Foucault Studies

REVIEW

Judith Revel, *Dictionnaire Foucault* (Paris: Ellipses, 2008), ISBN: 978-2729830939.

Judith Revel's *Dictionnaire Foucault*, the latest of the *Dictionnaire* series, is a surprising book because, at a cursory glance, it is difficult to know what to expect. Divided into short two- to three-page sections on a variety of topics in the Foucaultian *oeuvre*, it appears at first to be too superficial for a scholarly treatment of any single issue and thus instead to be intended as a text for students looking for an introduction to Foucault's work. But the alphabetised layout and lack of thematic guidance throughout the text makes even this purpose unlikely. However, after digesting a large part of the book the reader begins to understand that the book has much to offer both student and scholar alike: it provides an informative summary and overview of Foucault's ideas and combines both elementary and advanced elements of his thought. Within the scope of just 170 pages, Revel manages to give an excellent account of a number of key Foucaultian terms, locating them within his broader work and giving a detailed description of them.

Revel is the perfect candidate for undertaking the task of writing a dictionary of Foucault. Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris I Sorbonne, Revel has written a number of articles and books on Foucault and is a member of the research project *La bibliothèque foucauldienne: Michel Foucault au travail*. She has written principally on Foucault's literary period of the 1950s and early 60s and his movement towards a study of biopower and the processes of *subjectivation* in the late 1970s and 80s – two axes of interpretation that she brings to bear on the present study. But perhaps her most defining autobiographical feature is the strong influence of radical Italian thought (Revel is a translator and collaborator of Antonio Negri), which leads her to a Deleuzian reading of Foucault.

Revel introduces the book by identifying three methodological considerations that will guide her study. She starts by outlining two problematic ways of reading the development of Foucault's thought. First, she wishes to avoid a reading that divides his work into strict periods (archaeology, genealogy, ethics), sharply delineated from each other. Second, she rejects a reading that seeks to identify an unbroken line of continuity that runs throughout his work. Instead, Revel wishes to return to the "problematic" dimension of his work. Foucault's task was never to give clear-cut solutions to philosophical problems. For Foucault, philosophical labour was to create a series of "problematisations" that would make previously

taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting both difficult and dangerous. As Foucault created new terminology for dealing with the particular problems he was facing, he would test and modify them in his writing before they would take on a definitive form. He would then return to them in order to critique, modify and even abandon them in a continual process of displacement. Revel claims that this style could be read as a radical critique of the traditional linearity of thought and "systematicity" of philosophy. The challenge is to extract a sense of coherence from his work that does not exclude movement, rupture, discontinuity, but rather pays close attention to the twisting and folding back within which his thought evolves. It is the process of this development, through the flow and movement of his concepts that Revel seeks to capture while still giving an intelligible account of his work.

Secondly, Foucault's work is now being analysed and critiqued by a number of readers who have begun to use his concepts in domains to which Foucault did not direct his studies. Revel notes that where possible she would like to trace the development of these concepts in other authors. However, this is a task she rarely pursues within the book. Thirdly, in addition to including many key terms developed in Foucault's work, *Dictionnaire Foucault* also includes entries on a number of other authors who have been associated with Foucault. Revel does not wish to trace the precise influence that each author has had over Foucault, but rather to outline a brief encounter they may have shared, a polemical debate between them, or an interesting overlap in their work. These final thirty pages of the book dealing with such authors should be read more as a preliminary cartography of interesting figures whose work intersects with Foucault's, rather than as a genealogy of his influences.

Because of the nature of the book it is impossible to give a broad overview of its themes in a brief review, so I will restrict myself to highlighting three points among the many interesting remarks Revel makes throughout the work. These will be on the topics of literature, structuralism and *subjectivation*.

It can be easy to forget that Foucault was part of a generation of students in France that undertook an intense intellectual training in order to become "total" intellectuals for whom a strong literary background was essential even for a career in philosophy. Foucault is primarily known in the English-speaking world as a theoretician of power, but literary references abound throughout his earlier work. Foucault was most closely associated with a group of young writers who published in *Tel Quel*. He refers extensively to the history of literature and pays special attention to literary experimentation. Yet from 1970 on references to literature are for the most part dropped from his work in favour of political analysis. Revel seeks to show how this should not be seen as an abandonment of earlier concepts but as a continuation of many of the themes developed during Foucault's literary period. For example, the relationship between *dispositifs* of

power and strategies of resistance can be seen as a mirror of the linguistic categories discourse/transgression developed by Foucault through an engagement with Blanchot and Bataille.

