Foucault Studies

REVIEW

Luca Paltrinieri, *L'expérience du concept* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2012) ISBN: 978-2-85944-706-9

The book *L'expérience du concept* is presented as the result of a long-running research project within the field of historical demography and, in particular, on its methodological and philosophical underpinnings. In addressing this field the Author takes inspiration from Michel Foucault's history of "governmentality", as well as from the wider philosophical context of its emergence as a specific methodological approach. For this reason, as acknowledged in the Introduction, *L'expérience du concept* consists in a sort of preliminary run-up, propaedeutic to a forthcoming publication centred on the history of the category of "population". This well-structured conceptual-premise was made necessary, according to the Author, because the unsolved dichotomy between Foucault's *users* and *commentators* prevented a deep understanding and possible furthering of his historical *cum* philosophical method. Clearing away interpretative misunderstandings with the purpose of providing a scaffolding for the forthcoming historical work, the Author articulates one of the best available surveys on Foucault's philosophy, in which almost every aspect and direction of his thought is mapped. An illuminating and penetrating reconstruction of the so-called "French Epistemological school" is also provided, not as a mere side-effect or a complementary by-product, but as a necessary interwoven counter-part of such a survey on Foucault.[1]

Because of the limits to a review, it is impossible to reproduce and give an account of the overwhelming richness of references and the entire spectrum of arguments deployed in *L'expérience du concept*; but it might nevertheless be helpful to provide a synoptic view of its structure as well as of its main vectors and targets of analysis.

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[1] Namely, all the concepts, categories and principles of the so-called *épistémologie historique*—e.g. its "regionalist" and normative approach to scientific rationality, the centrality of historiographical concepts such as "event" and "emergence"—are displayed and thoroughly investigated. For the identifying criteria of the *épistémologie historique* see J. F. Braunstein, «Bachelard, Canguilhem, Foucault. Le "style français" en épistémologie», in P. Wagner (dir.), *Les philosophes et la science*, Gallimard, Paris, 2002 : 923. Paltrinieri refers to this tradition either with the term "historical epistemology", either with its inverse, that is, "epistemological history". We think the two expressions should be distinguished, as proposed by D. Lecourt (*Pour une critique de l'épistémologie: Bachelard, Canguilhem, Foucault*, F. Maspero, Paris, 1972), who used the former to emphasize Bachelard's concern with epistemology and the latter for Canguilhem's more historical approach. The relevance of the problem, which is not a mere point of lexicography is well highlighted by F. Delaporte "Foucault, l'histoire et l'épistémologie" in P. Artières, J.F. Bert, F. Gros, J. Revel, *«Foucault»*, *Le Cahiers de l'Herne* 95, Paris, Éditions de l'Herne, 2011: 339.

Structurally, the book is divided into five chapters, which, as the Author has it (26), track a passage from Canguilhem to the late Foucault, from the former's "epistemological history" to the latter's "historical ontology of ourselves". The first chapter is dedicated to Foucault's master, Canguilhem, and the other four are respectively devoted to Foucault's archaeological (chapter II and III) and genealogical methods (chapter IV and V).

As signalled by the title, the main philosophical theme of the work is the immanent and two-way relation between concept and experience (270), that is, the possibility of conceiving thought *as an experience* and experience *as a possible thought*. The concept-experience polarity comes with a cluster of other philosophical questions which cross the book, such as the issue of the dividing line between science and non-science (i.e. ideology), of internal and external factors as well as internal and external explications of science. The first chapter takes the standpoint of Canguilhem's epistemological history to illustrate some methodological guidelines drawing on the theme of the necessary opening of philosophy to its exteriority and therefore to science, on the dialectic between 'continuism' and 'discontinuism' and on the reciprocal definition of objectivity and historicity. Philosophy, a reflection "pour qui toute matière étrangère est bonne",[2] must be open to the external in a twofold manner: it must acknowledge the scientific production of truth on the one hand, and also insert and compare "the value of truth" with all the other possible values, e.g. with aesthetic, moral and political values on the other. The closing of the chapter elucidates Canguilhem's philosophy of biological individuality as based on the intrinsic normative feature of the living,[3] a theme which informs the philosophical "fil conducteur" of the book, i.e. the relation between experience and concept, life and science, subjectivation and objectivation:

