Foucault Studies

REVIEW

Paul Veyne, *Foucault: Sa pensée, sa personne* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2008), ISBN: 978-2226179142

Paul Veyne is an historian of the Greco-Roman world, and was a long-time friend of Michel Foucault. He was also an important source for Foucault's thinking about the ancient world and its practices, both socio-political, but especially the history of its mentalités. The signs of Veyne's impact on Foucault abound, particularly in the last two volumes of The History of Sexuality, and, indeed, in all the writings, conferences, lectures, and interviews in the period following his "ethical" turn. While this book is not an account of their discussions over a period of many years, Veyne surely had a privileged vantage point from which to observe the trajectory of his friend's thinking.

Veyne reads Foucault as a later day sceptic, an heir to Montaigne, for example, but not a nihilist, inasmuch as he not only acknowledges, but also focuses on, the existence of practices of human freedom, even as he rejects any religious, metaphysical, or transcendental foundation for them. Not only are practices themselves transformed over and over throughout history, amorous or penal practices, to take two examples that so interested Foucault, but both the very meaning of those practices – pleasure, for example – as well as the conditions and the procedures or "rules" for the construction of true statements about them, undergo constant transformation: "Ontologically speaking, there exist only variations, the transhistorical theme just being a term devoid of meaning: Foucault is a nominalist, like Max Weber and any good historian." (19) Practices, sexual or penal, for example, surely exist, but we grasp, "see," or know them only on the bases of the ideas that the discourse of a given epoch permits us to have, that the discursive rules for making truth claims allow. Veyne is both careful and determined to point out that Foucault's scepticism is not self-refuting, that Foucault is not contradicting himself, that he is not simply saying "the truth is that there is no truth." What he is saying, according to Veyne, is that objects, things, events, social relations, do not exist "before any discourse," as "a pre-discursive referent," apart from any perspective. (75) Foucauldian scepticism, then, can be best seen as a perspectivism, the Nietzschean provenance of which seems clear.

Indeed, Veyne introduces this volume by evoking the image of the human being as a fish in a bowl: the person sees himself outside the bowl looking in, thinking she sees things as they "really" are, yet acknowledging that her thinking is delimited by existence within it. "The

sceptic is at one and the same time an observer, outside the bowl… and one of the… fish." (11) For Veyne, Foucault's scepticism puts him in the company (limiting ourselves to modern thinkers) of Nietzsche, William James, Wittgenstein, Ian Hacking, and Richard Rorty: "knowledge cannot be the faithful mirror of reality." (14) But Foucauldian scepticism, according to Veyne, pertains to the historicity, of the discourse, of the épistémè, of the fish bowl, so to speak; it is "…a scepticism about general ideas (but about them alone: not about singularities such as the innocence of Dreyfus or the exact date of the battle of Teutoburg)." (24) But, of course, it does not mean, for Foucault, that there is no "truth." Rather, as Veyne puts it: "False generalities and discourses change through time; but, in each epoch, they pass for truths, pass so well that the truth is reduced to dire vrai, to speaking in conformity to what is acknowledged to be true, and which will make one smile a century later." (24)[1] Indeed, Veyne tells us that Foucault hoped that his ideas would have an impact on the writing of history, that historians would acknowledge "that everything was historical, even truth." (37)

But, Veyne hastens to add, Foucault is not a relativist, a fan of the linguistic turn of philosophy and literary studies of the '60's, for which interpretation is infinite. Rather, "…a text is not its own interpretation, Foucault's basic method is to correctly understand what the author of the text wanted to say in his own time." (27) That said, however, don't we all read that text, any text, and see any event, ensconced within our own historically specific fish bowl? While that circumscribes what it is possible to "see," some fish bowls, for historically contingent reasons, create possibilities that are foreclosed in others, including the prospect of exploding the limits of a given discourse, and its truth game. Veyne points to the emergence of Christianity and then of Islam, as historical examples of just such transformative events, adding that "we only change fish bowls to find ourselves in a new fish bowl." (45) The bowl itself is what Foucault designated as "an historical a priori," which itself will be transformed, though the conditions for a transformation of a discourse, and of the dispositif to which it is linked, cannot be reduced to any one causal factor or an overarching pattern: "…discourses do not succeed one another according to the logic of a dialectic … and are not judged by a transcendental tribunal, between them there are only relations of fact, not of right, they supplant one another, their relations are those of strangers, of rivals. Struggle, and not reason, is an essential relation of thought." (58) Indeed, each such transformation, like the discourse and dispositif that is transformed, is singular.

