

REVIEW

Jose Luis Moreno Pestaña, *En Devenant Foucault: Sociogenèse d'un grand philosophe* (Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Éditions du Croquant, 2006), ISBN: 2914968159; Jose Luis Moreno Pestaña, *Convirtiéndose en Foucault: Sociogénesis de un Filósofo* (Mataró: Montesinos, 2006), ISBN: 8496356604

This book by the Spanish sociologist Jose Luis Moreno Pestaña is an excellent presentation of the sociological method pioneered by the French school of intellectual sociology. Moreno Pestaña's work draws his inspiration from the inquiries of Pierre Bourdieu and his disciples, to create a narrative that illuminates the professional and intellectual choices of the young Michel Foucault at the dawn of his intellectual journey.

While the history of ideas stresses the contents and the relationship of a work to the whole universe of intellectual production, the French school of intellectual sociology inspired by Bourdieu emphasizes form and external factors, with particular emphasis on institutional constraints. It is not, though, a strictly deterministic account. What are highlighted are the options that the individual has in front of him and the way in which these are either embraced or rejected.

The first chapter opens fire without hesitation with the following: "when Michel Foucault arrived in Paris, the management of his academic and intellectual career was already well developed." (13)¹ Moreno Pestaña reconstructs, from his sociological point of view, a history already well known to us from the works of Didier Eribon, David Macey, and others as a collective enterprise in which his family participated in an active way. He shows how the normal worries of the transition from adolescence to young adulthood are aggravated in Foucault's case because of the difficulties faced by a young homosexual in the early fifties. The family intervenes swiftly and efficiently, changing his school, adding tutors when the resources of his provincial school are deemed insufficient to prepare him to the competitive entrance exams and organizing a discreet but watchful surveillance of his mental health, entrusted to Jacqueline Verdeaux, a friend of the family who also will ask Foucault later to prepare what will be his first major publication. Moreno Pestaña mentions that Foucault's family was well acquainted with Jean Piel, Georges Bataille's and later Jacques Lacan's brother in law, and the man who succeeded Bataille as director of the journal *Critique*, of which Foucault will be a member of the editorial board. (31) He also shows in a quite convincing fashion that, regarding the two most important choices for the future

¹ Quotes and pagination are from the Spanish version. All translations are mine.

professional carrier of Foucault, the choice of a profession and the choices of the subjects of his future intellectual production, both were made out of a repertoire of possible (and socially accepted) choices. And finally, he shows how the family's concerns were relayed by the institutional support (*École Normale Supérieure*) acting in tacit coordination to support Foucault in the event of a crisis.

The section "chosen by the institution" describes the training program at the preparatory school (*khâgne*) and its influence on Foucault. This is of course an important point for Bourdieu and his school. The institution—in a large sense, comprising *khâgne* or preparatory school for the admissions exam to the *École Normale*, the *École Normale* itself, the oppositions exam (*agrégation*)—is supposed to explain the 'how' of the French philosophical practice, as well as its vices, its superficiality, its prophetic pose, and its enmity with the social sciences.

The second chapter entitled "the space of possible trajectories" investigates the first writings of Foucault. Moreno Pestaña finds that

The first works produced by Foucault ...were scholastic texts... scholastic were the subjects he examined, scholastic the theoretical schemes employed by him and the intellectual positions through which is attempted to singularize himself in front of the intellectual world. (39)

And he adds that the early texts do not yet carry the distinctive traits of the future Foucault. This qualification gives the impression that we are in front of a *Bildungsroman*, of the slow emergence of the mature thinker that leaves behind the preconditions of his apparition. If that were so, the 'French School of intellectual sociology' would have a limited application field, it would at the most be able to reductively explain the original conditions from which the original thinker breaks out, but not the act by which he frees himself from his original limitations. In other words, it is possible that the French school of intellectual sociology ends up reaffirming what it wanted to deny, i.e., that the origin of a thought is unfathomable and an *ex nihilo* creation.

According to Moreno Pestaña, what characterizes Foucault's early period of intellectual creation is its indefinite nature; undefined is the public (in Moreno Pestaña's terminology, the 'intellectual market') and undefined is the position he aspires to occupy in this market. He explains the lack of definition as a psychological reaction to the institutional pressures at the *École Normale* of his time, where the students were confronted with the alternative between becoming just a high school teacher or attaining the exalted status of an intellectual.

