foucault studies

REVIEW

Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (London: Acumen Press, 2006), 192 pp., £15.99., paperback, ISBN 1-84465-057-X.

Todd May's *The Philosophy of Foucault* is part of the Continental European Philosophy series 'providing accessible and stimulating introductions to the ideas of continental thinkers who have shaped fundamental aspects of European philosophy'. The reader will quickly notice that this book is much more than an introduction, and it needs to be. The secondary literature on Foucault is enormous and continues to grow every year, making the task of writing a genuinely interesting and useful introduction to Foucault's work increasingly difficult, a fact exacerbated by the existence of some excellent introductions to Foucault's work.[1] Such a book must be accessible to a reader new to Foucault, while also providing a challenge to the reader already acquainted with his work. Any new book on Foucault must bring something distinctive or the text will likely become just 'another book on Foucault'.

Todd May's new book will surely become an important reference point for lecturers and teachers introducing their students to Foucault's thinking.[2] This will come as no surprise to those familiar with May's already significant contribution to our understanding of contemporary French thought.[3] Though

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1   I concur with Todd May's assessment in his "Further reading" (164), though I would say that Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow's *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982) and John Rajchman's *Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) are the two I have found most useful and interesting. For those most interested in Foucault's archaeological works I would also suggest Gary Gutting's *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2   The Continental European Philosophy series is published by Acumen Press in the United Kingdom and McGill-Queen's University Press in the United States and Canada. Already published in this series are introductions to the philosophies of Gadamer, Habermas, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, with forthcoming books on Derrida, Hegel, Husserl, Kant, Rousseau and Sartre.

3   See his book on Deleuze , *Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).; *Between Genealogy and Epistemology: Psychology, Politics, and Knowledge in the Thought of Michel Foucault* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1993); *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1994); *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas,*

there are many provocative and interesting aspects to the book, rather than concentrating on providing short summaries of each chapter, I will pay particular attention to those features I consider most noteworthy.

Given the introductory format of the book, one of its achievements is to capture the force and profundity of Foucault's work without being held hostage to over-simplification, which requires an economy of writing and depth of reading and engagement with one's subject similar to Foucault's own erudite studies. It is clear from the opening chapter that May, a sophisticated commentator on and user of Foucault's work, is able to deliver both these things.

For those early in their encounter with Foucault, May provides wonderfully clear yet penetrating readings of archaeology, genealogy and problematization as modes for enquiry in determining what we are without losing their own field of specificity. May does so by delivering excellent summaries and interpretations of what he considers to be Foucault's major works, including *Madness and Civilisation* and *The Order of Things* (chapter 2), *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, *Volume 1* (chapter 3) and *The Use of Pleasure* (chapter 4).[4] May's use of other primary sources, particularly Foucault's interviews and lecture courses, is also welcome and particularly good.

May's central thesis and main approach to Foucault's philosophy is provocative and distinctive. May's approach to Foucault, which bears a similarity to his own excellent introduction to Deleuze's philosophy published last year, is one of the most interesting aspects of the book.[5] Insofar as May identifies a single question at the heart of Foucault's philosophy, it is reminiscent of Deleuze himself, who isolated a single problem or question around which he would create an entire conceptual plane or 'image of thought'. What is this question? May proposes that 'what all the periods [of Foucault's work] have in common is that they are framed by a historical concern with the emergence of who we are'.[6] With typical clarity, May

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and Deleuze (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1997); *Our Practices, Our Selves: Or, What It Means to Be Human* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2001).

4 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2001); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure,* trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

5 May, *Deleuze.*

6 May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 25.

elucidates the book's central thesis at the beginning leaving the reader with no room for confusion. May writes:

> For Foucault there is, throughout the body of his work, a single question that receives elaboration. It is the question "who are we?" This is not the only question he elaborates. Yet it is the one he asks most doggedly, the one that is never far from the surface of any of his works.[7]

It might be argued that situating Foucault's thought within the traditional parameters of philosophy goes too far in domesticating Foucault's often radical formulations and provocations. However, looking at so much of the treatment of Foucault's work, I wonder whether the reverse is not true. In my view, there is no better way of de-radicalising and domesticating Foucault's thinking than to perpetuate the all-too-common and misguided reading of Foucault as a postmodern relativist. As May demonstrates perfectly well, insofar as Foucault understood the modern to be characterised by a 'critical ontology of the self', his philosophy was and remains quintessentially modern.[8] Furthermore, May shows that while the question is indeed a traditional philosophical concern, Foucault's response to it is anything but.

