

REVIEW

Raymond Aron. *Michel Foucault. Dialogue. Analyse de Jean-François Bert* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2007), ISBN: 978-2355260049

This brief book has two things to offer: first, a yet-to-be-published transcript of a conversation sociologist Raymond Aron and Michel Foucault had on French radio on May 8th 1967; second, an excellent (if short) interpretative essay that seeks to place this conversation within the context of French intellectual life in the 1960s. If the essay is a helpful and fine piece of scholarship, readers will learn little that is new about Foucault's thought from the dialogue itself—which lasted a mere nineteen minutes. The exact title of the exchange that took place on France Culture that day is "Dialogue sur Montesquieu, les origines, la nature et l'esprit de la sociologie, à propos du livre de Raymond Aron: *Les Étapes de la pensée sociologique*." The conversation was thus supposed to be a conversation about Aron and his latest book. But it quickly turned into something rather different: a critical exchange about Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*, and more specifically, about his notion of *épistémè*, his archeological method, his affinities with structuralism, and his thesis regarding the birth (and imminent death) of *l'homme*.

We see Foucault accept with grace having the tables turned on him and being the object—once more—of numerous attacks concerning his *archéologie des sciences humaines*. Amongst other things, Aron faults Foucault for overstating the *épistémès'* homogeneity, and for failing to acknowledge and *explain* the continuity between various phases in our intellectual history. The sociologist tries to drive home the latter criticism by pointing out the following: first, he argues that Montesquieu is a thinker who has one foot in traditional political philosophy and one foot in modern sociology. Montesquieu would thus belong to more than one Foucauldian *épistémè* simultaneously. Secondly, Aron notes that his own reflections on history and sociology cannot be seen as a radical break with the 19th century (as Foucault suggests), but rather, that his work builds on that century. The issue of historical continuity is certainly one of the major bones of contention between the two men: if, in my view, Michel Foucault could be seen as the high priest of *discontinuity*, Raymond Aron seems to deserve—with only a slight overstatement—the label of high priest of continuity. In an effort to address some of Aron's criticisms, Foucault humbly acknowledges that he did overstate the discontinuity between the *épistémès* in *Les mots et les choses*—but that this was a reasonable price to pay for what he was really concerned with: underscoring the "continuité synchronique," (21) the similarities between various disciplines within the same time period.

In one pivotal moment, Aron asks his interlocutor whether he, Foucault, does not invalidate his own thesis by belonging to (at least) two *épistémès* at once. (20) Aron pushes Foucault to identify the *épistémè* that he inhabits: “Where do you situate yourself?” (20) To this question, Foucault replies: “I will answer simply: today.” (22) It is with this in mind that one should approach philosophy according to Foucault: he or she who takes it up ought to be—as Foucault claimed on numerous occasions—the “diagnostician of today.” (22)

As I noted earlier, this dialogue is too brief for us to learn a great deal that is new and substantive about Foucault’s thought—we possess extensive interviews, letters and texts where Foucault addresses much more systematically the issue of historical discontinuity, the notion of *épistémè* and his relationship to structuralist thought. Nevertheless, this short exchange provides us with a vivid picture of the type of relationship the two men had: one that was filled with sympathy and mutual respect. (Earlier that spring, Foucault participated in Aron’s seminar at the Sorbonne, and the success of the seminar convinced Aron that he should pressure his colleagues to hire Foucault. As we know, Aron’s efforts were in vain. But Foucault and Aron would meet again: they would both join the Collège de France in 1970). More importantly perhaps, this exchange gives us a taste for what philosophical exchange at its best looks like: a *critical* activity that is filled with intellectual rigor, and yet one that is characterized by generosity and civility. Indeed, despite their profound disagreements, both men, throughout the dialogue, acknowledge with grace the strength of the other’s methodology and try to find common ground between themselves.

Let us turn now to the commentary of Jean-François Bert (which constitutes the bulk of this book). It is here that students of Foucault may learn something—particularly readers who may not be very familiar with French intellectual life in the mid-1960s and with the ins-and-outs of Foucault’s ambiguous connection to French structuralism. Bert’s essay begins with a clear and succinct summary of *Les mots et les choses*; it is a *précis* that seeks to remind us of the originality of the book—its archeological method and the exceptional importance it gave to archives and ‘minor works.’ (28-29) But the great polemics that followed the publication of *Les mots et les choses* could not simply have been caused by its demoting of ‘Great Books’ or its odd way of studying the soil on which our *savoirs* grew. As Bert points out, (31-32) it is Foucault’s barely hidden contempt for humanists and his disregard for traditional concerns of historians that earned him the ire of many critics (in particular Sartre). This concise overview of the book’s reception history is helpful (but readers who want a lengthier and more substantive discussion of all this should consult *Les Mots et les Choses de Michel Foucault. Regards critiques 1966-1968*—a recently published and comprehensive collection of the book reviews that were written in the late 1960s).

The subsequent sections of Bert’s essay seek to shed light on three major issues that are implicitly or explicitly raised by the dialogue between Aron and Foucault: the latter’s affinities with structuralism (an enduring, if somewhat tired, area of debate amongst Foucault scholars); the merits of the notion of *épistémè*; and finally, the elements of commonality between Aron and Foucault. Bert argues that it is not entirely inappropriate to associate *Les mots et les choses* with structuralism—not only in light of the main presupposition nested at the heart of this work (i.e. there is no sovereign, free-thinking subject)—but also in light of the fact that Foucault himself liked to encourage this association (at least for a while).

Now, if Foucault partially deserved the label of 'structuralist' in 1967, did he deserve that of 'relativist'? Bert answers in the affirmative, and suggests that there is indeed a "very subtle relativism in Foucault." (36) But let us not linger on this relativism, counsels Bert. Instead of stressing Foucault the relativist (as so many critics did in the months following the publication of *Les mots et les choses*), let us stress Foucault the "relationist." (40) Put differently, we ought to celebrate in Foucault his extraordinary ability to draw out relations everywhere they exist—between methodologies, between disciplines, between rulers and ruled, etc. Now, if on the matter of structuralism Bert is ready to take a clear (if subtle) position, he refuses to 'solve' the dispute between Aron and Foucault on the issue of (historical) continuity and discontinuity. (44) For Bert, it is here that one finds the crux of Aron's critique of Foucault: Aron sees the *épistémès* as excessively 'static,' without movement. In his view, Foucault's archeology does not show (nor account for) progressions and continuities (Aron articulates all this in great detail in his *D'une sainte famille à l'autre* (1968)). (42-44)

Finally, at the end of his essay, Bert proposes to draw out various elements of similarity between Aron and Foucault—a rather interesting move given the fact that the two men are typically seen as polar opposites. According to Jean-François Bert, Aron and Foucault shared a great attentiveness to structures and power relations, a deep interest in journalism and social activism, and also a strong commitment to skepticism. (48-52) Both men embraced—to borrow Nicolas Baverez's felicitous phrase—an "épistémologie du soupçon." If some readers may protest having Aron and Foucault brought so close together, all will certainly appreciate the clarity and elegance of Jean-François Bert's short essay.

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