

## REVIEW

**Mark G. E. Kelly, *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 2009), ISBN: 978-0203883747**

Mark Kelly's *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* embarks on the formidable task of presenting Foucault's thought as a coherent political philosophy. It is formidable because of Foucault's personal dislike of viewing his work as a coherent oeuvre, as well as the well-known shifts that characterise the way in which his work developed. Nevertheless, Kelly's book manages to deliver on its promise and provides an interesting and convincing reconstruction of Foucault's political philosophy suitable both for beginners and more advanced readers. However, the stated scope of the book naturally limits the way it deals with Foucault's less politically influenced writings, especially regarding his very early work. The book is divided into seven laconically titled chapters dealing with key concepts essential to Foucault's philosophy, making it very accessible and valuable for those looking for more information on specific elements of Foucault's thought. In what follows, I will go through the chapters in their chronological order focusing on what I consider to be some of their most interesting or controversial claims. If the development of Foucault's thought could be characterised as a roller-coaster ride filled with abrupt twists and turns, Kelly's main concern in his book is to make visible the tracks that guide it and constitute the fundamentals of his political ontology.

Although Kelly claims that the first chapter of the book should be considered the least interesting in the book, I found it important because it explores the methodological foundations of Foucault's political thought, about which Kelly also makes subsequent remarks in the latter chapters of the book. The first chapter provides a reading of Foucault's epistemology and ontological orientation, emphasising its materialism. However, he makes it clear that Foucault's materialism is of a very different order than what is generally understood as materialism, the difference of which is highlighted in Foucault's archaeological writings on the concept of event and statement. For Kelly, Foucault's materialism of the incorporeal provides an ontological basis for his entire thought. Furthermore, this materialism is reflected in Foucault's epistemology, which emphasises the violent interconnection between discourse and extra-discursive reality. Ultimately, in Kelly's opinion the notion of extra-discursive reality with which discourse is in continuous contact constitutes "a constant feature of Foucault's thought." (29) Though this, together with his later remarks on Foucault's being a realist rather than a nominalist (86), might put Kelly at odds with those who tend to view Foucault as social constructionist, I found Kelly's emphasis on the materialist aspects of Foucault's thought important, especially against such interpretation that misleadingly exaggerates the discursive construction of things at the cost of neglecting the way how, for

instance, power relations operate in a very material way and are irreducible to language.

The two subsequent chapters (chapter 2 and 3) deal with power and here Kelly provides some thought-provoking claims regarding Foucault's conception of power. First of all, Kelly sees Foucault's way of developing his ideas of power as, ultimately, a trajectory towards a future theory of power, despite Foucault's insistence on his method's being opposed to theory. According to Kelly (34), Foucault's scepticism is not directed at the possibility of a theory of power as such but rather on the possibility of forming an a priori theory of power without any empirical investigation. In addition, in Kelly's opinion Foucault's account of power is ultimately transhistorical. But this does not mean that power would simply refer to some timeless substance existing outside history, but is instead something more complex than that. Kelly acknowledges that Foucault emphasises the purely methodological role of concepts of power and knowledge, but also points out how power is related to a Nietzschean ontology that is based on a struggle between forces that form the conditions of the possibility of history. (39–40) This means that power is in a sense transcendental since it ultimately refers to relations of force that are in a state of constant flux and can only be studied through the different historical forms they happen to take. Hence, changes in power do not happen at the level of its form but instead concern the modes it takes during different historical periods. (40)

In the second chapter, on power, Kelly claims, in accordance with his earlier arguments about the transhistorical nature of power, that Foucault's view of power is ultimately coherent. Kelly here devotes especial attention to repudiating interpretations of Foucault that emphasise the meaning of the shift from Foucault's views on power as warlike phenomena to his late 70's emphasis on governmental forms of power, most notably made by such scholars as Thomas Lemke.<sup>1</sup> Pace Lemke, Kelly does not see this as implying two mutually exclusive models of power. According to him, the shift from power as war to power as games where the adversaries are trying to conduct each other's conduct happens merely at the metaphorical level and cannot be interpreted as a change in the models of power itself. Instead, what can be seen as a basis for both modes of power can be found in the relation between forces as a condition of possibility for power relations to exist. (58–59) Though Foucault drops the description of power as war after employing the notion of government, what is at stake according to Kelly is a more accurate re-elaboration of what was already presented earlier, since both war and government ultimately find their basis in a conception of power as a clash between forces. Kelly's ultimate claim is that war and government should be considered as two different *perspectives* on power, the former being macroscopic, whereas the latter is "microphysical." (62) This move from war to government is correctly interpreted by Kelly as a result of Foucault's growing interest in the state and its role in the network of power relations, a concern he had earlier bracketed when reacting against the Marxist tendency to privilege state power. However, Kelly notes that Foucault's way of analysing the state from a governmental perspective is not intended to replace Marxist analysis but to function as a corrective to it.

