

# Foucault Studies

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## REVIEW

**Judith Revel, *Michel Foucault: Expériences de la pensée* (Paris: Bordas, 2005), ISBN: 2047299446.**

In this path-breaking volume, Judith Revel sets herself the task of constructing a “genealogy of Foucault’s thought” (12); a genealogy, then, of the thinking of a figure whose own *métier* was genealogical inquiry. For Revel, there is an “internal coherence” to what so many have seen as the “radical discontinuity of the Foucauldian way [*parcours*]” (12), a coherence due to his reading of history as radically “discontinuous,” filled with breaks and leaps, so that “...the only imaginable constant is that of a discontinuity understood as continuous change...” (33) Those breaks and leaps upon which the Foucauldian genealogies focus, involve the plurality of *épistémès*, and the successive transformations in the “rules” for “speaking truth” [*dire-vrai*], in power relations, and the government of others, and in the construction of subjectivity. According to Revel, it was the reading of Nietzsche that was the key to Foucault’s critique of a linear and teleological vision of history contained in a certain reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, in his rejection of a trans-historical vision of the subject contained in phenomenology (Husserlian and Sartrean), and in his distance from structuralism, with which Revel claims Foucault was never enmeshed. For Revel, then, Foucault’s preoccupation was with “the irruption of a non-necessary ‘singularity’” in history: the event. It is genealogy that makes it possible to *problematize* our own reality, to question the singularity of the historical forms and modes of a given social, economic, political or cultural complex or network [*dispositif*], and to constitute what Foucault designated as a “critical ontology of ourselves.”

One of those historical breaks that a Foucauldian genealogy delineated occurred in the West in the nineteenth century, with “...the emergence of a series of bio-powers applied both to individuals in their singular existence and to populations... and finally the appearance of technologies of behavior [that], therefore, form a configuration of power that, according to Foucault, is still with us at the end of the twentieth century.” (155) These bio-powers, congealed into a “biopolitics” that constitute nothing less than new power relations based on the political administration of the life of whole populations based on normalization, the birth of what Revel terms a “social medicine,” indeed a new mode of *assujettissement* or subjectification, and new modes of governmentality.

Two conceptual problems arise here in Revel's scintillating account of the Foucauldian way, one that she herself explicitly raises, and one that seems to me to arise from her own account.

For Revel, Foucault's genealogy of biopolitics designates *two* very different, though clearly linked, historical developments. On the one hand, biopolitics designates the way in which new power relations are constituted in the nineteenth century, new modes for the government of individuals and populations, and new modes of subjectification. On the other hand, Revel points out that for Foucault, biopolitics "also designates – inversely – the manner in which it is possible to respond to those powers [*pouvoirs*] over life, that is to say, the conditions of possibility for a practice of freedom that would be rooted in a power [*puissance*] of life." (232-233) That Foucault uses the same term, biopolitics for a mode in which one governs others, and for a mode in which one can resist that government, is an important insight, one that readers of Foucault need to utilize. However, Revel here implicitly raises another, no less important issue, when she speaks of powers over life and power of life, and uses two different terms to designate them, *pouvoir* and *puissance*. The French language, like Latin, makes such a distinction, but it is completely lacking in English, which raises a problem both for translators and readers of Foucault. *Pouvoir* as power *over* and *puissance* as power *to*, the former linked to domination, norms, and control, the latter linked to creativity, productivity, and resistance, each play important and distinct roles in the Foucauldian way or path, roles to which Revel has alerted us. In philosophy and political theory that distinction has an important history, shaping Spinoza's *Ethics*, for example, or Antonio Negri's *Empire*.

Not only does Revel show that *puissance* is the response to *pouvoir*, but she also raises the prospect, explored by Foucault with his *ethical* turn, around 1980, that *puissance* is linked to the possibilities of "an invention of self [*invention de soi*] and of self with others." (229) But here, a conceptual and linguistic problem of her making seems to arise. Revel utilizes the term *subjectivation* for the construction of human beings as *subjects*, both as "objectivized" [*objectivés*] subjects, and as "constituting oneself as a subject of one's own existence;" as the subject that is *assujetti*, subjectified, and as the subject that arises from "a certain number of self-techniques." (174) It not only seems to me that using the same term to designate two different modes through which the subject is constituted can sow confusion, but that Foucault himself used different terms to designate these very distinct ways in which the subject shows up. Indeed, in the index to Foucault's *Dits et Écrits*, *subjectivation* makes its appearance only with the final Foucault, with what Revel terms his "double perspective, ethical and aesthetic." (210) When Foucault spoke of power relations, government of others, discipline, control, normalization, he spoke of *assujettissement*, for which sub-

jectification seems an acceptable translation. It is certainly the case that subjectification is not simply domination or control; that it contains *resistance*, the resistance of the one who is subjectified, as one of its elements. And, as Revel compellingly shows, it is in the resistance to power [*pouvoir*], in struggle, that practices of freedom can pass over to an invention of self; and to that other history, "...a history of *modes of subjectivation*." However, a clearer linguistic or terminological demarcation would clarify that precise point.

Revel's book, in my view, may well be the most important work on Foucault's trajectory to have appeared since Dreyfus and Rabinow's *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Though it lacks Foucault's own role as a third "writer," which is such an important component of that earlier work, Revel's volume takes Foucault's *parcours* from a history of *épistémès* and *dispositifs* to the history of the invention of self, permitting us to see the whole sweep of the Foucauldian way. One can only hope that this book will be soon translated into English, and spark new debates.

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