Among the subjects that attracted Foucault's attention at that time is the nature of mental illness. This is not a mere intellectual interest for Foucault. We know from his biographers that Foucault had several depressive episodes and suicide attempts. These events should not be explained solely in terms of Foucault's troubled sexual identity. They could also be one of the options that the institution offers, and which function as a stimulant in

the brutally competitive atmosphere of the *École*. In any case, it is clear that Foucault chooses mental illness as the subject of his first academic works.

Moreno Pestaña's analysis is guided by the principle that "a theoretical subjectivity can only take charge of his intimate drives by a work of translation into a space of legitimate forms of such drives." (51) The emphasis is then to identify what are these legitimate forms, i.e., 'the institutional and intellectual possibilities.' Here Moreno Pestaña finds neither surprises nor a real rupture with the institution. The study of psychology was part of the curriculum, and even had a heavier weight than that given to other social sciences. Foucault obtains a degree in psychology and latter a certificate in psychopathology, he interns in a psychiatric hospital, becomes interested in psychological tests (but, according to Moreno Pestaña, only in the Rorschach test, which had a certain phenomenological prestige attached to it, as opposed to more positivistic test).

Moreno Pestaña subscribes to the position that phenomenology had a mostly negative influence in French intellectual life in that period, and that it reinforced the already dominant anti-scientific views. (56-57) But he rejects Foucault's claim about a divide in French 20th century philosophy between a philosophy of meaning and experience (Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) and a philosophy of knowledge, rationality, and concepts (Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, Jean Cavailles and Foucault). This interpretation, claims Moreno Pestaña, is a retrospective gaze that is more informative about Foucault's state of mind in the 1980's than about what it purports to explain. Young Foucault was very interested in phenomenology, in particular in the work of Merleau-Ponty whose classes he audited in the early 50's. He also wrote a now lost thesis under Jean Hyppolite's supervision regarding 'the constitution of an historical transcendental in Hegel's Phenomenology of the Spirit.' Moreno Pestaña finds this fact suggestive, as Hegel's philosophy—as it was understood in France at that time—connects phenomenology with politics, particularly, with communism.

What kind of phenomenology did Foucault encounter at the *École Normale*? According to Moreno Pestaña, the phenomenology taught at the *École Normale* was centered on the work of Edmund Husserl and dismissive of Sartre. (58) As mentioned, Foucault audited several classes given by Merleau-Ponty, and even considered at one time to write a thesis about the birth of psychology among the post Cartesians, a subject that would be congenial to the interests of Merleau-Ponty.

For Moreno Pestaña, Merleau-Ponty's interest in the social sciences and psychology in particular does not go beyond the point of view that was conventional in French academic circles of his time, i.e., the view that Husserl's contribution was one that would accept science but leave untouched philosophy's exalted position. Merleau-Ponty believed that Husserl's project was to "save philosophical reflection without turning his back to the achievements of the social sciences." (60) In order to carry out this project, Merleau-Ponty proposed a dialogue between philosophy and psychology. This position is opposed, on the one hand, to Sartre's which upholds the traditional privileges of philosophy, and on the other, to Martin Heidegger's, whose position leads to irrationalism. These antithetical posi-

tions delimit the intellectual field in which the thought of Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Bourdieu will eventually evolve, and reflects the foundational problem of French philosophy in the 20th century, i.e., how to relate to and take distance simultaneously from positive science, and in particular, from the social sciences.

Marxism was another major influence in the *École Normale Supérieure*. It was represented by Louis Althusser, with whom Foucault had a very close relationship, and also by philosophers such as Daniel Dessanti and Tran Duc Thao, that wanted to enrich Marxism with Phenomenology. For Moreno Pestaña, the most revealing episode in this complex interaction between philosophy, science, and politics is the Lysenko case. In his view, the alignment of so many French intellectuals with the official Soviet position should not be seen only as a case of ideological blindness. It had, on the contrary, a specific French context, and it was in tune with the main dilemma of French philosophy in this period, the question of the relationship between philosophy and science. This problem is the one that organizes all the others, including the political ones.

