

# Foucault Studies

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## REVIEW

**Johanna Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). ISBN: 0-521-84779-6**

This book provides a thorough reconsideration of Foucault's corpus. Oksala proposes that we read and understand Foucault's thought through the lens of freedom. The relevance of freedom as a concept unifying the seemingly disparate themes of Foucault's texts is a suggestive one, although this proposal must in the end meet with some amount of skepticism. I will give a brief overview of Oksala's book before outlining some of the substantial reasons to recommend the book. Finally, I will conclude with some questions and criticism of Oksala's endeavor. As we shall see, despite its flaws, the book does an admirable job of showing how freedom and subjectivity were issues of fundamental importance during Foucault's entire career.

At the outset, Oksala makes the obvious point that it would be a mistake to understand Foucault's conception of freedom in the traditional manner. Freedom for Foucault works in marked contrast with the dominant Western and Enlightenment notion of freedom as individual autonomy. Oksala is quick to point out that it is precisely this idea of freedom as autonomy (in the ethical sense) and emancipation (in the political sense) from which Foucault seeks to distance himself, and it is this ambivalence that Foucault's critics find most troubling. Oksala thus has a twofold task: to show the relevance of freedom across Foucault's works and to answer these various criticisms of Foucault. As Oksala points out, Foucault provides a genealogy of this mode of ethical subjectivity, and, in doing so, show that it is contingent and questionable. Indeed, this is the primary aim of genealogy: to show that the stable identities that we have become accustomed to our contingent and therefore open to question. By way of contrast with the self-assured subject as source of transcendental value found in Kant's ethics, Foucault's self-identities are contingent and always revisable.

The first part of the book examines Foucault's relationship to phenomenology, primarily that of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and focuses on Foucault's early

work. The second part of the book takes up Foucault's genealogical writings in tandem with current feminist theory. The final part of the book concerns Foucault's explicitly ethical period during the last years of his life. Each of these themes (the subject in Foucault's archaeological writings, the body in his genealogical writings, and the explicitly ethical subject in his final writings) is approached from the idea of freedom understood as radical contingency. As this list of topics makes clear, Oksala takes seriously Foucault's claim to have been primarily concerned with the subject during all phases of his career. Oksala takes a position akin to Thomas Flynn's axial reading of Foucault's texts, rather than hew to the periodization of Foucault's *oeuvre* proposed by Dreyfus and Rabinow.<sup>1</sup> Dreyfus and Rabinow see Foucault's work as fundamentally discontinuous. According to their influential yet problematic analysis, Foucault took archaeology as far as he could before abandoning it due to the contradiction inherent in the method. Dreyfus and Rabinow construe archaeology as a theory immanent to discourse that at the same time attempts to transcend the limits of discourse by positing a totalizing theory outside of the discursive rules it analyzes.<sup>2</sup> In short, they see Foucault as abandoning archaeology in favor of genealogy. In his recent work on Foucault and Sartre, Thomas Flynn analyzes the apparent shift in Foucault's thought not in terms of a repudiation of archaeology but rather as a change in emphasis. Flynn detects three axes operating in Foucault's texts: those of knowledge, power, and subjectivation.<sup>3</sup> The apparent shifts in Foucault's thought then become changes of emphasis and a unitary reading becomes plausible. Oksala implicitly relies upon Flynn's unitary reading, for she wishes to read Foucault through the concept of freedom, and, by extension, through his notion of the subject. Oksala rightly criticizes the interpretation of Dreyfus and Rabinow and thus sees Foucault's work as a unified whole. Indeed, in her criticism of Dreyfus and Rabinow's characterization of Foucault's archaeological method as 'quasi-structuralist,' she points out that Foucault came to see archaeology and genealogy as complementary methods, and her book tracks the three distinct chronological periods of Foucault's work in terms of the "domains" of *language*, *the body*, and *ethics*.<sup>4</sup>

The first part of the book concerns language and the role that freedom plays in Foucault's archaeological texts. Chapter one consists largely of an exegesis of the key themes of *The Order of Things*, while the second chapter provides an insightful reading of *The Order of Things* as a response to Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences*. Foucault

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<sup>1</sup> Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2<sup>nd</sup>.Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Dreyfus and Rabinow, pp. 98-103.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason, Volume 2: A Poststructuralist Mapping of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> Oksala, p. 10.

replaces the transcendental subject of Husserlian phenomenology with a theory of discursive subjectivities, for archaeology concerns the being of language, a formulation that becomes important for Foucault in his texts on *avant-garde* literature and art.

Husserl had come to see the limitations of the Cartesian starting point for phenomenology by the 1930's and sought to replace this theory of transcendental subjectivity with a theory of transcendental intersubjectivity through a phenomenological analysis of the invariant structures of the *Lebenswelt*. This means asking how these invariant structures themselves become constituted, and this is the primary task of the *Crisis*. Oksala argues that the influence of French historians and philosophers of science such as Georges Canguilhem, Gaston Bachelard, and Jean Cavailles. For Husserl, scientific activity is grounded in the *Lebenswelt* and hence in experience. Foucault "understands scientific development as irreversibly removed from direct intuition and experience" (45). It is not experience that is decisive, but language and discourse. This leads Oksala to a discussion of the anonymity and, more importantly, the freedom of language.