In 1963 Foucault published an article on Bataille entitled "*Préface à la transgression*," in which he explores the notion of a counter-discourse that he holds aside from other works published during the same period. The encounter with Bataille is important as it introduces Foucault to the notion of transgression understood as "*passage à la limite,*" or the ability to breakthrough and escape from totalising structures such as that of the modern *épistémè* he describes in *Les mots et les choses*. Foucault is aware of the problem of the dialectical structure he creates in speaking of transgression as an act which ends up confirming the very limit it denies. This is perhaps why he later turns to Blanchot in a 1966 article, "*La pensée du dehors.*" The notion of *dehors*, or "outside," is viewed as another possible avenue of escape from the structures of power/knowledge that are explored in Foucault's archaeological works. However, Foucault later denounces any understanding of "outside of power" as a myth and the lingering elements of a phenomenological romanticism. Revel believes Foucault is ultimately right to discard the concept of *dehors*, but sees a striking similarity between this previous literary notion and his eventual development of strategies of resistance through the creation of new forms of life within a grid of power relations.

A second task Revel undertakes in *Dictionnaire Foucault* is to dispel the notion that Foucault was ever a structuralist. She does see certain similarities between Foucault and the structuralists, most notably a critique of the figure of the subject in its phenomenological version and a desire to construct a precise field of relations, focusing on long-term effects through a study of historical determinations. Foucault himself notes the methodological considerations he shares with structuralism, such as a critique of humanism and a teleological vision of history, a fascination with linguistics, grammar, and the materiality of signs. Revel argues that one reason why Foucault has often been associated with the structuralists of the 1960s was the result of a particular interpretation of his concept of an *épistémè* as a unitary system, coherent and closed, a historical constraint implying a rigid over-determination of discourse. But for Revel, Foucault's *épistémè* was not the total sum of knowledge of a given period, nor the general framework under which research could be undertaken, but the relations, distances and gaps between multiple scientific discourses as an open field and space of dispersion. Foucault's work never contained the kind of ahistorical transcendents that were characteristic of structuralists' work. Nothing is given as an "absolute invariant," as analysis always took place within a specific historical period. However, Revel does not properly treat the suggestion that Foucault's notion of power itself is one such ahistorical invariant, choosing instead to discount such remarks as misguided. This is one of the continuing drawbacks of Revel's analysis: Foucault always seems to get it his own way.

Finally, Revel explores the Foucaultian notion of *subjectivation* within an understanding of the biopolitical. It is well known that towards the end of his life Foucault turned from an analysis of the ways in which humans are made objects of discourse towards the processes of *subjectivation*, whereby subjects establish a 'relation to the self' through which they can constitute themselves as subjects. Revel believes we should read this in connection with the concept of biopolitics as a call to create new forms of life – biopolitical resistance – in opposition to strategies of biopower that seek to control and dominate us. Revel follows Negri and other radical Italian readers of Foucault in drawing a distinction within the concept of the biopolitical between *biopower*, the strategies and techniques of a new form of power over life, and *biopolitics*, the emergence of sites of resistance within life itself, as a Spinozian affirmation of the power of life. This distinction is mirrored by the difference between the French *pouvoir* and *puissance* – both translated into English simply as "power." The difficulties of this approach are noted by Revel, but she believes that this is the most politically effective and faithful way in which to advance Foucault's project of a "critical ontology of ourselves." The term ontology does not appear much elsewhere in the Foucaultian *oeuvre* and most commentators see Foucault as attempting to avoid ontological language altogether. However, Revel views the project for a critical ontology of ourselves as containing an implicit ontology – the inherent creative, productive, insubordinate powers of life. For Revel it is "this production of new forms of life, of being new, that one could characterise as an ontology: a biopolitical ontology of resistance which affirms the intransitivity of freedom of human beings at the heart of relations of power." (101) However, it is difficult to say whether Foucault ever held such a belief himself or whether the insistence on the "omnipresence in Foucaultian texts of references to creation and invention" (134) and the distinction between biopower/biopolitics, *pouvoir/puissance* is not simply reading Foucault as a Deleuzian, as Revel would like him to be read. In any case, it is clear that we have returned to Bataille's concept of transgression, the productive effects of power and the possibility of going beyond them.

These are only some of a number of highly worthwhile arguments Revel raises in this incisive text, which should be read by any scholar interested in the changing fortunes of the Foucaultian legacy in an age dominated by forces that Foucault first identified in his concept of the biopolitical.

James Muldoon
Honours Student
Department of Politics
Monash University
Melbourne
Australia