In the specific case of Foucault, his first book, *Mental Illness and Psychology* (1954) contains a long and favorable discussion of Soviet psychiatry, and of the Pavlovian method. In the second edition, this whole section disappears without trace. Regarding the Lysenko affair itself, we do not have any direct comments from Foucault, but from notes taken by Althusser of a presentation made by Foucault at the *École Normale* it is possible to infer that Foucault seemed to accept some elements of the theses of Lysenko, but the remaining evidence does not allow us to ascertain which ones. (87) Moreno Pestaña also takes into consideration the influence of Georges Politzer, a communist thinker and *résistance* martyr that developed a criticism of scientific psychology and of psychoanalysis that Foucault would generally endorse.

All these influences and problems shape the field of possible orientations for Foucault at the time he makes his first steps as an independent thinker. Moreno Pestaña sums up the situation as follows:

The texts that Foucault published [in his early period] are traversed by the same conflicts and swings as his author. [...] Foucault writes texts of Marxist psychology, which contain favorable references to texts published by the Academy of Sciences of Moscow, but he includes also detailed expositions of existential psychology, avoiding carefully the kind of dirty polemics common among Marxist intellectuals of this period. (103)

The most important text published by Foucault in this period was his introduction to the work of Ludwig Binswanger and Marxism is totally absent from this work. This apparent contradiction can be summarized using the formula that Foucault himself used several years later, talking of himself as a 'Nietzschean communist', i.e., somebody who opposes the established order from a political point of view, while holding at the same time a tragic view of the world. (104-5) In his essay on Binswanger these two opposed feelings find a temporary reprieve.

Binswanger was a Swiss psychiatrist influenced by the work of Heidegger, whose work had been praised by Merleau-Ponty as a good example of convergence between phenomenology and social sciences. Jacqueline Verdeaux invited Foucault to write an introduction to the French translation of Binswanger's *Dream and Existence*. This work, writes Moreno Pestaña, provides Foucault with a perfect occasion to show his dual citizenship as a philosopher of psychology. (111) Moreno Pestaña devotes 30 pages of his book to study Foucault's Introduction. He claims that this essay is indeed of unique importance to understand the development of Foucault:

A certain philosophical figure shapes up. Michel Foucault actualizes, on the one hand the position of the inheritor of a tradition, whose meaning, far from being exhausted in the context of its emergence, or of being reduced to its own specific intellectual field, need to be permanently revised... On the other hand, Foucault insist in several occasions that the sense of such texts requires a creative reading that would make it emerge in spite of the authors own self-consciousness, revealing what up to now had been veiled, Foucault assigns to himself the role of a prophet, whose extraordinary action shakes the scholastic ruins in which often the history of thought locks itself. (125-126)

Chapter four deals with *Mental Illness and Psychology* (1954). Moreno Pestaña begins his analysis by presenting two different interpretations of this work. The first is a contemporary review of the book which highlights the merits of the work while criticizing Foucault's recourse to the concept of materialism as unnecessary for the description of psychopathology. The second, from Frédéric Gros' book *Foucault et la folie* (1977) which claims that

...the will to 'make science' about madness does not admit in 1954 any reduction. Under the theoretical impulse of Althusser it would appear as preliminary to any serious research. And we see that Foucault accepts [Althusser's view] with a strange docility. (146, quoting Gros, 7)

The first interpretation refers to an author that is still maturing and whose later production can not be foreseen. The second is based on a body of work already produced, about whose unity we ask ourselves. Moreno Pestaña rejects the way in which Gross explains the nature of the work through the image of Althusser: if it were not for the (bad) influence of Althusser, the work would have shown its true nature—Foucault's real one. It is true that a few years later, when Foucault republished this early book after having completed his doctoral thesis, he eliminates the sections dealing with the theory of Pavlov and the references to Soviet psychiatry. But to explain Foucault's change of focus there is no need to invoke the image of Althusser. What is needed is to understand the process of Foucault's intellectual maturation. Foucault is not the same before and after he completed his doctoral thesis. Both the context in which the writing took place and the reception are different.

