

Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No. 10, pp. 3-6, November 2010

INTRODUCTION

Special Issue: Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben

Jeffrey Bussolini, City University of New York

For Joan Stambaugh

When the editors of *Foucault Studies* graciously asked me about guest editing an issue on Giorgio Agamben's interpretation and use of Foucault, we surmised that there must be a good deal of interesting research going on about this crossover—especially with the ongoing release of Foucault's lecture courses interspersed with the release of Agamben's books.¹ The fact that Agamben's engagement with Foucault has become increasingly close since 1995, and that several of the key books bearing on this relation are either not yet translated (*Il Regno e la Gloria* {*The Reign and the Glory*}, *Il sacramento del linguaggio* {*The Sacrament of Language*}), or somewhat recently translated (*Signatura rerum* {*The Signature of All Things*}), the dispositive essay *Che cos'è un dispositivo?* {*What is a Dispositive?*}), meant that there was a wide and growing field of possible lines of inquiry. Fortunately our impression proved correct, as the strong essays in this volume indicate.

Agamben himself has frequently, and increasingly, indicated how important Foucault's work is for him, and any number of readers and commentators have noted that since 1995 he has been engaging in a thorough and ongoing philosophical engagement with the work of Foucault. As has been observed, and as several of the pieces in this issue analyze, this shift also corresponds to a 'political' shift in Agamben's work, in which he has become much more concerned with the analysis of political power, sovereignty, biopolitics, governmentality, and related phenomena. The fact that so much of his political interest and analysis takes place within the horizon of these Foucauldian concepts is itself an indication of the relation between these two thinkers. Provisionally, we might say that Foucault's thought and concepts are indispensable for Agamben's political analysis, and that his taking up and use of them allows him to evaluate and extend these concepts. Thus his engagement with Foucault is both one of theoretical borrowing and one of making these concepts his own through adapting them to his own problems and analyses. It is this last dimension that has caused so much heated controversy surrounding Agamben's appropriation of concepts from Foucault; many commen-

¹This has given the respective texts, lecture courses by Foucault, and new books by Agamben, an intense contemporary dialogue which accompanies the explicit filiations of Foucauldian concepts and methods taken up by Agamben.

tators have claimed that he borrows these concepts in name only, failing to pay heed in a rigorous way, if at all, to the way in which they are understood by Foucault.²

In my long interpretive review essay in this volume, I indicate that in some ways Agamben's sustained interaction with the thought of Foucault might be compared to the consideration of Friedrich Nietzsche's thought undertaken by Martin Heidegger. As a number of readers have pointed out, Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche is partly a consideration of Nietzsche's texts and concepts on their own grounds, and partly the placement and usage of these concepts for the elaboration of Heidegger's own philosophy (hence the controversy about his interpretation, which parallels the controversy about Agamben's interpretation of Foucault). In this respect we may also think of Gilles Deleuze's well-known figure from *Pourparlers* of "approaching another philosopher from behind" in a way that draws on the thought of that philosopher but nonetheless turns or develops it in a way that would be unrecognizable, even scandalous, for the thinker. Indeed, as several of the papers in this volume (especially Snoek) consider, Agamben has presented his own version of such a 'faithful unfaithfulness' or 'unfaithful faithfulness' in the concept of the *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* that he borrows from Ludwig Feuerbach. As he explains it, Agamben always looks for those points in the work of other philosophers that are given to further development and elaboration.

The present collection of essays allows for an up-to-date and a renewed consideration of the ways in which Agamben draws upon the work and thought of Foucault. The fact that this engagement has been an ongoing one means that there is plenty of new ground to consider in this relationship, with new texts and new concepts from Foucault being taken up by Agamben. In addition, Agamben himself has revisited and in some cases modified his earlier analyses of Foucault, indicating more common cause and crossover where he or other commentators had previously played up significant differences. Nonetheless, important differences in style, approach, and questions posed remain between these thinkers, and Agamben indicates new areas of difference even while underscoring his indebtedness to Foucault. The sustained interaction and interpretation highlights the need for this issue and for more work which seeks to pay heed to the various aspects of this crossover.

On a biographical note, it is of interest that Agamben had no personal contact with Foucault. He did not attend his seminars nor did the two meet in person or exchange letters.³ This might be compared to Agamben's study with Martin Heidegger, in the Heraclitus and Hegel Seminars in Le Thor,⁴ and his attendance at some of the seminars of Gilles Deleuze, with whom he also exchanged letters and published essays on Melville's *Bartleby* in a book volume.⁵ Agamben has, of course, frequently cited and drawn on Heidegger's work in a number of locations. While his citation of Deleuze may not be as systematic, Deleuze's concepts and works certainly figure frequently into Agamben's thinking, especially at certain key points or theoretical turns. In his sustained interpretation of Foucault's work, often the lecture courses,

² Mika Ojakangas, "Impossible Dialogue on Biopower," *Foucault Studies*, no. 2 (May 2005) 5-28; Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing, 2008).

³ Correspondence with Giorgio Agamben July 2010.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars*, translated by Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003).

⁵ Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze, *Bartleby: la formula della creazione* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 1993).

since 1995, Agamben has also placed himself in a position of dynamic exchange with him. Thus we might say that an important philosophical axis of Agamben's formation is Heidegger-Deleuze-Foucault, paralleling his own characterization of his methodological axis of influence by Arendt-Benjamin-Foucault. But of course each of these axes exists within a much wider field of texts and currents that enter into the domain of Agamben's writing, given that he draws on a great many sources (just as did each of the figures listed above who influenced him).