> Le sujet humain surgit dans le rapport entre connaissance et vie, c'est à dire dans le conflit entre deux expériences qui appartiennent au même titre à la normativité vitale et qui s'inscrivent dans ce troisième sens d'expérience comme activité erratique du vivant: l'expérience bien précise de soi-même dans le vécu et l'expérience de soi comme objet d'une connaissance scientifique (61)

Two points will therefore be retained by Foucault: a new notion of experience and of the knowing subject. Life and concept, far from being opposed or incompatible, find their dialectic unity in an experience which is a "permanent de-subjectivation" (64).

As well known, writing the preface for the English edition of Canguilhem's *Le normal et le pathologique*, Foucault drew a much debated dividing line between two French contemporary philosophical traditions, one pursuing "a philosophy of the experience, of sense and of subject" and one ascribable to a "philosophy of knowledge, of rationality and of concept"—a

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[2] G. Canguilhem, *Le normal et le pathologique*, PUF, Paris, 1966: 7.

[3] The Author is careful in not attributing to Canguilhem a simplistic "philosophy of the subject", Canguilhem's concept of individuality being namely relational, relative both to the internal as well as to the external environment of the individual (52).

tradition in which Foucault included himself.[4] Paltrinieri's choice of reading the Canguilhem-Foucault connection on the lines of the twofold reformulation of the correlated notions of subject and experience is thus rather challenging, apparently provocative, but heuristically fortunate. Furthermore, merely to rethink Foucault's own philosophical path around the concept/experience theme is a controversial position to maintain, since the notion of experience is certainly one of the key-points of Foucault's recusal at the end of the 60's.[5] However, for Paltrinieri, the main issue at stake is to elucidate the *precise notion* of experience that Foucault was abandoning, one still stuck in a fundamental ambiguity between structural and phenomenological alternatives.[6] Foucault's reference to Canguilhem must therefore not be read as occasioned by some formal lineage between teacher and pupil, as too many historical accounts still suggest, but rather as a precise exit-strategy, as a way to escape and overcome the opposition between phenomenological-marxism and structuralism about the problem of experience (83).

> Le différend qui est à la source de toutes les oppositions tracées par Foucault entre l'histoire épistémologique et la phénoménologie, ainsi que la revendication d'appartenance à la première contre la seconde tradition se fondent, à notre avis, sur la mise en question du rapport entre une certaine expérience humaine et la conceptualisation des rationalités scientifiques (106)

As already noted, the second and third chapters are devoted to the disentanglement of the archaeological method and its limits. The Author argues that although Foucault's "archaeological programme" was developed as a reply both to phenomenologist and structuralist strands, it nevertheless maintained an intrinsic lack of full interplay and integration between concept and experience. The "fundamental experience" of the dream, the "limit-experiences" of madness and literature remain ambiguous between the two extremes of a phenomenological subjective experience, ahistorical and inaccessible to science and objectivity, and a structuralist objective, historical and supra-individual (collective) experience. Whereas the phenomenological imports of the word and notion of "archaeology" were both present also in other

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[4] M. Foucault, "La vie: l'expérience et la science", *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, n°1: *Canguilhem*, janvier-mars 1985; re-published in *Dits et Ecrits*, Gallimard, Paris, 2001, vol. II: 1583, "…il me semble bien qu'on pourrait retrouver une autre ligne de partage qui traverse toutes ces oppositions. C'est celle qui sépare une philosophie de l'expérience, du sens, du sujet, et une philosophie du savoir, de la rationalité et du concept. D'un coté, une filiation qui est celle de Sartre et de Merleau-Ponty; et puis une autre, qui est celle de Cavaillès, de Bachelard, de Koyré et de Canguilhem". On this controversial « partage » drawn by Foucault see P. Cassou-Noguès, P- Gillot (éd.) 2009 *Le concept, le sujet et la science : Cavaillès, Canguilhem, Foucault*, Vrin, Paris. The preface in which Foucault's famous passage appears seems to have stimulated many of the questions Paltrinieri's *L'expérience du concept* tries to answer.

