

Foucault Studies

© Sébastien Malette 2008

ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No 5, pp. 123-127, January 2008

REVIEW

Sergei Prozorov, *Foucault, Freedom and Sovereignty* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). ISBN: 0754649083

Through an *(un)faithful* reconstruction of Foucault's ontology of freedom involving authors like Schmitt, Deleuze, Agamben, Negri and Žižek, Sergei Prozorov proposes a daring return to the 'sovereign subject' as an epitome of freedom. *(Un)faithful* here does not necessarily mean ill-advised: Prozorov does not reclaim a central position for the sovereign subject, but rather claims a position for a subject which reasserts itself at the limit of every political order as the paradigm of the subject of freedom. In clear terms, the project of this book can be summarised as an attempt to liberate a concrete experience of freedom through an engagement with Foucault's philosophy, which, according to the author, allows us to conceptualize freedom as an ontological condition of human being rather than as an attribute of social order. The main argument of Prozorov is simple: if one wants to think freedom *freely*, one must resist 'the temptation to fix its meaning and define the possibilities of its practice by locating it within a form of order, real or imaginary, practical or theoretical, possible or impossible' (p. 17). Being Foucauldian has therefore more to do with the liberating experience of the movement of thought toward its own freedom, than with the fidelity to particular concepts, postulates, identities or orthodoxy.

Structurally, this book is divided into six chapters. The first part of the book (chapters 1-3) establishes the locus of *concrete* freedom at the opening of the *Deleuzian* 'diagram', which ruptures its self-immanence to reveal the figure of the subject as a concept which is primary to any historical ontology of truth, power and ethics. The first chapter addresses the question of whether a Foucauldian freedom is possible. According to the author, 'the exclusion of Foucault from the discourse on freedom rests on his critics' demand for a number of presuppositions that are allegedly necessary to ground a meaningful concept of freedom' (p. 27). What is usually demanded of Foucault is a set of universal and normative criteria in terms of which a freer society can be posed. For Prozorov, such demands are more concerned with the establishment of a 'perfect order' than with freedom itself, an obsession that often overlooks the stakes and dangers involved in the politics of the global promotion of a specific liberal ideal of freedom. Although governmentality studies are praised for

highlighting these dangers, the author remains equally critical of their tendency to reduce freedom to an immanent property of a specific diagram of power relations, and consequently to a positivity whose content is historically variable. What is therefore needed is a concept of freedom irreducible to any social order, but implicated in every project of its transformation, a concept of freedom capable of contesting the very process of the operation whereby the act of power implicated in the formation of any diagram is subsequently justified as 'liberation'.

The second chapter attempts to portray this concept of freedom. It is not a search for a deeper stratum of free subjectivity that would precede all governmental processes of subjectification. It is rather an investigation of the diagrammatic plane to see whether something might escape its operation. This investigation leads the author to draw an ontological inside/outside distinction which allows the reader to understand the irreducible presence of resistance as a constitutive feature of human beings. For Prozorov, this irreducible presence reveals itself through acts and moments of transgression which generate an irruption of transcendence within the immanence of the diagrammatic plane. In short, freedom no longer appears as something a certain governmental diagram can guarantee through its positive intervention or commitment to non-intervention, but rather as the result of the ontological impossibility for the diagram to achieve the degree of closure and stability that it purports to ensure. Here Prozorov carefully distinguishes his conception of freedom from Berlin's negative liberty. The author suggests that Berlin's negative liberty is not an opening of the diagram into the outside. It is rather a delimited and guaranteed space of possibility that becomes *ipso facto* restricted by its own governmentality, in much the same way as positive freedoms are. The Foucauldian ontology of freedom, which allegedly resists any positive specification or determinate identity, appears therefore as a more fitting example of a *properly negative freedom*.

The third chapter describes this 'properly negative freedom' by dissociating Foucault's ontology of freedom from every form of identity politics. The author suggests that all forms of identity politics are heterogeneous to the practice of concrete freedom, insofar as they are tied to the language of positivity, the assumption of authenticity and the articulation of freedom with knowledge. Prozorov's argument is not to be mistaken for the post-modern attitude that conceives of identity as always in question, perpetually in the process of contestation and reconstruction. It is rather an invitation to de-problematize identity, admit not knowing who we *really* are, and renounce all interest in such knowledge. Such disinvestment from identity politics comes with the realisation of one's fundamental non-identity with oneself, the ontological negativity that renders impossible even one's own identity. This is not to say that there is no subject. On the contrary, the subject for Prozorov is precisely the being which is 'beside its own diagrammatic identity', a being which indicates through its persisting resistance to any form of enclosure that what is at stake in the affirmation of freedom is not identity or

authenticity, but rather the human potentiality of being otherwise. Against the diagrammatic injunction to a positively specified identity that one must enact to be endowed with subjectivity, the locus of concrete freedom is therefore the subject understood here as this 'being beside itself that is both actual and potential at the same time', not as a mere antonym of power, but rather as a force which always presupposes -- and does not negate -- the intimate and irreducible power to be or not to be.