This issue consists of five essays of original research on some aspect of theoretical engagement between Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, each considering some aspect or line in particular, and one long interpretive review article covering several of Agamben's books, which focuses largely on the relation between the thinkers. Arne de Boever's article, which also offers a formal analysis of the cover art for the issue, focuses especially on the analysis of the Enlightenment in Immanuel Kant and Foucault, and how it relates to several aspects of Agamben's work. The paper draws on Bernard Steigler and others to consider Agamben's theory of technology in the dispositive essay. It also considers several key concepts in Agamben such as potentiality and contingency. Johanna Oksala's essay is a careful analysis of political violence in Hannah Arendt, Foucault, and Agamben. The fact that Arendt is also such an important interlocutor for Agamben makes this a particularly apropos comparison. The paper precisely charts and considers the contours of violence in the political philosophies of the three thinkers, and indicates where there is productive overlap and where there is important tension and difference.

Anke Snoek's piece gives a wide-ranging yet meticulous account of many of the points of reference and interrelation between Agamben and Foucault. Drawing in the latest books by Agamben as well as a host of other articles and interviews, the paper gives an excellent account of prominent areas of contact and tension between them. It indicates several ways in which the texts of Foucault and Agamben benefit from a mutual interpretation.

David Bleeden's piece considers especially the concept of potentiality in Agamben, and how it is indebted to and present in Foucault's thought. It draws on Aristotle to highlight important aspects of potentiality and to consider Agamben's interpretation of it. The paper thus indicates some of the important ontological and methodological aspects of the relations between Foucault and Agamben.

My own essay in this volume indicates how recent works have uncovered a conceptual distinction between apparatus and dispositive that is present in Agamben, Foucault, Deleuze, Althusser, and others. The paper draws on Foucault's exposition of the dispositive, Agamben's "What is a Dispositive?" (*Che cos'è un dispositivo?*) treatise, and Deleuze's "What is a *dispositif?*" (*Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?*). Also engaging etymological research, it indicates some of the stakes and dimensions of this distinction. In addition, my interpretive review essay takes up several of the recent works of Giorgio Agamben, including two not yet translated into English. It considers these works in terms of their interpretation and use of Foucault. However, the review essay also seeks to give a brief but comprehensive overview of the works.

Already for some time now, there has been productive scholarship about the theoretical relationship between Foucault and Agamben. As the two recent parts of *Homo sacer* are released in English, and as the Foucault lecture courses from the Collège de France continue to

appear—especially *Du gouvernement des vivants* {*On the Government of the Living*}, which considers the early Christian period, and *Le Courage de la vérité, Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II*⁶ {*The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and of Others II*}, which further considers veridiction—the extent of the crossover between these thinkers will become increasingly evident. And this is not to mention the effect likely to be produced when Agamben releases the final volume of *Homo sacer*, concerning especially the form of life, or when the fourth volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality, Les aveux de la chair* {*The Confessions of the Flesh*}, also concerning early Christianity, may receive a wider consideration. The fact that Agamben has so meticulously and persistently drawn upon Foucault will make for a substantial field of consideration. While the critical and sometimes counterintuitive uses to which he puts Foucault’s thought will also undoubtedly give rise to further objections from commentators, and thus further critical distinction being made between their respective projects, it remains the case that there will be a number of pertinent questions to be considered as to the relations between these thinkers, and that Agamben will continue to be an important touchstone for the contemporary consideration of the work of Michel Foucault.

I would like to thank the editors of *Foucault Studies*, especially Sam Binkley, Sven Opitz, and Ditte Vilstrup Holm who worked with me closely, for asking me to undertake this project and for surmising that I might be an apropos person to do so. Also Giorgio Agamben for correspondence about aspects of this issue and his personal contacts with Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. Daniel Defert for conversations some time ago about Michel Foucault’s personality and philosophical style. I would like to thank Ananya Mukherjea for discussion, reading, suggestions, and commentary throughout the project. David Kishik for conversations about this project and a host of other matters. Rafael de le Dehesa for reading papers and considering some of the main issues at hand in the issue with me. Michael Jolley and Grace M. Cho for insight and interaction on these texts. Thanks to Patricia Ticineto Clough for early encouragement on the project. Polly Watson for editing inspiration. Ahilan Arulanantham for first introducing me to Foucault’s work. John Sarefield for many conversations pertaining to these matters. For further discussion, ideas, and support through the project, would also like to thank Christina Harlow, Mark Roth, Chase Chivers, Aaron Cardella, Antonio Ferrera, Scott MacLeod, Jill Cuticello, and Jeb Allred. Finally I’d like to thank my teachers in philosophy (Babette Babich, Joan Stambaugh, Stanley Aronowitz, Michel Tibon-Cornillot, Alfonso Gomez-Lobo, Mark E. Warren), without whom I would not have been able to discern problems such as the ones taken up here, let alone address them.

Jeffrey Bussolini
Sociology, Anthropology, Social Work Department
City University of New York, College of Staten Island
2800 Victory Blvd., Bldg 4S-232
Staten Island, NY 10314
USA

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité: Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II* (Paris: EHESS, 2009).