

## REVIEW

**David Webb, *Foucault's Archaeology: Science and Transformation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), ISBN 978-0-7486-2421-8**

As with few other contributions to the literature on Michel Foucault, David Webb's book<sup>1</sup> is refreshingly easy to describe: it is a chapter-by-chapter commentary on Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, flanked by an opening "Background" and some very brief "Closing Remarks," which serve to situate and defend the author's *Ansatzpunkt*, or toehold, within a certain subfield of the philosophy of science, to wit the epistemology and history of mathematics. Within this still rather vast intellectual domain, Webb operates a further delimitation, and selects the epistemo-historical reflections of Jean Cavailles, Gaston Bachelard, and Michel Serres, as his minimum heuristic set of philosophical "precedents" (1) for Foucault's methodological innovations in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

While the description of the book is simple, the task that Webb sets himself in it is anything but. In brief, he sets out to correct (non-polemically) the still widely popular narrative (no doubt encouraged by some of Foucault's own pronouncements) according to which the French philosopher 'turned' away from archaeology to genealogy on account of the former's presumed 'failure.' In this scenario, no sooner had Foucault finished *The Archaeology of Knowledge*<sup>2</sup> than he was finished *with* it (as both book and method). In contrast, Webb seeks to make the case that, far from being a failure, archaeology as a method in fact accomplishes a great deal, and that the book by the same title allows us to identify and take stock of precisely these accomplishments, which Foucault could then safely mobilize and rework in his later writings.

On my conservative count, there are three major and interrelated achievements of the *Archaeology* according to Webb. The first one is that it furthers a problematic or program that Foucault had been invested in since his secondary doctoral thesis,<sup>3</sup> but most explicitly in *The Order of Things*, namely the *continuation of 'critique' by other means*. As Webb rightly insists, it is not enough to describe these other means as *historical*: one has to understand

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<sup>1</sup> There are 181 pages in this hardcover edition (not 256, as advertised by various online retailers).

<sup>2</sup> Published in 1969 at Gallimard, it is Foucault's most sustained treatment of the eponymous method.

<sup>3</sup> Which consisted of Foucault's translation – with a copious Introduction – of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. The full text of the Introduction was only published in 2008 by Vrin, followed by its English translation the same year: Michel Foucault, *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology*, translated by Roberto Nigro and Kate Briggs (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2008).

history here in a precise sense, namely as “freed from the anthropological theme,”<sup>4</sup> i.e. from man as the “strange empirico-transcendental doublet”<sup>5</sup> (object and subject, or conditioned and condition of knowledge) bequeathed to us by Kantian philosophy. Foucault’s task in the *Archaeology*, therefore, is to show “how a condition can be a non-causal condition of experience, without standing above or apart from the experience it conditions” (33) – that is, without being empirical or transcendental.

If this is the problem to which Foucault responds (and so far Webb does not diverge from the standard interpretation of the *Archaeology*), then the book “can [...] be read,” as Webb himself does, “not just as a retrospective exercise in methodology covering his earlier works, but as an experiment in a form of thought that he saw taking shape in the wake of the disappearance of man” (7). Taking his cue from a remark in Foucault’s *Order of Things*<sup>6</sup> that is rarely discussed in the literature, Webb sets out to identify ‘precedents’ for this thoroughly historical (non-anthropological) form of thought in the philosophy of mathematics of the first half of the twentieth century, specifically in the writings of Jean Cavailles and Gaston Bachelard, but also in Michel Serres’ early work on the history and epistemology of mathematics, as well as his readings of Lucretius and Leibniz (7). What they all have in common is an effort to relax the “fundamental requirement for unity that characterised Kantian transcendental conditions” (14) by removing the putative source of such unity, i.e. the transcendental subject.

Thus, in explicit counterpoint to logicist epistemologies of mathematics like Kant’s or Husserl’s, Cavailles, for instance, takes a “constructivist line” (17), and insists that the only unity mathematics can aspire to is given by its own history, and not by some external, ‘more’ fundamental, or higher order principle, which can only “provide normativity at the expense of novelty” (19). Crucially, however, this history is not to be “assimilated to cultural history or a phenomenological conception of the lifeworld. It is a history of the transformations undergone by concepts and objects as they acquire their form at a particular moment, in a particular problematic” (*ibid.*). For lack of a better word, one could call it ‘conceptual,’ if it were not for the fact that concepts are no more privileged in this history than the problems they respond to, or the objects and subjectivities they help construct, or the rules

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002), 347.