So too is subjectivity. There is no a-historical subject, that creature of philosophical anthropology. But there are subjects; indeed an historical succession of them, and Veyne wants to show that for his friend, if one wants to grasp the subject as he/she is in a given civilization or "world," then "it's necessary to study history, the economy, society, linguistics and the whole dispositif which makes of him what he is at a given moment." (66) For Veyne, Foucault's provocative ending of his *The Order of Things*, "that man would be erased like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea," was not a rejection of subjectivity, but just of the hypostasis of an

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[1] As Veyne points out, Foucault told him that Nietzsche "…was not a philosopher of truth, but of *dire-vrai*." (140)

a-temporal Subject. Indeed, I would advance the claim that as early as 1966, then, we can already see the outlines of what would later become – for the final Foucault – "the invention of self."

However before turning to Veyne's discussion of Foucault's ethical turn, his views about the invention of self, I want to address a point that Veyne makes about Foucault's conception of "man" in relation to the Heideggerian vision – a point that raises questions about the possible limits of Foucauldian scepticism too.[2] In the last essay that he published, in April 1984, a reworking of his introduction to the English translation of Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological*, Foucault spoke of error [errer] and making mistakes as hallmarks of human being, seen as – in Veyne's words – an "erratic animal," (113) both in the sense of inconsistent and subject to error. While the variety of truth games or regimes of truth in human history might seem to confirm such a judgment, is this an indication that Foucault has found a "true truth" [vérité vraie] about the human condition or simply that we humans are all "prisoners of a discourse and of a dispositif, and free by half"? (112) I leave this as a question just because its pursuit would take us beyond the limits of Veyne's own text. What did animate Foucault, though, according to Veyne, was the conviction that humankind now "could live without myths, without religion, and without philosophy, without general truths about itself. Such was the Nietzschean revolution, of which he believed himself to be the continuator." (126) Yet, Foucault also recognized that he could not extricate himself from, or rise above, his own "world of discourse; the truths of genealogy, archaeology, are seen in the 'perspective' of the moment." (129)

Now back to the "subject," to subjectivity. Despite the claims that Foucault was a determinist, a structuralist, for whom the subject virtually did not exist, Veyne reads the dispositif as an "obstacle against which the subject manifests itself." (144) Indeed, the subject is both con-stituted within a complex of power-knowledge, and yet has the freedom [liberté] to resist it, though this subject is, of course, as Veyne tells us, neither a-historical, sovereign, nor natural: "… he is shaped in each epoch by the dispositif and the discourse of the time [and] by the reactions of his individual freedom..." (154) It is here that Veyne begins to speak of Foucault's ethical turn around 1980, where to his earlier focus on knowledge and power, he now adds a focus on the subject. Veyne uses the tem subjectivation to designate all the diverse modes in which the subject can, and has been constituted historically, and the term esthétisation [aesthe-ticization] to designate the "transformation of self by oneself." (156) Rather than engage in a terminological dispute here, I would interject that Veyne is, indeed, acknowledging the importance of clearly distinguishing between modes of self-constitution primarily as various forms of assujettissement and what the final Foucault designated as "invention of self," though elements of both are empirically present in varying degrees. What Veyne designates

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[2] In additions to his animus towards Heidegger, political and philosophical (the latter based on his view of the German thinker as committed to Absolutes), including his conviction that *Dasein* is the shepherd of being, Veyne also claims that Heidegger had virtually no influence on Foucault, other than to lead him to a reading of Nietzsche.

as "aestheticization" is, as he points out, nonetheless the child of its time, a possibility found in a determinate culture, not just invented at will. Michel Foucault saw our epoch, our culture, as one in which the breakdown of the authority of moral codes, and the modes of subjectification linked to them, has created an opening – though no more than that – for the emergence of an "aesthetic of existence," for a new invention of self. Paul Veyne's interpretation of his friend's thinking shows us how important Foucault can be in contributing to, in "aiding [such] a spontaneous process." (186)

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