviewers' comments. After that, I will summarize points of praise and critique, which Kelly's book faced. Finally, I will give my own analysis and evaluation of the work.

In the very beginning, Kelly tells his readers that the book "is for and not about Foucault" and "against and not about normative political theory" (Kelly, 2018, p. 1). It means that the author's focus is neither Foucault's thought itself (there are previous Kelly's books primarily devoted to it), nor normative political theory, but a defence of the view interpreting Foucault as a non-normative thinker, which actually is the main purpose of the book. Thus, Kelly raises two questions: why it is necessary to oppose normativity and how it is possible. He gives three arguments to the first question (see Kelly, 2018, pp. 7–8). We need to oppose normativity because, first, it limits the field of influence to those who adhere to these norms. The second argument is that normativity has unintended consequences. Finally, normativity is inherently dangerous. To answer the second question and to prove his thesis, Kelly interprets selected authors through the lens of his approach. He tries to show that Foucault, even late,

was an anti-normative thinker, and that his critique is superior to other approaches opposing normativity. He rejects the wider notion of normativity claiming that it has nothing in particular to do with norms (which is arguable), and chooses the stricter definition used in ethics, that is "ought".

Kelly interprets Foucault's alternative to normative political theory as threefold, for normative, "political, and theoretic aspects are closely interconnected" (Kelly, 2018, p. 11). First, it is anti-normative in the way that it does not have a normative ground in opposing and criticizing things. Second, it is a-theoretical because it eschews systematization and does not try to "produce a totalizing explanation of everything" (Kelly, 2018, p. 11). Third, it is non-political in the sense of "party politics" (Kelly, 2018, p. 11) or, in other words, not being a part of politics as such. Shortly, Foucault's method is a critique aimed to undermine things through its analysis. The book comprises Introduction, where Kelly determines the purpose of his work and sets up the methodological and conceptual framework: seven chapters each devoted to a single thinker one way or another related to Foucault – these are Marx, Lenin, Althusser, Deleuze, Rorty, Honneth, and Geuss, – the last chapter dedicated to Foucault's scholarship, and Conclusion. On the whole, the book is indeed "something of an anthology" (Kelly, 2018, p. 13), therefore, the order of reading the book can be arbitrary.

In the first chapter devoted to Marx, Kelly tries to show from Foucauldian perspective that Marx was almost anti-normative thinker and in some sense precursor to Foucault. He calls Marx a "pivotal figure" (Kelly, 2018, p. 17) in the history of political thought. Kelly criticizes attempts made in 1970–80s Anglophone philosophy to rehabilitate Marx as a normative political philosopher, for his attitude towards capitalism was rather an analysis of how it works as a system rather than a moral condemnation. He analyzes Marx's method and his core concepts, such as alienation, exploitation, slavery, and theft to prove that they are purely descriptive rather than normative. However, the author holds that Marx failed to promote a non-normative alternative because he puts forward a political theory of communism, which according to Kelly inevitably relies on normative premises and becomes political utopian. Moreover, although Marx reached antinormativity, he was held back by Hegelianism.

The second chapter is devoted to Lenin. Kelly holds that through the comparative analysis of Russian Revolution and Lenin's work "State and Revolution" it becomes clear that Lenin failed to realize his theory in practice, that is, incorporate it in real politics, and thus had to substitute it. As the result, there was the time of terror and totalitarianism. As regards to Foucault, Kelly holds that although Lenin invoked to "smash politics, and dispense with morality" (Kelly, 2018, p. 58), he was committed to Marx's philosophical ideals.

In chapter three, Kelly criticizes Althusser for being not close enough to Foucault's position because of being detached by his commitments to Marxism and Leninism. Moreover, Althusser's adherence to French Communist Party and state-oriented politics makes him politically engaged thinker. He also uses some kind of theoretical tools in his thought. In Kelly's words, "Althusser commits

to a kind of normativity, which resides in his being theoretical and political" (Kelly, 2018, p. 72).

Chapter four is meant to show fundamental differences between Foucault's and Gilles Deleuze's philosophies: "The former aims to demolish existing strategies of power through critical analysis of their operation, whereas the latter aims to build up a new positive account of reality in order to free constrained creative forces" (Kelly, 2018, p. 76). For this, Kelly mostly deals with Deleuze's work "Postscript on Control Societies". He criticizes Deleuze for so-called "normative theoreticism" and his attempt to include Foucault's approach in his thought. In other words, Kelly claims that Deleuze's thought is incompatible with Foucault's genuine critical analysis. As Kelly puts it, "Deleuze's political philosophy is based in the assertion of a metaphysics, in which forces try to free themselves from evil reconfigurations of them" (Kelly, 2018, p. 91).

In the fifth chapter, Kelly criticizes the way Richard Rorty reads Foucault: although Rorty was sympathetic to him, he adhered to normativity by looking for a "realistic utopia" (Kelly, 2018, p. 101). Kelly claims that Foucault's ideas rather challenge Rorty's pragmatic liberalism than support it. The same thing happens with Rorty's idea of ethnocentric relativism, which "elevates his normative preferences to the status of inarguable political truths" (Kelly, 2018, p. 107).