For May, Foucault's 'radically new approach to the question of who we are' is structured around five core characteristics that separate Foucault from Descartes, Freud, Sartre and most Western philosophers insofar as their desire to locate a 'universal core to human nature' is seen as largely representative of Western philosophy.[9] First, May argues that, for Foucault, the question of who we are 'is a collective and not an individual matter'. Second, what we are emerges out of our collective practices, discursive and non-discursive, which constitute part of what we are and can be, and as such cannot be 'shaken off'. Third, our 'collective determination is complex' and can only be understood by looking at the multiplicity of 'historically given practices' and their complex connections. Fourth, 'practices are what we are and can't be separated from what we think'. Thought and practice are inextricably linked. Fifth, because what we are is constitutive of our contingent history, what we are and can be is always open to change and negotiation even if it is not a simple question of choice.[10]

May brilliantly uses this schema as a tool for evaluating what he adjudges to be the different movements in Foucault's work, from his early archaeological studies of the rules of discursivity delimiting what can and cannot be said at a given point in time, to his genealogical interrogations of

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7   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 2.

8   Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 319.

9   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 9.

10   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 16-23.

the politicisation of knowledge and its connections with the production of power relations, through to the later works on ethical self-determination.

As this rightly suggests, those familiar with Foucault are offered some provocative interpretations of Foucault's work. May's discussion of Madness and Civilisation in chapter 2, in particular, Derrida's critique of Foucault's attempt to provide an 'archaeology of silence', provides a powerful reading of the book as an 'archaeology of reason and not madness', and is a first-class philosophical intervention.[11]

So is the chapter on genealogy, where May provides one of the best introductions to Foucault's understanding of power currently available. This is because May shows better than most that when Foucault says that 'power is essentially creative', creative means something more than the production of normalised identities we become subjected to. Importantly, May's emphasis on Foucault's conception of 'power as the action upon existing actions' allows us to see Foucault's power relations as dependent on freedom and not the source of its negation.[12] What emerges from such a conception of power, in my view, is also a novel configuration of freedom, not as an innate capacity but as a creative transfiguration of the self in relation to pre-existing limits. As May articulates so well, genealogy is not limited to the task of identifying what he calls our 'collective determination' or our domination within power-knowledge networks as Habermas and Honneth have argued.[13] It is equally a tool attuned to opening up the possibility of human freedom. As May writes:

> It allows us to see how aspects of ourselves that we thought were natural or inescapable turn out to be historically contingent. That we did not have to become who we are, and in turn we can become something other than we are.[14]

This raises an important question in Foucaultian scholarship: the question of the continuity or discontinuity of Foucault's archive. For critics like Peter Dews, the later work on ethics articulates a profound rupture in Foucault's thinking.[15] Others, most notably in my opinion, Deleuze, emphasise the continuity of Foucault's thought while observing shifts in focus.[16] This question gives May's book a dynamic and tension that are especially clear in the chapter on ethics and the care of the self in chapter 4,

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11   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 36-40.

12   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 81-85

13   Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

14   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 67.

15   Peter Dews, "The Return of the Subject in Late Foucault", *Radical Philosophy (Spring, 1989)*, 51, 37-41.

16   Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (London: Athlone Press, 1990).

where May presents two seemingly conflicting arguments: that the work on ethics represents a shift in Foucault's thought 'from the question who we are now to who we might be', and that 'the shift is less stark than it may appear'.[17] I am not sure May resolves this. Indeed, I wonder if this tension cannot be traced back to May's following of the standard periodisation of Foucault's work which May does well to dismantle. May's articulation of the problematic of the 'subject and its relation to truth' as a constant theme in Foucault's work, is one example of his ability to isolate important continuities in that work. In fact, I would go so far as to say that May's identification of a coda in Foucault, 'the constant straying afield of the self', does well in establishing a unity in Foucault's philosophy from which its perpetual becoming is derived.[18]

That said, May's reading of the later work and the care of the self is excellent, succeeding in bringing to life the transgressive force of Foucault's philosophy. It provides, for one thing, an important corrective to those who continue to isolate a rather extreme individualism or decisionism in Foucault's later work by showing how 'ethical self-formation cannot be separated from the problematization of collective norms and practices'.[19] Both these things, I would argue, come from a profound innovation, Foucault's conception of ethics as inextricably linked to the political. It was Foucault himself who, in a later interview, spoke of an interest in conceiving 'politics as an ethics'[20]. Indeed, an ethics of self-transformation is itself a politics of transgression because, as May highlights, a relentless problematization of the self is simultaneously a perpetual questioning and challenging of collective norms.