<sup>6</sup> As the concept of ‘structure’ reopened the “relation of the human sciences to mathematics” (Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 416) in contemporary culture, Foucault notes, the concern for “a general formalization of thought and knowledge” (*Ibid.*, 417) and the questions associated with it “suddenly open up the possibility, and the task, [...] of applying a second critique of pure reason on the basis of new forms of the mathematical a priori” (*Ibid.*, 417-18). Avoiding polemics, Webb is content to find a precedent for Foucault’s ‘quasi-structuralism’ in the *Anthropology* in Serres, who also appreciated the opportunities offered up by a certain kind of formal analysis, but was “already aware of the limits of orthodox structuralism” (Webb, *Foucault’s Archaeology*, 23; see also 148). The strongest formulation occurs on page 120 (*ibid.*): “In steering a path between structuralism and hermeneutics, [Foucault] is implicitly following the programme for historical analysis that Serres proposed in 1961.”

that form them all. Importantly, Webb argues that it is this “mathematical background to archaeology [that] allows Foucault to introduce the idea of historical a priori conditions for discourse without repeating the distinction between the transcendental and empirical that would tie archaeology back into the situation from which it aims to break free” (2), namely the big ‘anthropological sleep’ that had led modern thought into impasse, according to Foucault’s diagnosis in the *Order of Things* (46).

The second major achievement of the *Archaeology* on Webb’s account is that it offers, in support of its revised concept of history (non-memorial, ‘monumental,’ tabular, etc.), a model of *temporal dispersion* that Foucault’s later, so-called genealogical, writings will further refine to fit their shift in emphasis from discursive to non-discursive practices, but not challenge<sup>7</sup> (e.g. 135). Here, again, Webb finds precedents in Bachelard’s temporal atomism, and Serres’ *Hermes* books and reading of Lucretius, but even more to his credit he valorizes Foucault’s reflections on the role of time in “the dispersion of syntheses”<sup>8</sup> in Kant’s *Anthropology*, rather than their unification, as in the first *Critique*: “Time [in Kant’s *Anthropology*] is not that *in* which, *through* which, and *by* which synthesis is achieved; it wears away the synthetic activity itself.”<sup>9</sup> Webb then convincingly connects these reflections to the associated motif – in the *Order of Things* and the *Archaeology* – of the overcoming of what Foucault refers to as the ‘analytic of finitude,’ which only rehearses and further entrenches the anthropological doubling characteristic of modernity (esp. 34-38). This model of temporal dispersion is an achievement of Foucault’s archaeology, according to Webb, precisely because it offers an alternative (137) to Heidegger’s hermeneutics of Dasein in *Being and Time*, and his famous ‘interpretation’ of Kantian anthropology in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, both of which persevere in the transcendental direction of temporal unification through an even ‘more’ fundamental form of ontological analysis.<sup>10</sup>

The third major achievement of the *Anthropology*, on Webb’s account, is that it sets an *experimental* (‘constructivist’) tone in the writing of intellectual history that is both argued for and brilliantly executed, and that Foucault’s late writings on the ‘aesthetics of the

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<sup>7</sup> Webb forgoes any detailed discussion of other Foucauldian texts (‘archaeological’ or ‘genealogical’). When he refers to them, or sketches lines of development among them, it is only for the sake of clarifying the stakes of the *Archaeology*. Yet, Webb’s commentary reads all the better for this self-limitation: in a collaborative spirit, he invites his readers to further test his hypothesis against other works by Foucault, or read around the topic to make up for the briefness of his discussions of Bachelard, Cavailles, and Serres, or for the omission of other thinkers (Canguilhem and Althusser) who have been discussed more extensively in the literature (Webb, *Foucault’s Archaeology*, 2).

