

# Foucault Studies

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## REVIEW

**Paul Veyne, *Foucault: His Thought, His Character*. Translated by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), ISBN: 978-0745646428**

The present book amplifies an article of Veyne's written soon after his dear friend's death.<sup>1</sup> Both works not only position Foucault in theory, philosophy, and historiography, but they also treat us to insights about the man with anecdotes from his life. But with this amplification the representation of Foucault's thought becomes fuzzy even as new aspects of the person peek from time's shadows. Oddly, closer to events, the article only occasionally alludes to the battles of the 1970s when Foucault was "bogyman of philosophers and historians alike"<sup>2</sup> whereas the book repeatedly looks over its shoulder. *Foucault* frequently pummels the windmills of Truth, the Transcendent, and even Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Readers most interested in the first half of *Foucault's* subtitle will profit most, I believe, by trying to figure out several of its interesting, if inadvertently raised, problems. In a moment I'll develop two: why so many who have taken Foucault seriously, including Veyne and Habermas, are wrong to declare him a decisionist; and why, contrary to Veyne, Foucault really was and remains "a corrupter of the young." (Chapter 9) That quality of Foucault's thought which both the book and the article make central is the status of truth. So I will first focus on Veyne's characterization of Foucauldian truth, then transition to facets of the true Foucault.

Now, one's methods and methodological assumptions constitute one's orientation to truth. How should we say Foucault was oriented to truth? Present-day Veyne presents us with an almost synchronic and disorientingly kaleidoscopic Foucault: nominalist, sceptic, empirical anthropologist, archeologist, genealogist, hermeneutic positivist (Chapter 1), decisionist, positivist, anti-realist,<sup>4</sup> Nietzschean perspectivist, an "ontologist [...] of discursive practices of knowledge, set-ups of power and forms of subjectivization," (Chapter 3; 51) empiricist,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Veyne, "The Final Foucault and His Ethics," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Autumn 1993), translated by Catherine Porter and Arnold I. Davidson. The translators note that the article had originally appeared in 1986 "without Veyne's remarks on Foucault and AIDS [...which they] have restored" (1) at the author's request.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Bann, "Towards a Critical Historiography: Recent Work in Philosophy of History," *Philosophy* 56 (1981), 382.

<sup>3</sup> "I am in a position to testify that Foucault was not the devil that some (by no means negligible) figures believed him to be." (112) In this context, Veyne refers to a "funeral oration, delivered at the Collège in 1984, [which] declared that the philosophy of the deceased consisted in denying what one had always believed, that is to say the truth, normality and morality." (178n4)

<sup>4</sup> Though Veyne mostly denies late Foucault's quasi-Kantian posture, he admits it at 169n7.

“specialized intellectual,” (Chapter 6; 76 (yes, there are a few translation and editing issues)) Nietzschean hermeneuticist (Chapter 7), irrationalist, advocate of instrumental reason in political contexts, voluntarist (Chapter 9, 115, 120, 122, respectively), “staunchly amoralistic” (Chapter 10, 131) yet one for whom “morality mattered.” (Chapter 11, 144) (A number of these characterizations are not limited to the chapters cited.)

In contrast, on several occasions Veyne’s explanations of basic ideas tolerably bear their burdens. The first five paragraphs of Chapter 8, for example, show that genealogies render first- and second-order truths relative as such to discursive practices; such truths are not correspondence to things-as-they-are. Therefore, since a critical genealogy is a “truthful balance-sheet of ‘discourses’ [...its] truth still remains the condition for the possibility of that critique.” (93)

It may be that Veyne has no consistent take on “Foucauldism” (51) because he has not learned the lesson he claims to have learned from Bernard Williams’s criticism of “the little book of [his] youth, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*” (164n1) Veyne quotes the unlearned lesson: “an extravagant relativism about truth, or worse.” (165n1) Unlearned, for Veyne often praises the “warrior” in Foucault, a member of the tribe whose “minds avoid the desire for truth,” (121)<sup>5</sup> for whom “there are no general truths,” (45) for whom “the general ideas that humanity has produced over the centuries are all false, since they are irreconcilable.” (87) (Note the multiple problems in that last claim.) “Fishbowl” is Veyne’s term of art for the sets of discursive practices that make the truths of an era possible.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, consistent with the previous paragraph, Foucauldian genealogy “raises us above ourselves, lifting us out of our time [...] out of our fishbowl”; (74; also e.g. 117, 127, 136) but, on the other hand, “Foucault is almost obsessively aware [...] that] the impossibility of rising above and looking down on thought means that even the most revolutionary of thinkers can never escape from our little world of ‘discourse.’” (84) This is not our aporia but Veyne’s persisting extravagance.