[5] Given the risk of reintroducing an "anonym and general subject of history" (see M. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1972: 27, 74; cf. Lecourt 1972: 99) the concept of experience reveals as a slippery one, as Foucault himself remarked in the *Archéologie du Savoir* (Paris, Gallimard, 1969: 26-27). See Paltrinieri: 104.

[6] After all, structuralism, phenomenology and historical epistemology, as well shown by the Author, proposed themselves as different and rather divergent philosophical projects springing from the same reprise and reformulation of Kantian transcendental and anthropological questions.

commentaries, it is this time instructively deepened by the re-linking of Foucault's own use of "archaeology" with Kant's *Fortschritte der Metaphysik* (119).[7]

Beside its closer attention to the present and the subsequent propensity for *long-durée* periods over sharp and sudden breaks, a crucial feature of genealogy is, according to the Author, an instrumental use of history, which draws on the construction of "historical fictions" with a twofold purpose.[8] The first, epistemological, analysed in the IV chapter, recalls Foucault's *nominalist* attitude, which consists in writing the history of our thought *as if* universal ideas and categories such as the state, the spirit and the population do not exist in objective reality.[9] The second sense of fiction, political, must work as an experience, thus involving and opening the possibility for human action.[10] Chapters IV and V, with their novel conception of the archaeo-genealogical historical method, are the most original part of the work. The Author shows how *archaeology* and *genealogy*, far from being two opposite schemes - the latter generated by the failure of the former - represent instead two necessarily collaborative points of view between which the late Foucault tries to reach a complete synthesis.[11]

Being the analysis of the "foyers d'expérience" the task of the "history of *thought*" (and not of the science, nor the rationality, nor the ideas) envisaged by Foucault (102), the archeao-genealogical method is intended to show apparatuses (*dispositifs*) as methodological fictions highlighting the particular experience of the relation to power (250).

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[7] G. Gutting, *The Archaeology of Scientific Reasoning*, Cambridge U. P., 1989: 5; M. Kusch, *Foucault's Strata and Field*, *An Investigation into Archaeological and Genealogical Science Studies*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1991: 5-12. In this sense Paltrinieri indirectly challenges M. Kusch (1991: 6): "As a reading of this text shows, however, Foucault's claim that there one finds 'the word, the text and the meaning to which I refer', is not believable; neither the term nor any meaning even vaguely resembling Foucaultian archaeology appears in the *Fortschritte*". Accordingly, Kusch maintains that the "real" and operative way of using "archaeology" can be found only from *La Naissance de La Clinique* (1963) onwards.

[8] In these pages it is deeply interesting the analysis of Foucault's relation to history and historians, to the *Annals Schools*, to the serial history and above all to P. Ariès, model for the elaboration of the historical thesis contained in *La volonté de savoir* (*Histoire de la sexualité*, I, *La volonté de savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979).

[9] On Foucault's nominalism and the non-existence of universals see P. Veyne, *Michel Foucault: sa pansée, sa personne*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2008.

[10] See the passage of the "Entretien avec Michel Foucault" (DE II: 866), quoted in Paltrinieri's *L'experience du concept*, where Foucault says about his *Surveiller et Punir*: "Dans le livre, s'exprime une expérience bien plus étendue que la mienne. Il n'a rien fait d'autre que s'inscrire dans quelque chose qui était effectivement en cours; dans, pourrions-nous dire, la transformation de l'homme contemporain par rapport à l'idée qu'il a de lui-même. D'autre part, le livre a aussi travaillé pour cette transformation. Il en a été même, pour une petite partie, un agent".

[11] To a certain extent it was P. Rabinow to canonize a sharply tripartite view of Foucault's philosophical path, organizing the English publications of his *Essential Works* along the three headlines of *knowledge*, *power* and *ethics*. See P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Vol. I *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1997), Vol. II *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology* (1998), Vol. III *Power* (2000), New York, The New Press. But accounts such as the aforementioned Kusch (1991) were already presenting a rather schematic dualism between archaeology and genealogy. On the contrary, for a reading closer to the intentions of Paltrinieri see A. I. Davidson, "Archéologie, Genealogie, Ethique", in *Michel Foucault: lectures critiques*, D. Couzens Hoy (éd.), De Boeck-Wesmae, Bruxelles, 1989: 250.