The freedom of language is essentially tied to literature. Foucault discusses this idea in Chapter Eight ("Labor, Life, Language") of *The Order of Things*, and then in a series of essays and interviews on *avant-garde* figures such as Blanchot, Bataille and Andre Breton which culminate in his text on Raymond Roussel, *Death and the Labyrinth*. According to his analysis in *The Order of Things*, language becomes unmoored from things and loses its immediate representative function. Language still represents things, but only indirectly.<sup>5</sup>

*Avant-garde* literary texts radicalize this tendency. In doing so, they test the limits of the sayable and thereby serve to critique dominant forms of subjectivity:

By being able to demonstrate the limits of a discursive order, literary writing is able to reveal important limits of subjectivity. Because the discursive order is constitutive of the limits of subjectivity, counter-discourse in the form of *avant-garde* writing, for example, can question these limits. Foucault aimed to show how modes of subjectivity are constituted in scientific discourse, and also how these limits are transcended in *avant-garde* writing and art (Oksala, 85).

This can be clearly seen, for example, in Foucault's essay on Maurice Blanchot:

Language is then freed from all of the old myths by which our awareness of words, discourse, and literature has been shaped. For a long time it was thought that language had mastery over time, that it acted both as the future bond of the promise and as memory and narrative; it was thought that its essence resided in the form of

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (NY: Vintage, 1970), pp. 280-28

words or in the breath that made them vibrate. In fact, it is only a formless rumbling, a streaming; its power resides in dissimulation.<sup>6</sup>

Oksala's text furnishes a rare and enlightening reading of Foucault's notoriously opaque *Death and the Labyrinth* in terms of this problematic of the transgressive questioning of limits. Oksala claims that this relationship between limits and their transgression remains a constant throughout Foucault's work—his work continuously probes the question of the boundary of the same and the other. Although some would argue that this focus on the boundary between, for example, reason and madness in *Madness and Civilization* or life and death in *Birth of the Clinic* disappears in Foucault's later work (Oksala cites Clare O'Farrell in this regard), Oksala argues that the emphasis changes from language to the body and then finally to the ethical subject.

The second section takes up Foucault's genealogical texts (primarily *Discipline and Punish* and the initial volume of *The History of Sexuality*) relative to concerns of feminism. This is an intriguing juxtaposition, if for no other reason than because Foucault's work has often been seen as critical of the aims of at least some versions of feminism. The genealogical subject is subject to the mechanisms of power relations. Many interpreters have misread Foucault's genealogical texts as precisely denying the very possibility of freedom, a reading that superimposes a sort of Weberian "iron cage" upon Foucault's analyses of mechanisms of power and knowledge. Primarily for this reason, Oksala's insistence that the body be understood as a site of resistance is refreshing. She sees Foucault during this period calling into question the distinction between the natural body and the cultural body or the sex/gender distinction in texts such as *Herculine Barbin* and the *La Volonté de Savoir*. The body for Foucault is an object of discipline, but it is equally the site of resistance to the disciplinary regimes of power and knowledge. Foucault claims that there is no power without resistance, and power over bodies can ever only be partial. Feminist theorists critical of Foucault, such as Judith Butler and Lois McNay, claim that Foucault never articulates how this resistance manifests itself with regard to bodies, and this vagueness renders his thought useless for political feminism.

Oksala argues that Foucault does in fact provide resources for thinking of the body as a site of resistance, but only if we give up all attempt to reduce the body to its materiality. The body is both a passive object of power and an active locus of experiential meaning. If we understand the body in this way, then Foucault's position becomes much closer to that of Merleau-Ponty and his phenomenological lived-body that is both experiencing and experienced.

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Thought of the Outside," *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 2: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (NY: New Press, 1997), p. 167.

In the third and final section of the book, Oksala takes up the question of ethics in relation to freedom. It is in this section that she is most critical of Foucault's thought. She provides a reading of his later work that connects his later focus on an ethics of individual autonomy back to concerns from the beginning of his career. She concludes by criticizing Foucault from a Levinasian perspective. Foucault's analyses begin with a first person perspective that construes ancient ethics as the practice of autonomy, but, according to Oksala, Foucault was unable to see that these various practices of the self in the ancient world were really practices of domination. However, this criticism is anachronistic, and it is in danger of misreading the intent of Foucault's project during this later period. After all, Foucault is not advocating these ancient practices of the self; rather, he is providing a genealogy of the ethical subject in the West, and any criticism that fails to acknowledge this fundamental fact is doomed from the start.

Her critique of Foucault from the standpoint of a Levinasian ethics of alterity might have been more nuanced if she had acknowledged the relationship between Foucault and Blanchot. This could have provided a further evidence of the relationship between the earlier and the later Foucault. While it is certainly true that Foucault does not acknowledge the dimension of radical alterity that calls subjectivity into question, he does argue that all practices of autonomy must be born of heteronomy, or in other words that the only way to become a contingently independent subject is through those very relations of power and knowledge that normalize the subject. One can become a subject only through subjection, and thus the charge that Foucault's ethics begins with the individual is inaccurate.

One further criticism is that Oksala relies too much on the adversarial model of power that Foucault develops in his texts and lecture courses of the mid-70's and she neglects to consider how reflection on the apparatuses of security and biopower that Foucault begins to develop in the lecture courses of the late 1970's, along with the examination of liberalism and governmentality, could have deepened her analyses. For example, in the recently translated lecture course from 1977-1978 (*Security, Territory, and Population*), Foucault writes:

The game of liberalism—not interfering, allowing free movement, letting things follow their course; *laissez faire, passer et aller*—basically and fundamentally means acting so that reality develops, goes its way, and follows its own course according to the laws, principles, and mechanisms of reality itself.<sup>7</sup>

As this quotation illustrates, there remains much to be thought with regard to this issue of the relationship between Foucault's thought and the question of freedom. Despite my

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-1978* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 48.

criticisms, *Foucault on Freedom* does an admirable job of at least posing the question of freedom in Foucault's thought as a question, and showing how this idea threads through Foucault's work from beginning to end.

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