Related to this deep confusion about the status of truth in Foucault’s thought is the first of the two interesting problems mentioned a moment ago. Was Foucault a decisionist, someone without reasons for his values convictions? Certainly, “Foucauldism is a critique of actuality that is careful not to dictate prescriptions for action.” (116) Equally true is that while Foucault became a militant activist across a range of issues, he “did not put forward arguments in favour of his causes. Rather, he tried to arouse indignation.” (123)<sup>7</sup> Rorty nailed it, in my view, in calling Foucault a “Knight of Autonomy.” Foucault looks like a decisionist on the outside, but his “subjectivity was not purely a matter of whims. It was based on personal experience and knowledge.” (122)

Yet Veyne enables a deeper glimpse into the nature of Foucault’s commitment to his values. His portrait in the final paragraphs of the penultimate chapter, “Foucault and Politics,” brings to mind none other than *Anna Karenina*’s Levin. Recall that the troubled Levin,

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Veyne 1993: “a warrior is a man who can get along without truth.” (2)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Veyne 1993: “truths [...] are] the set of rules that make it possible to utter and to recognize those propositions held as true.” (3)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Veyne 1993: There is “a little-noticed characteristic of Foucault’s work, a philosophically grounded elegance that was apparent in his private conversation, from which anger was not excluded, but indignation was.” (6)

wealthy master of a large estate, finally finds intellectual and spiritual peace in fideism. Tolstoy described that faith unforgettably in Levin's gloriously happy, days-long, silent, sweaty scything side-by-side his illiterate peasants. Similarly, Foucault's "self-observation had shown him that, through his work, he had reached a point where, even if unequal in dignity, intellectual activities of the most prosaic and humble nature were indistinguishable from literary or artistic creations. For Foucault, this was a kind of religion [...which] allows one to accede both to an impersonality in which the self of the researcher or writer disappears and to the birth of a self without qualities." (133f) It does not follow that Foucault was a decisionist because he "believed that chasm [between scholarship and politics, between word and deed] to be irremediable." (119) Reasons of the heart (116) are not for other's ears, but they are one's truths.

The second interesting problem: was Foucault a corrupter of youth? Veyne casts his rhetorical question in dimly Socratic light, alluding to charges from advocates of Truth and the Transcendent. Take it straight: do Knights of Autonomy practicing genealogy corrupt? Bad prescriptions, explicitly in word or implicitly in deed, would be candidates, but only trying to arouse indignation rules out the former.

So is Foucault's life example enough to trip unwary youth into perdition? According to Veyne, Foucault outed himself to close friends in 1954. At that time "homosexuality was invisible and totally forbidden. [...Foucault] was then a young man, living with aggressive bitterness with his difference and his scorn of both others and himself." (140) So at that time the closet kept corruption away. But 20 years later "[t]here was nothing at all hysterical about him. He had become 'a decent pédé (pederast) with no problems,' as he himself put it." (141) Then, teaching at Berkeley he indulged, "in controlled episodes," "his taste for drugs, opium and LSD, [...and would] jaunt to some gay sauna in San Francisco's homosexual ghetto, where his behavior was less sadistic than some have assumed." (142) Of course, neither Veyne nor we could think that the example of his last decade would corrupt anyone by tarnishing Truth and the Transcendent. For, first, we smile in envy when he tells us with gay pride that "Foucault had bestowed upon [him] the title of 'honorary homosexual.'" (138) And, second, since anyone for whom T<sup>2</sup> lights the way is impregably protected from the Foucaults of this world, no corruption ensues there either.

But persuasive prescriptions and implicit seductions are not the only routes to corruption. In the book already referred to, Bernard Williams argues that genealogy has two modes: critical and vindicatory.<sup>8</sup> If we understand corruption to be some dissolution of adhered and crucial values, then effective critical genealogy must accomplish that. Yet for late Foucault, as we know, that goes hand-in-hand with the Enlightenment's ongoing labour of liberty. Only partially implicit in his critique of governmentality is a vindicatory genealogy of (some version of) liberalism. Critique harrows the soil for freedom; such corruption is necessary to enable youth to flourish.

For all his admiration and praise, Veyne avoids hagiography. Thus, Foucault's understanding "of [Max] Weber was incorrect"; (35) *The Archaeology of Knowledge* was "written too

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

early and too hastily." (84) Perhaps. Then we are disarmingly informed that with respect to "current affairs [Foucault] would have liked to possess real intellectual clout (which he never really did)." (132) Again, Foucault caught grief from many quarters when he "declared himself to be 'impressed by this [Iranian revolution's] attempt to open up a religious dimension in politics.'" (127) The episode elicits desultory discussion, then breaks off: "I have not the heart to go on about it." (128) It seems to me, however, that Veyne has set before us the pieces of a third, fascinating Foucault puzzle. Precisely a "political spirituality," (127, Veyne cites Foucault) with no taint of any Stoic God or gods, much less gooey California new-ageism, might tie together Foucault's value fideism, militant indignations, and care of the self.

*Foucault's* most insightful judgments concern character, not thought. He "was cunning. Preferring to be associated with the left, he was careful not to dissipate the nuanced ambiguity that separated his [Nietzschean] untimeliness from the leftism of his admirers." (135) Veyne captures the man with whom four of us had dinner in Santa Cruz just over a year before his death. He was indeed an "elegant figure, steeped in sangfroid and clarity, [...] inflexible, cutting rather than ironical." (143) But blinded by his hatred of the Soviet Union, he supported France's nuclear force-de-frappe. The dinner argument intensified; later, one of us was in tears. Too soon, all were.

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