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology*, 89, cited in Webb, *Foucault’s Archaeology*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology*, 90. As Webb astutely remarks, “Paradoxically, it is in Kant’s *Anthropology* that Foucault finds the first traces of a process that will lead to the disappearance of man” (37).

<sup>10</sup> See also Webb, *Foucault’s Archaeology*, 99-103, for the quickly drawn but suggestive contrast between the two thinkers on the issue of language: “while Foucault can describe discourse, as did Heidegger, as the ontological condition of language, this is because it is the site not of the disclosure of Being, but of the construction of what is” (99).

self' will thematize and expand on (165f). Indeed, in raising the issue of the 'value' of archaeology (what it is good for? why should we prefer it to other types of analysis?), Webb notes that, "[i]f there is a prevailing value here, it is that of experimentation, and the possibility of transforming the conditions of existence" (128). This remark ties in with the most heuristically successful part of Webb's commentary, to my mind, namely his argument that we understand Foucault's emphasis on 'rules' as 'regularities' in the *Archaeology* in the spirit of the much sought after historical *a priori*s (always multiplying out of reason's control), i.e. as conditions that do not stand 'apart or above the experience they condition.'

Webb explicitly draws here on Serres's notion of regularity in *The Birth of Physics*, in order to describe a "recursive mechanism by virtue of which what is conditioned bears on the conditions that preceded it" (103), which is structurally isomorphic with the "feedback loop from discursive events to their conditions" (155) that gives the concept of 'rule' (or 'law') in *Anthropology* its bite. Precisely because it emerges from the discontinuous elements of a series to which it can then be said to apply, a regularity is not a formal condition (i.e. a condition of possibility) but rather a 'condition of existence,' as Foucault never tires to insist (see 58, 62f, 66f, 82f, 110, 155, etc.). Contra classical metaphysics, Kantian philosophy, and phenomenology (103f), which maintain the separation between condition and conditioned (as well as transcendental and empirical, structure and development, metalanguage and language, normative and descriptive, continuity and discontinuity, etc.), the concept of 'regularity' serves to blur such traditional distinctions by "requir[ing] a close alternation" (46) between their poles. Thus, a focus on regularities undoes the (hierarchical) privileges of "priority and irreversibility" (117) that accrue traditionally to the marked side of the philosophical division. Yet, the archaeological description of regularities does not simply reverse this hierarchy (it is not a form of dialectical analysis, or ideology critique) but rather "sets out a view of plural transformations in which continuity and discontinuity [as well as condition and conditioned, structure and development, etc.] both feature" (138) – to the point of allowing these distinctions not only to blur, but also eventually to "fade away altogether" (136).

It is in this letting-fade-away of traditional dichotomies that Webb locates the experimental and transformative potential of Foucault's archaeology. As he points out with respect to the impossibility of morality in modernity diagnosed in *The Order of Things*, "Archaeology does not promise a direct response to this problem, but it does describe a change to the framework in which the problem arises" (164). To wit, archaeological description cannot be a direct, frontal, rational-instrumental intervention (155), since it cannot determine its own 'archive' (meaning that it cannot ground itself as if from on-high-and-outside the very historical process it describes). Unlike a classical epistemological discourse that looks for the criteria that legitimate a certain form of knowledge as 'true' necessarily, archaeology "has a certain [infinite, see 142] openness and revisability built into it" (46) in virtue of the "two-way communication between conditions and conditioned" (104). And this revisability applies to the effect of its descriptions on the regularities it targets. Archeology is thus a kind of 're-writing' (or 'recursive analysis,' in Foucault's words), which involves a

certain repetition that – in the manner of the internal epistemology of mathematics discussed by Serres – not only rehearses the movement through which regularities get formed, but also “adds to the pattern of regularities” (24) and transforms this pattern ever so slightly. On Webb’s sympathetic reading then, Foucault’s archaeological redescription of modernity may just be a step beyond it.