The second part of the book (chapters 4-6) repositions Foucault's properly negative freedom as a political tool to resist biopolitical governmentality. To do so, the fourth chapter links Foucault's ontology of concrete freedom and Schmitt's notion of sovereignty on the basis of their alleged metaphysical disposition to locate the condition of possibility of order in the founding rupture of the exception. For Prozorov, it is in the interstice of Foucault's poststructuralism and Schmitt's political realism that we may draw the relation between the diagram and its sovereign foundation in terms of freedom. The author suggests that Schmitt's notion of sovereignty restores the transcendence of the political as a force of disruption of the illusion of the self-immanence of social order. As such, sovereignty is described as the 'Other of order' because of its potentiality to transgress what it establishes through the sovereign act of making the exception. In sum, 'being free' for Prozorov is to 'be sovereign' over one's existence against all attempts to seize it and reduce it to a positive project; and, conversely, 'being sovereign' 'is nothing other than being free to pursue one's potentiality for being against all attempts to freeze this potentiality in all actual identity' (p. 100).

Building on this description of 'sovereign freedom', Prozorov criticises both Agamben's (chapter 5) and Hardt and Negri's (chapter 6) treatment of biopower. The author argues that both approaches -- although in different ways -- are marked by the conflation of sovereign and biopolitical modalities of power. On the one hand, Prozorov charges Agamben with generating an improbable image of power relations as unchanging throughout human history. The author argues that the dissociation of sovereign and biopolitical modalities of power allows us instead to keep both the appreciation of the historical mutability of power relations, and the affirmation of sovereignty as the formal condition of concrete freedom, not as an order which is imposed on 'bare life' from the exterior, but rather as a condition of 'bare life', which is always already in a position of sovereignty over itself. On the other hand, Prozorov denounces Hardt and Negri's conflation of immanence and autonomy as being too compliant with biopolitical rationalities. The author claims that without a clear distinction marking the externalisation we need in order to resist biopolitical rationalities of power, the Multitude will for the most part reproduce the undesirable features of biopolitics. Resistance should therefore 'abandon its fixation on the figure of the sovereign and instead take the form of the refusal of the care' which is allegedly inherent in biopolitical rationalities of government (p. 111). In sum,

resistance should be an attitude of indifference not so much to the threat of power, but rather to its loving embrace; it should not be directed toward repossessing biopolitics from an external control, but rather toward a refusal of biopolitical production as such.

Combining both approaches for what they offer best, the author concludes by suggesting that to become a 'singular-universal' subject of resistance to biopolitical investment, the Multitude should be rethought as an aggregate of equal subjects of freedom whose singular resistance is driven by their common feature of being 'beside their diagrammatic identity', which, in turn, precisely reveals another human commonality that takes the form of a 'bare life' condition, capable of asserting its own sovereignty by stripping itself of all identitarian or positive determination (p. 136). Thinking resistance and freedom in such manner, it is argued, should lead us to abandonment of all valorisation of production, and thus to a greater enjoyment of a purely negative freedom consisting of 'being against' (p. 137).

Of course, the present review does not render the subtlety of the arguments deployed by the author, as well as his brilliant ability to articulate some of the most challenging questions on such topics as freedom, identity and sovereignty. Yet, despite all its success, readers might question what appears to be Prozorov's own conflation of biopolitical with pastoral power in Foucault's work. It is common knowledge that biopolitics now operates through the distance provided by numbers -- not identity -- in order to rationalise their normative and securing activities over populations. The whispering promise of the shepherd is therefore no longer required to generate the state of exception when one sheep goes astray. Numbers now provide the regulation as well as the state of exception without any need for strange dialectical contortion. In fact, those involved in the mathematical capture of 'bare life' could not care less about its embodiment through the figure of a 'sovereign subject'. As long as the negative desires of the 'elusive subject' can be converted into numbers through their actualisation, Žižek and other philosophers are in fact more than welcome to ruminate over some transcendental negativity and symbolic (re)creation of the subject.

Readers might also question the motive behind the project of Prozorov. Why are we so anxious -- at least since Kant -- to determinate the *a priori* conditions for us to *genuinely* resist? More intriguingly, why does Prozorov return to categories like transcendentalism and immanentism when it comes to define freedom? Haven't we read the epistemological tango described by Foucault at the end of *The Order of Things* to understand that such dualism is precisely the modern condition we should try to overcome? To be fair, such an attempt at overcoming can be read in the Prozorovian definition of the subject of freedom as this being which is *both* actual and potential at the same time. Unfortunately, it is often unclear if the author refers to the *logical possibility* for the subject 'to be or not to be' when he uses the term 'potentiality' (which implies *either* the termination of potentiality as such *or* its

passage into actualisation), or if he refers to the subject's *capacity* of becoming other than what s/he is (which implies the possibility of switching from a state of being to another *within* the subject's potentiality of becoming). Finally, the radical disjunction made by the author between the freedom available within a regime of governmentality and the freedom to leave that regime altogether may appear more than just debatable, given that Foucault's notion of 'agonism' signifies that the nature and extent of freedom is always contestable within an existing yet open set conditions, which precisely makes resistance enunciable and intelligible. Foucault's perspectivism is indeed open to various uses and developments, but not to the point of introducing in his name some kind of non-enunciable aprioristic and universal mode of 'being free'. That is to turn Foucault in a 'philosopher' he was not. Nevertheless this thought-provoking and well-written book will surely prompt Foucauldian and non-Foucauldian scholars alike to re-examine -- and perhaps reassess -- their deepest assumptions about the questions of human freedom and identity.

Sébastien Malette, University of Victoria