

REVIEW

Frédéric Gros (ed.), *Foucault et le courage de la vérité* (Paris, PUF, 2002). ISBN: 2130523315

The “courage of truth” translates the Greek term *parrhêsia*, which becomes one of the later Foucault’s preferred topics. Like Heidegger, who in his later writings sharpens the experience of “true thought” around the translation of a few pre-Socratic terms (e.g., *chréon*, *alèthéia*, *moîra*, *logos*), Foucault devotes his final courses at the College of France (1981-1984) to interpreting a network of Greek concepts (e.g., *epimeleia heautou*, *meletê*, *êthos*), which converge for that occasion in an experiment with the parrhesiastic way of life. Despite its title, however, the work consisting of six chapters written by as many contributors aims not so much at substantiating this convergence through historical investigation as showing the omnipresence of the theme of the courage of truth in Foucault’s intellectual cursus. These contributions re-evaluate the usual tripartition of Foucault’s work (archaeology, genealogy, subjectivation), turning the practico-theoretical “fundamental complex” (p. 8) that constitutes the courage of truth into the central axis around which Foucault’s thought and political engagement revolve. From this perspective, *parrhêsia*, defined as “une prise de parole publique ordonnée à l’exigence de vérité, qui, d’une part, exprime la conviction personnelle de celui qui la soutient et, d’autre part, entraîne pour lui un risque, le danger d’une réaction violente du destinataire” (p. 158), corresponds to what Foucault practised and thought throughout his entire lifetime and work. The truth-telling or fearless-speech (*franc-parler*, *dire-vrai*), which combines the transformation of oneself with a risk-taking, provocative way of speaking, is somewhat characteristic of a degree of cynicism that is in keeping with Foucault’s dicta, reading between the lines: “the real sick people are the psychiatrists” (*Madness and Civilization*) or “the creation of illegalities is the true criminality” (*Discipline and Punish*). As institutions develop, their techniques of domination become increasingly tolerable. And the courage of truth becomes the most effective means of resisting them.

The work is divided into three sections. The first is entitled “The specific intellectual”. Through references to Foucault’s engagements (GIP, Iran, Croissant, etc.), the first text (P. Artières) illustrates the new relationship of the intellectual to his actuality. It is no longer a question of identifying universal values, but rather of making a diagnosis on a “located present”. The

second chapter (F.P. Adorno) goes further by investigating the relationship between theory and practice. It stresses Foucault's attempt to differentiate the social critique from the political dimension while associating the first with an ethical practice. This is what Socrates already practised. His "stylization of existence" deserves to be used as an antidote to the edict, "Know thyself" (*gnothi seauton*), which is overrated in our tradition. The second section is entitled "Metaphysical engagement". The first text in that section (J. Revel) challenges the divisions of Foucault's work from an original and inspiring perspective. The only break in Foucault's philosophical cursus would have originally occurred in 1953 with the reading of Nietzsche, who reveals to Foucault the importance of discontinuity. But how to introduce a degree of unity to the study of the "cases" that interest Foucault (Artaud, Bataille, Sade, Roussel, etc.)? The theoretical answer to that question would have been given to Foucault by Deleuze, and the practical answer, by his involvement in the GIP. On the theoretical level, it is no longer a question of unifying the differences, but rather of "*problématiser*" by questioning events and singularities that Foucault later associates with different historical *a priori*. At the practical level, the GIP provides Foucault with the argument according to which resistance is not aimed at forming a new unitary community, but at generating a maximum of differences. Thus at the theoretical and practical levels, the question of the "cases'" unity is marginalized. The following chapter (M. Fimiani) points to a Hegelian motive in Foucault's study of the relationship between self-government and government of others, self-control and transformation of self, etc. The third section is entitled "Greek Light". In the first chapter of this section, the author (J.-F. Pradeau) reconsiders the interesting debate that pits Foucault against P. Hadot concerning the status that is to be granted to the "spiritual exercises". It is known that ascetic practices open the way to Foucault's "aesthetics of existence", which are vigorously denounced by the guardians of Hellenism as a new form of dandyism incompatible with ancient universal reason. The authentic ancient "culture of the self" is not directed toward a free and voluntary aesthetic constitution; it implies the idea of a cosmic and external order on the basis of which it is regulated. To Foucault's defence, the author points out that Foucault's interest in the "culture of the self" is aimed not at achieving a historical return, but at undertaking a genealogy of the modes of subjectivation in order to break with the repressive and legal conception of power. The final chapter (F. Gros) first exposes the three analyses of the concept of *parrhêsia*, where Foucault successively opposes the courage of truth to confession (*aveu*), rhetoric and wisdom. The author later explains how Socrates becomes for Foucault a "*frère parrhêsiate*" who constitutes his existence through the creation of a simple lifestyle and the use of a provocative "technique of veridiction". Foucault stresses the fact that the scandalous truth-telling of Socrates was devalued in favour of a Platonic

idealization of the “noble soul” and self-knowledge. That constitutes for Foucault a misappropriation of the true nature of Socrates.

The work coordinated by F. Gros has the merit of showing the decisive character, for Foucault, of the connections between being and doing, work and engagement, the invention of the techniques of veridiction and the creation of a lifestyle, etc., which help give this philosophy an immediately pragmatic value. The book convinces the reader of the importance of the courage of truth for Foucault. From the latter’s definition of the “author” (which, while not mentioned in the book, is adequate for its own purposes) as the one who loses his/her identity in favour of a self-transformation through the process of writing (1960s), his interest in the perspective of “the life of infamous men” from which history must be rewritten, and his conception of the specific intellectual (1970s) up to his final meditations in which the topic of *parrhêsia* becomes explicit (1980s), Foucault never ceases to practise the courage of truth and to seek the forgotten conditions of its exercise.

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