Moreno Pestaña's own interpretation concentrates on three aspects: (1) the way Foucault presents himself to his readership, his 'theoretical subjectivity'; (2) the resources from

the different disciplines (philosophy and psychology) put into play in the text; (3) finally, the way Foucault's own life become insinuated in the work. (148) Moreno Pestaña devotes a few pages to analyzing the characteristics of the French philosophical style (160-3) and concludes that Foucault's text present a complex narrative tension. While in the text on Binswanger we find a traditional philosophical style, i.e., a rhetoric of mystery and slow revealing of the writer's positions, in *Mental Illness and Psychology* we find several theatrical moves, in which Foucault exposes at length a thesis with apparent approval, only to suddenly reverse his position and reject it. (162)

Of the three levels that Moreno Pestaña suggests, we will concentrate on the third one, i.e., the relationship between life and work as revealed in the latter. Moreno Pestaña points out what we already know, that Foucault's interest in psychopathology is not merely intellectual. This section is organized in three axes: (i) the problem of a double life; (ii) hospitalization; and (iii) the transformation of a disorder of esteem into a prestige symbol. Pestaña's hypothesis is that in his reflections on the difference between real conflict and psychological conflict Foucault is reflecting on his own experience of living a double life. He summarizes his findings in the following table (177):

SCIENTIFIC/CULTURAL LANGUAGE	SELF WORK	SOCIAL EXPERIENCE
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REAL AND PATHOLOGICAL CONFLICT	DIVISION OF BEHAVIOR INTO DIFFERENT SPHERES DIFFERENT FROM ILLNESS	DOUBLE LIFE
MARXIST SOCIOLOGY → DIALECTICAL PAVLOVISM	INTEREST FOR THE DISCIPLINES WHICH PROVIDE JUSTIFICATION FOR THE DIAGNOSTIC AND THEIR REJECTION	THE MENACE OF HOSPITALIZATION
DESCRIPTION AS PART OF THE ILLNESS	DIFFERENCE IS NOT PATHOLOGY, BUT THE DISTANCE OF THE GENIOUS FROM THE OTHERS	THE DANGER OF INCAPACITATION BECAUSE A DIAGNOSIS OF INSANITY

If we compare the essay on Binswanger with *Mental Illness and Psychology* we can say that the first represents the maximum pole of attraction for a practice of the philosophical kind,

while the second represent the maximum of attraction for a scientific practice of Marxist obedience. This tension relaxes somewhat in the writings that Foucault publishes shortly before his doctorate, and in particular in the article *Psychology and Scientific Research*. Foucault develops in these years an interest “for the disciplines that give scientific legitimacy to norms.” (181) This is a subject and a methodology that would become the most recognizable feature of Foucault’s work.

Moreno Pestaña illustrates the transition between the works already analyzed and this new orientation with two short articles, the one we just mentioned, and the earlier one *La psychologie de 1850-1950*. The central thesis of *Psychology and Scientific Research* is that at its origin psychology imitates the principles and methodology of the hard sciences. But, because of the impossibility of putting these into practice, it is forced to acknowledge that human reality is different and needs to pursue other approaches. This argument shows the influence of Bachelard and Canguilhem. (182-183) According to Bachelard, science establishes itself as such in a process of rupture with common sense, which is an obstacle that needs to be overcome in an ‘epistemological act’ (Althusser’s ‘epistemological break’). This argument allows Foucault to deflate the scientific pretensions of psychology. Nevertheless, in the same text, Foucault praises psychology in general and psychoanalysis in particular. The article ends with a negative note, with Foucault exhorting psychology to take seriously the view that “what is more human in man is his history.” (184)² Moreno Pestaña interprets this reference to history in a Heideggerian way, in the sense of a ‘history of Being,’ but the text also authorizes other readings, including a Marxist one.

In the following section Moreno Pestaña reviews Foucault’s *La recherche scientifique et la psychologie*, in which Foucault takes a more critical position *vis à vis* psychology. It is as if Foucault is no longer interested in this discipline. He adopts the ‘standard position’ which represents the views of a fraction of French philosophy against the disciplinary challenges of psychology (and the social sciences in general). According to this position, the social sciences are disciplines of a second order, a shelter for mediocre philosophers. But, if that’s the case, wasn’t Foucault himself tempted at one time to become a psychologist?

This is a book about social origins, and therefore limits the scope of its analysis to the early stages of Foucault’s development. This limitation is not necessarily a part of the sociological approach, but to a certain extent, a concession to a more traditional understanding of intellectual history. It would be interesting to see how well this approach fares when applied to other periods in the career of Foucault, and in particular, to the several turning points in his thinking.

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² Michel Foucault, “La psychologie de 1850-1950,” quoted in Moreno Pestaña, 184.