Given the tendency of many to read Foucault's work on the aesthetics of existence as a distinctly singular process, the value of this cannot be overstated. It should be noted, however, that the interconnected relations between ethics-politics-aesthetics that can be derived from May's reading of Foucault remains very general. And while May is unquestionably right in my view that Foucault's later work on ancient ethics 'enables us to rethink what we might be as well as what we have become', it would have been fascinating if May had demonstrated this with particular reference to contemporary problems in politics and philosophy. It was Foucault after all who told us he wanted to be a 'tool kit to be used and applied'. One possibility would be to conceptualise the care of the self as a critical and transfigural ethics that resists and problematizes the instrumental rationality of late capitalism.

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17   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 99, 106.

18   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, See chapter 5.

19   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 103-109.

20   Michel Foucault, "Politics and Ethics: An Interview", in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought,* ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 375.

May is, however, acutely aware of the need to look at Foucault's work in relation to the present. The final chapter of the book, 'Are we still who Foucault says we are?' is framed by the question of whether or not 'Foucault's work remains untimely or merely behind the times'.[21] It is a superb concluding chapter. May explores the issue by looking at three perspectives that suggest that Foucault's account of what we are may need supplanting. First is Deleuze's account of the 'control society', which Deleuze sees as replacing the disciplinary society and its normalising technologies described by Foucault. Second is Baudrillard's argument that Foucault's configuration of power is now outdated and incompatible with the 'strategies of seduction operating in the world of hyperreality'. Third is Lyotard's analysis of the 'postmodern condition' and its proposal that the modern world of 'metanarratives has been replaced by a new form of capitalism'. These criticisms of Foucault are well developed as are May's responses to them and are well worth reading, particularly May's discussion of Foucault's lectures on governmentality, which he develops as a response to conditions of the present.[22]

But like some of the other criticisms of Foucault's work documented in the book, I find the over-emphasis on the 'accuracy of Foucault's studies' to be somewhat problematic, partly because it traps Foucault within a representational logic that his 'profound Nietzscheanism' explodes; nor is it adequate for evaluating whether Foucault's work is 'untimely' in the sense Nietzsche gives to it in his Untimely Meditations.[23] As I see it, Foucault's work is 'untimely' not because the 'ship of fools' he describes in *Madness and Civilisation* is something more than Foucault's dazzling aesthetic imagination, it is *'untimely'* because of the ethics of permanent revolt interlinking thought and practice that runs through all of Foucault's work.

As Adorno understood well, that which is ceaselessly critical, as Foucault's thought was, is also eternally 'untimely'. Similarly, as Deleuze argued with reference to Nietzsche's distinction between new (active) and established (reactive) values, 'the new, with its power of beginning and beginning again, remains forever new, just as the established was always established from the outset'.[24] Lastly, and partly as a consequence of this, I wonder if the question proper to Foucault's critical philosophy was not always the question of what can we be and not what are we? May has made considerable progress in both directions.

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21   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 132.

22   May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 153-159.

23   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, second edition, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

24   Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 172.

In this book May provides one of the very best introductions to Foucault's work. Indeed, one experiences the sense of a singular encounter with a powerful force that continues to intrigue, puzzle and provoke him. Deleuze said that 'something in the world forces us to think'.[25] The Foucault who unfolds in May's book, the Foucault who persistently asked the questions of who we are, and how we have become what we are so as to open up the possibility of becoming different, does just that. More than this, I would argue that any intervention in the competitive field of Foucault studies needs to achieve three particular things beyond the standard requirements of scholarship in order to be noteworthy. First, it needs to provide a perspective on Foucault that forces the reader to re-think existing ideas. Second, it must create an opening or a series of openings for the reader to venture into. Third, it must use Foucault and put his tools to work. Todd May's book does all of these things.

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25   Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 183.