

Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No 7, pp. 144-147, September 2009

REVIEW

Michael A. Peters and Tina (A.C.) Besley (eds.), *Why Foucault? New Directions in Educational Research* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), ISBN: 978-0820478906

Why Foucault? New Directions in Educational Research seems to be well-suited for two particular audiences and purposes. For those engaged in the academic study of education who are either unfamiliar with Foucault or who have not found his work applicable to educational scholarship, it will introduce Foucauldian ideas. To Foucault scholars from other fields, it will direct their attention to educational studies. In other words, depending on the audience, this book can be seen as primarily Foucauldian and/or educational. At the same time, there is little doubt that these dual purposes are not mutually exclusive and have many reciprocal and overlapping interests. Though there are many other potential uses for this collection, in this review I will focus on the range of interpretations that orbit around Foucault's relation to the subject, provide a few remarks on the notion of "educational research," and conclude with my overall impression of the book.

In the Introduction, the editors address the titular question "Why Foucault?" in the more attenuated interrogation "Why read Foucault today?" In other words, they raise the question of whether Foucault (and poststructuralist thought in general) is still necessary and important. Yet, they conclude that "the question is too melodramatic" and seems to be more a matter of reception than one of finality or importance. They reframe the issue as "a hermeneutical question in the philosophy of reading and the sociology of knowledge and culture." (1)

Addressing this hermeneutical question, the editors put the initial question aside and begin to organize their collection according to the complexities of identifying, situating, and naming Foucault himself—whom they refer to as "Mr. Elastic Man" (3)—and the cacophony of interpretations, trends, and disciplinary (ab)uses of his work. That is to say, for the editors, this international survey of Foucauldian treatments of educational issues is not for the sake of variety, pure and simple; indeed, the scholarly breadth of the book is the methodological key to their project. Appropriately, then, they offer a wide range of interpretations from respected scholars in the field of educational studies. Peters also dedicates chapter 12 to discussing the many-sidedness of Foucault in Anglo-American discourse.

As diverse as the essays in this collection are, chapters 2 through 5 present an intelligible progression of Foucauldian interpretations that encapsulate both the stronger and weaker points of this book. This sequence begins with two essays (chapters 2 and 3) that use Foucault to consider the disciplinary aspects of schooling. Those chapters give way to the next pair of essays (chapters 4 and 5), which focus on the confessional elements of pedagogical practice as they substitute for more overt disciplinary practices, and begin to address the formation of the self. These four chapters describe the range of Foucauldian analysis in this book as beginning with the view of education and schooling as they relate to questions of power and discipline—educational “regimes of truth”—and ending in the relation of education to the ascetic and ethical constitution of the self—educational “games of truth.”

These differences between the “regime” and the “game” (also noted by Peters in chapter 12), that is, between the discipline-power/knowledge and the formation-of-the-self Foucault, are well-known in recent Foucauldian scholarship and vary in many ways. In these essays, each interpretation seems to turn on the author’s own navigation (or lack thereof) of these interpretations. As sharp and polemical as this apparent difference may seem, I think it is important to emphasize that it need not be construed as a dualism. The fact that the subject is constituted in her relations with power—the core of Foucault’s notion of subjectification and subjection—appears to be a dynamic relationship that is spoiled and distorted when we try to isolate it. Nonetheless, it is possible to ignore this relational aspect of Foucault’s thought by assuming that the relation need not address the subject as something real and serious for Foucault.

An interesting treatment of this polemic is in chapter 6 where James Wong addresses this interpretive difference by discussing Foucault’s relationship to the Enlightenment through the Kantian notion of “critical ontology.” This chapter provides a unique view of Foucault’s relation to the subject from his affinity—not his disdain—for the Enlightenment, as described by Kant’s 1794 essay, *What is Enlightenment?* This is an interesting argument that differs from the usual chronological argument that Foucault gradually left behind “power” or, as he put it (and which was [is] cited more than once in the book), he “[insisted] too much on the technologies of domination and power.” (57) Wong argues that “Foucault takes from Kant’s essay the idea that the hallmark of enlightenment is the attitude of challenging assumptions about what we know and how we act.” (72) This leads to Foucault’s critical ontology, which Wong uses to question the developmental model of childhood, which is not a simple matter of how power is exerted; more than that, the key point rests in how such techniques constitute the subject, in this case, the “developmental” child.

