

# Foucault Studies

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## REVIEW

**Johanna Oksala, *How To Read Foucault* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008), ISBN: 978-0393328196**

One of the virtues of Johanna Oksala's book *How To Read Foucault* is that it manages to do so much in such a small space and do it so well. Every serious student and practitioner of philosophy knows that short introductory books of the "so and so made simple" type have a long-standing and well-justified reputation for being of little value, often doing more harm than good by abandoning the subtlety and complexity of the concepts they claim to represent. This book is one of a growing number of texts that are exceptions to that rule, an achievement for which Oksala deserves praise as a writer, educator, and Foucault scholar. Credit must also go to the editor, Simon Critchley, for his approach to producing a series of short introductory monographs designed to help readers gain a trustworthy entry into the works of challenging writers. At least in the present case, his formula for the *How To Read* series is a successful one: each chapter begins with a lengthy quote from the original author, followed by careful examination, explication, and elaboration and then by suggestions for further reading, all in less than one hundred pages. In the editor's foreword Critchley writes: "in order to get close to what a writer is all about, you have to get close to the words they actually use and be shown how to read these words." This sounds simple enough, but it is clearly no easy task.

Another exception to the rule that there are no worthwhile short introductions to philosophy is Gary Gutting's contribution to Oxford's series of texts: *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*. But whereas the focus of Gutting's book draws upon the significance of Foucault's biography as an expression of his life's work,<sup>1</sup> Oksala's book focuses more on preparing the reader for the actual *experience* of reading Foucault. Of course, the irony of any such "how to read" book on Foucault is that it should not avoid acknowledging the fact that Foucault was committed to the idea that there is no single true, accurate, or right way to read a text and that we might do well to concern ourselves least of all with an author's intentions as a guarantee of that singular truth. As Oksala points out in her discussion of Foucault's analyses of literature, authors tend to function as historically contingent

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<sup>1</sup> A reading strategy that, it should be pointed out, is almost diametrically opposed to one that simplistically and speculatively reduces an author's work to his or her biography, James Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault* being a case in point.

principles of limitation on the discourses they work with and produce. Texts are neither static nor closed but continue to unfold and refold, revealing new facets and dimensions while obscuring others as they are re-encountered over time and in ever-changing situations. Every reading or re-reading of any literary or philosophical text is always something of a singular experience. This is particularly true when one encounters writing as rich and complex as Foucault's. Just as he had hoped, his writings have come to be recognized as a toolbox with a great variety of tools to be reused in any number of unforeseen ways. In her introduction Oksala makes the point that "...the use of a tool is always determined by the context, and ultimately the goal of our work." What this book does is open up that toolbox and carefully lay out some of what have become the most popular tools while briefly describing some of the ways they have thus far been put to work by cultural critics, AIDS activists, historians, feminists, social theorists, artists, political scientists, philosophers, and others. In the process Oksala invites us to think about picking up those tools and beginning to use them ourselves in new ways to be determined by our own particular contexts, specific problems, and limits of imagination. As she puts it in the book's second paragraph: "To get closer to Foucault's intent, it helps if one is willing to question the ingrained social order, give up all truths firmly fixed in stone, whilst holding on to a fragile commitment to freedom."<sup>2</sup> For the newcomer to Foucault this may very well sound like a tall order, if not somewhat facetious, but by the end of the book Oksala manages to successfully demonstrate how such willingness has not only been possible, but continues to be a necessity for those who are motivated by questions of freedom.

The organization of Oksala's book is more or less chronological, tracing Foucault's thought as it evolved from a concern with the archaeology of knowledge to a genealogical description of power/knowledge and, finally, an examination of ethical self-fashioning. Along the way she also manages to give due emphasis to important aspects of Foucault's work that today are often overlooked, such as his analysis of the philosophical implications of experimental language in *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*. In addition, many of Oksala's choices of quotations to begin each chapter are refreshingly unexpected, yet they always manage to capture the essential concerns of the aspects of Foucault's work she wishes to discuss. In a mere ninety-nine pages she succeeds in underscoring the power, depth, and breadth of Foucault's thought as it moved restlessly and unpredictably from one text to the next, all the while noting that there is a common thread or set of concerns that animated all of his writings from the earliest efforts in existential psychology to the last works dealing with the care of the self. For Oksala, what ties all of these diverse inquiries and forays together is Foucault's concern with the history of the present and "opening up spaces of freedom that make a singular way of life possible."<sup>3</sup>

Oksala is an astute and fair-minded Foucault scholar who knows the history of Foucault interpretation and is familiar with the diverse uses to which his work has been

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<sup>2</sup> Johanna Oksala, *How To Read Foucault* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

put, both past and present. What she offers is a straightforward report on some of the kinds of effects and experiences that have been produced through contemporary readings of Foucault. She also succeeds in introducing and addressing some of the more serious and circumspect criticisms of Foucault's work that have emerged over the decades in which his popularity and the recognition of his significance have increased. *How To Read Foucault* is now the first book I would recommend to anyone who is interested in getting an accurate overview of Foucault's life work and a reliable pathway into any one of his books. Those who are already familiar with Foucault will also benefit from this concise and cogent portrayal of one of the most important contemporary bodies of thought and the multifaceted ways in which it continues to be utilized.

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