The sixth chapter is devoted to contemporary critical thinker Axel Honneth. Kelly holds that Honneth, as well as Rorty, fails to understand Foucault's position properly. Kelly labels Honneth's thought as normative critical theory, and states that Foucault is a challenge for him rather than support. However, the main point of criticism is that Honneth considers Foucault in line with Frankfurt School theorists, thus blurring the differences between the thinkers and failing to combine Foucault and Habermas in his work.

In chapter seven, Kelly deals with recent works of Raymond Geuss. He criticizes the movement of political realism Geuss belongs to for the view that it is necessary to produce values (political, not moral) and engage in public policy, although the author is sympathetic to the realist critique of the "ethic-first" approach. Kelly concludes that normativity, politics, and theory need to be stamped out on the basis of their failure to account for social complexity.

In his final chapter, Kelly directly aims to defend Foucault from normativity by referring to works of Paul Patton in several steps: he analyzes Patton's original interpretation of Foucault as an anti-normative thinker. Then Kelly answers to the criticism holding that political thought is inevitably based on normative ground, which means that Foucault either incoherent or eventually normative. Then he examines Patton's defence of Foucault against Charles Taylor's criticism. Finally, Kelly criticizes Patton's later work on Foucault, human rights and neoliberalism and his claim that late Foucault became a normative thinker claiming that referring to the problem of rights is merely "a call for rights only qua limitations on power" (Kelly, 2018, p. 156).

In conclusion, Kelly explains that he sees his work as an attempt of "catching up with Foucault" (Kelly, 2018, p. 169) because he is considered as the last thinker

of anti-normative thought. Kelly contends that even other French thinkers, such as Rancierre, Badiou and Balibar, were sub-Foucauldian because different kinds of commitments to normativity, politics, and/or theory can be found in their ideas. As for Badiou, Kelly argues about political character of his thought. Rancierre, in his turn, is the closest to Foucault's position, as Kelly claims, however, his theoretization makes him in some sense normative thinker. And Balibar falls for politics more than other two in terms of attempts to "positively determine the goals of politics" (Kelly, 2018, p. 171). Kelly comes to conclusion that we need to admit the urgency of our "ability to think, act, and live differently" (Kelly, 2018, p. 172). Kelly admits that we are probably "still caught in the old Enlightenment problematic" (Kelly, 2018, p. 172). As its outcome, Kelly shows Trump's triumph as an example and normative political theory's inability to resist it. For Kelly, this demonstrates that Foucault's anti-normative critique is highly relevant also because today "action urgently needs a new strategic analysis of power relations to inform it" (Kelly, 2018, p. 173).

To conclude, I would like to summarize both merits and shortcoming noted by other reviewers. Simon Choat acknowledges the book's style that makes the argument clear and consistent, although it relates to the Continental tradition characterized by "the pretension and needless obscurity" (Choat, 2018, p. 1). However, he considers some of Kelly's arguments against normative political theory unconvincing, and doubts on the demarcation line between theory and critique. He claims that "overzealous" (Choat, 2018, p. 4) defence and interpretation of Foucault's approach as flawless weakens the book. Choat finishes his review with a statement, which is absolutely out of place, that it is not acceptable in 2018 "to write eight chapters on political thinkers and to fail to include any women or non-white thinkers" (Choat, 2018, p. 4). Moreover, almost nothing is mentioned about the book's content.

In his turn, Frieder Vogelmann assesses the book as threefold: (1) original for Kelly's "overall thesis that political thinking should follow Foucault's model of non-normative critique" (Vogelmann, 2018); (2) provoking for combination of author's thesis and criticism against both analytic and continental normative political thinking; and most importantly (3), infuriating for Kelly's deliberate refutation for his far-reaching claims. Vogelmann is dissatisfied with insufficient outline of Foucault's conceptual apparatus claiming that "it weakens the book's persuasive power" (Vogelmann, 2018). He analyses each chapter in detail and also challenges Kelly's approach and its three core elements: normativity, theory, and politics. However, Vogelmann does not give proper attention to the final chapter and conclusion, which I think are no less important parts of the book.

Throughout the book's outline and other reviewers' assessment, it has become clear that it is not perfect and has some shortcomings. Nevertheless, it does not belittle the book's importance. I would recommend this book to those, first, who are interested in Foucault's scholarship, particularly in his political thought. Second, this book can be useful for scholars concerned with normative political theory and its alternatives, for the view of continental tradition presented here challenges the analytic paradigm

dominating within the field. Finally, this book might be useful for scholars who are interested at least in one of the thinkers presented in chapters, for it can give a great opportunity to look at them from the other side.

References

Kelly, M. G. E. (2018). *For Foucault: Against Normative Political Theory*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Choat, S. (2018). M.G.E.Kelly, For Foucault: Against Normative Political Theory. Albany: SUNY Press, 2018. In *Contemporary Political Theory,* September 2018, (pp. 1–4). DOI: 10.1057/s41296-018-0266-8

Vogelmann, F. (2018). *For Foucault: Against normative political theory* [Notre-Damme Philosophy Review]. Retrieved from: https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/for-foucault-against-normative-political-theory