This particular essay (and other ones in this collection) provides insightful views into different prisons and other madneses. These essays, at their best, allow the reader to imagine other modern institutions and technologies—education and

schooling comes to mind most straightforwardly in this collection—that are not merely ripe for “new” Foucauldian analysis, but rather, such institutions and technologies were already present in Foucault’s general critique of modernity, albeit without the elaboration he gave to prisons, madness, sexuality etc. To say otherwise, to describe education as something “new” to Foucault, would be the equivalent of contending that Foucault’s genealogies were absent from the ethos of Nietzsche’s genealogical project and general critique of modernity. These critiques of modernity—including the erasure of modern “man”—cannot be adequately explained without considering the full range of issues that include power *and* the subject, something we must say about both Foucault and Nietzsche.

The essays that leave out the constitution of the self in their analysis and focus exclusively on power and discipline lack depth (for the reasons I mentioned above) and, in the end, seem outdated, insistent on a Foucauldian hermeneutic that leaves too much of his work unconsidered. Now, it is certainly important to see education, schooling, and pedagogical norms etc. as disciplinary practices in which power is present. However, if that is the answer to “Why Foucault?” in this book, then, it may be a stale answer we have heard (again and again) before. In the chapters where this is the case, I think that without losing different points of emphasis and without instituting a permanent and “real” Foucault, some of the work in this book requires a deeper consideration of the opening question (“Why Foucault?”) in relation to the subject. This seems to the point of Foucault’s own interest—wherever and whenever one considers this interest to be in the Foucauldian *corpus*—in the ethics, ascetics, and care of the self and the games of truth. Thankfully, most of the essays deal with these issues at length.

What I have left out so far is the very idea of “research” and, more specifically, what this book means by “educational research.” James Marshall raises this question in chapter 2 and offers a direct and insightful response to it. He writes, “The title for this book suggests that we need new directions for educational research. Michel Foucault, however, would not have offered “new directions” for educational research, though he might have offered suggestions as to how research might be done.” (15, emphasis in original) This seems right, as “new directions” has a certain ring to it that sounds very non-Foucauldian (although there is sure to be a nuanced interpretation that could justify it). But, regarding the “research” element of the title, to those familiar with what is usually considered to be “educational research”—or, to put it another way, the modern-scientific studies that go on in modern universities (places that are outlined and investigated in chapter 10) and affect public schools and their policies—it goes without saying that Foucault would have had very little patience with such rigid regimes and games of truth. But, lest anyone be deceived about what is normative in educational research today, “educational research” is used in this book in a way that might be better put by borrowing Derrida’s description of democracy in the *Politics of Friendship* (2005) as a

venir: educational research-to-come. Unfortunately, there is much more that could be, and perhaps should be, said about this matter in this book.

All in all, though the essays are as advertised—that is, they are a diverse arrangement of theoretical and cultural interpretations of Foucault written by an international cast of leading scholars of educational studies—the dismissal by the editors of the titular question in the beginning appears premature and the corresponding subtitle is misleading. “Why Foucault?” in education is a deep question that does not simply ask about the relevance and need for more or less Foucault; it also asks the critical ontological question central to his own project: How do educational discourses and pedagogical practices serve in the constitution of modern subjects? So, leaving that question aside for a range of options to better describe Foucault and his spectrum of intellectual traditions might have been premature. More importantly, it may obscure the point that when considering the broad range of Foucault’s project, any genealogical investigation does not end with an analysis of power; there is more to be said that brings us to the question of constitution—a question that can be addressed and approached in a variety of ways but cannot, to my mind, be ignored. Also, as Marshall pointed out earlier, “New Directions in Educational Research” is a mysterious, if not inappropriate, subtitle without subsequent deeper reflection and explanation of what it means. This, of course, says very little about the pages that follow the title and subtitle, but it seems worth mentioning.

Putting aside that minor issue, the contents of the book do provide a rich array of resource for the purposes I mentioned at the beginning of this review. For someone interested in seeing how educational scholarship might be affected—and disturbed—by Michel Foucault’s seminal thought, this collection will stimulate new ways of thinking about education. For the Foucauldian scholar who has yet to consider the implications of Foucauldian analysis in the specific, yet broad, area of educational discourse, this collection will be stimulating in both harmonious and agonistic ways that parallel and augment Foucault’s own genealogical treatments of other modern institutions. And this can only be a good thing for Foucauldian and educational studies.

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