> L'expérience dont parle Foucault n'est cependant pas ce qui précède sa formulation concep-
> tuelle, qui en est toujours une trahison (solution bergsonienne), ni ce qui nous permet de re-
> trouver l'origine de la pensée conceptuelle en deçà du concept (solution phénoménolo-
> gique), ni ce qui est rendu possible par un système conceptuel (solution structuraliste). Les
> expériences qui intéressent Foucault sont toujours des expériences de la pensée qui nous
> permettent de prendre du recul, de la distance par rapport à ce que nous faisons, à nos
> comportements, à nos formes d'action (19)

The attempt at being reflexive and applying the "results" of Foucault's analysis to Fou-
cault's thought recursively is a relevant feature of the book. It is in this sense that the Author
refers to Foucault's "thought-experience" (104) in writing books, an experience which is gen-
erated anew by each new book, modifying Foucault's methodology and retrospective reading
of his past works. The Author operates a "mise en intelligibilité" (10) of Foucault's thought, to
capture the "form of his thought"; a sort of "archaeology" of Foucault's thought itself, a study
of the conditions of its emergence, thus trying to respond to Gutting's appeal:

> What reason is there to think that a twenty-first century successor to Foucault would not be
> able to carry out on archaeology the same sort of critical analysis that Foucault himself has
> carried out on the modern human sciences?[12]

In the Appendix to the V chapter, the Author engages in an insightful opening to con-
temporary Anglo-Saxon current of *historical epistemology*. What could have been shown in
more detail is the centrality the question of the "experiential-context" still has in the contem-
porary phase of historical epistemology: Davidson's *The Emergence of Sexuality* is clearly based
on the articulation of the possibility of the experience of perversion in relation to the emer-
gence of a specific "style of psychiatric reasoning", towards the end of the nineteenth centu-
ry.[13] Hacking, although with some delay, understood that his work around the category of
probability and the connected "statistic style of reasoning", were tentative answers to a very
similar sort of epistemological and ontological question.[14]

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[12] G. Gutting, 1989: 279. Our emphasis.

[13] A. I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts*, Harvard U.
P., 2001, XIII: "Historical epistemology attempts to show how this *new form of experience* that we call "sexuali-
ty" is linked to the emergence of new structures of knowledge, and especially to a new style of reasoning
and the concepts employed within it". Our emphasis. I. Hacking, "Historical Ontology" in *Historical Ontolo-
gy*, Harvard U. P., 2002, 23: "Historical ontology is not so much about the formation of character as about the
space of possibilities for character formation that surround a person, and create the *potentials for "individual
experience*." Our emphasis.

[14] It is nevertheless controversial to claim that Hacking has a philosophy of experience: whereas it is well-
known its philosophy of experiment, that is of scientific experience, a parallel extensive reflection on ordi-
nary or "lived" experience is certainly missing in his work. Historical epistemology as the history of "forms
of experience" is clearly more central in Davidson's than in Hacking's writings: for both the finding and
describing of "styles of reasoning" is crucial, but only in Davidson they are clearly connected since the be-
ginning with "ways of being a person".

L'expérience du concept provides a "continental reading", which is deeply attentive to the American reception of Foucault, marking it as one of the first works that combines the genesis and articulation of Foucault's thought with a reflection on the effects it had on the larger panorama of science studies, especially in the Anglo-American world.

In concluding, one cannot avoid underlining the enviable lucidity and perspicuity in penetrating the entangled mass of Foucaultian notions, often reduced to a muddle of ruins after years of an often pilfering and uncritical secondary literature. Moreover, given the rising curiosity and the increase in popularity of the historiographical model of historical epistemology, the Author's contribution is not of secondary importance, but rather sheds new light and fresh awareness upon the dusty scholarship of the French-triad of Bachelard, Canguilhem, and Foucault.

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