The chapter on subjectivity (chapter 4) is aimed against such interpretations of Foucault,

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Lemke, *Eine Kritik der politischen Vernunft: Foucaults Analyse der modernen Gouvernementalität*, (Argument Verlag:: Hamburg/Berlin, GE, 1997).

recently presented, *inter alia*, by Eric Paras,<sup>2</sup> which tend to claim that Foucault's later philosophy is characterised by an abrupt repudiation of his earlier antihumanism and the introduction of a subject somehow external to power. Though Kelly disagrees with Paras, the main target of his criticism, is, however, Judith Butler, whose Foucault sees the subject as a pure effect of power. Kelly locates correctly Butler's (mis)understanding of subjectivity in Foucault's thought as originating from her tendency to equate subjectivation as an active process of self-constitution with the passive subjection (*assujettissement*) to power. (87–89) Kelly's counter-argument emphasises the materiality of the subject by relying on a Nietzschean-Deleuzian understanding of the body as composed of a multiplicity of sub-individual forces that are folded upon themselves in subjectivation. Kelly is quick to distinguish Foucault from Deleuze though and emphasises how Foucault's demand for the promotion of new forms of subjectivity is something different from Deleuzian deterritorialisation, since deterritorialisation presupposes that individuality is something that is harmfully imposed on us and hence "[...] constitutes a harking after an authentic existence (103)," which Kelly deems as alien to Foucault. Instead of deterritorialisation Foucault, Kelly avers, is concerned about resisting the ways in which individualisation is governed. Though I agree with Kelly that equating Foucaultian ethics with Deleuze's would be misleading, I found his point here rushed, taking into consideration, for instance, the notion of an "outside thought" that Deleuze considered to be one of the key themes in Foucault's philosophy and that also resonates, albeit uneasily, with certain Deleuzian themes. Moreover, it could be questioned in my opinion, whether deterritorialisation really has authenticity as its goal. In Kelly's opinion, however, deterritorialisation is not compatible with Foucault's interest in exploring "unlimited possibilities of perpetrating violence against reality." (148) Unfortunately, he does not elaborate the differences between Deleuze and Foucault any further, which leaves readers interested in both their mutual points of convergence and disagreements somewhat empty-handed. However, a critical and exhaustive assessment of Deleuze's way of interpreting Foucault is obviously outside the scope of Kelly's book.

The final chapters of the book are devoted to resistance (chapter 5), critique (chapter 6) and ethics (chapter 7). Here Kelly examines resistance as something co-extensive but transversally opposed to power. He argues how one of the key elements of power and resistance is the notion of will, which provides an element of unpredictability and purposeful resistance to power relations. However, the notion of will should be understood in a relatively broad sense since even the sub-individual forces that form the subject have their own "wills." (118) Kelly does not, however, dwell too much on this somewhat problematic notion, partly because of Foucault's own ambiguity and reluctance to elaborate his way of using the term. Most of the chapter on resistance is devoted to the problem of co-option which Kelly identifies operating in two different ways. In the trivial sense co-option refers to the fact how all of our actions are always born in a given socio-political milieu and will always be part of it. However, this is to be distinguished from the dangerous form of co-option where supposed acts of resistance end up reproducing or supporting the relations they were meant to challenge. Indeed, distinguishing between emancipatory resistance and co-opted resistance forms the fundamental task of Foucaultian critique. (123) Now, resistance as emancipation does not mean getting rid of power as such but should be understood more narrowly as combating

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<sup>2</sup> See Eric Paras, *Foucault 2.0. Beyond Power and Knowledge* (New York, Other Press, 2006).

specific forms of domination that ossify power relations. This also means that Foucaultian critique is hostile to all utopianism and does not have any need to subscribe to an alternative vision. (132) Furthermore, critique plays a double-role depending on whether we are dealing with macroscopic or microscopic resistance. From the macroscopic perspective critique has to do with analysing power relations, which is a task Foucault assigns to philosophy as an historical investigation of the relationship between politics and truth. From the microscopic perspective critique is linked to ethical practice as a resistant response to forms of government that strive towards the creation of new modes of subjectivation. Kelly locates two ways how the concept of ethics is employed in Foucault's thought where ethics is characterised as "practices of self-relation," as well as "permanent resistance." (151) These two aspects, however, overlap when ethics encounters politics and, in Kelly's opinion, ethics, as deliberate practices of self-formation, represents a solution to the problem of identifying subjection with subjugation by offering alternatives modes of subjection without recourse to scientific knowledge of the self. (158–159)

Despite its relatively brief length, *Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* is a thought-provoking elaboration of Foucault's political thought. According to it, Foucault's political philosophy is fundamentally coherent and guided by a materialism that is aimed to correct the shortcomings and misleading simplifications made in Marxist thought. Indeed, though Kelly explicitly states how his intention is not to situate Foucault along the philosophical map, but instead to provide a reading of him in his own terms, it could be argued that sketching the relation between Marxism and Foucault's political thought acts as an implicit motif in the book. Unfortunately Kelly does not attempt to elaborate the kind of Marxism it could be compatible with in a detailed manner. Another concern I had with Kelly's book was that it does not engage adequately with the relevance of Foucault's political thought to our present, characterised, for instance, by Deleuze as a shift from disciplinary societies to societies of control. Analysing the benefits as well as the potential shortcomings of Foucaultian critique in relation to our own present in a more detailed manner would have provided an important addition to an otherwise informative and well-written book. Nevertheless, *Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* deals with one of the most important and immediate aspects of Foucault's thought in an interesting manner and will be valuable to all those interested in Foucault and politics.

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