This brief presentation hopefully explains why, though play-by-play, Webb’s book is not simply a running commentary on the *Archaeology*. (Even if it were, it should still be of great service to the community of Foucault’s readers, since the *Archaeology* is by far the least ‘popular’ and most stultifying of his texts, with its cascading terminological innovations, its sprawling, obdurate flatness, and its unrelieved abstraction.) There is a fair amount of rational, philosophical reconstruction that goes into Webb’s account. Indeed, if we imagine for a moment Foucault’s massive conceptual patchwork in the *Archaeology* as a catoptric anamorphosis, in which the relentless multiplication and marshalling of distinctions, concepts, and layers of analysis produce blurring or distorting effects, then Webb’s rational-reconstructive work in this commentary functions like a conical or cylindrical mirror placed orthogonally on it, which makes the otherwise flat and distorted image visible in depth, or vertically, and from more than one angle.

However, it is this very rational-reconstructive push of Webb’s commentary that in the end has to be squared with the ‘constructivist’ pull of Foucault’s text, insofar as it raises the issue of this commentary’s very status: is Webb’s proposal that we consider Foucault’s archaeology in light of its mathematical ‘precedents’ just another interpretation? Or is it the ‘right’ interpretation? More importantly, is it an interpretation at all? My optical metaphor seems loaded, in that it appears to imply answering ‘yes’ to the last two questions: anamorphic processes have historically been used as a means of disguising and disseminating ‘confidential’ contents to an advised public. However, it is not my intention to suggest that the *Archaeology* deals in clandestine wares, despite Foucault’s conspiratorial innuendos. My suggestion is rather that Webb’s commentary strikes an uneasy yet ultimately productive compromise between an ‘interpretive’ and a ‘constructive’ attitude, just like a cylindrical mirror placed vertically on an anamorphic image not only corrects its distortion but also makes it visible from a plurality of angles.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Webb’s homage to Foucault consists in treating archaeology the way the latter treated discursive events and regularities, namely as a ‘live’ method operating at a sub-visible – yet describable – level that is not hidden or secret, and that therefore requires not a hermeneutic deciphering, but rather a ‘technical’ (formal) one.

While not purporting to be “the final word” (2), Webb’s commentary aims to provide just such a technical redescription of the *Archaeology* that would make it available for further interpretation from any number of other perspectives. The historical-legal category that Webb leans on most in his reconstruction, namely ‘precedent,’ is a case in point. (Occasionally, Webb talks of ‘predecessors,’ but he is generally careful not to employ the vocabu-

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<sup>11</sup> In contrast, oblique or perspectival anamorphosis, famously used by Hans Holbein the Younger in *The Ambassadors*, requires one to occupy a particular vantage in order to correct the distortion of the image.

lary of the history of ideas.) As we know, in common law, a precedent is a decision made in a particular case that becomes binding, or paradigmatic – a ‘rule’ – for a whole series of subsequent cases that involve similar issues or facts. The question, however, arises whether the legal metaphor (despite superficial commonalities with the regularities of Serres and Foucault) does not return Webb to a continuous space of reason(s) and similarity: for arguing from precedent is a form of justification, or legitimation, and hence normative rather than descriptive. More specifically, the ambiguity that creeps into Webb’s account as an argument from precedent concerns the principle of continuity (*‘stare decisis’* in legal jargon, which mandates that judges abide by previous decisions), and the extent to which it predisposes Webb to emphasize, in Foucault’s intellectual trajectory, continuous macro-change over discontinuous micro-transformations (and so adopt an interpretive stance). This issue (the uneasy side of the compromise I was alluding to above) remains suspended in Webb’s commentary, where most time is spent arguing for the similarities or analogies between Foucault’s approach and the epistemological and historical reflections of Cavailles, Bachelard, and Serres, and only a fraction is devoted to tracking the specific transformations that occur as Foucault is “translating them from mathematics to the human sciences” (61). Yet, I agree with Webb’s principled stance that a narrative pressing too much on discontinuity – here the “radical shift from archaeology to genealogy” (136) – merely reverses the undue privileges accorded continuity by the history of ideas (138f), and is no more informative about the plurality of minute transformations that take place in and among Foucault’s works than the master category of change criticized by Foucault.

In sum, thanks to its specialized focus, modest size, and brevity of style, David Webb’s book has a lot to offer to anyone interested in Foucault, whether this interest is philosophical, historical, or simply intellectual. Foucault experts will find much to work with – along or against the grain of Webb’s reconstruction.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, if carefully and patiently unpacked,<sup>13</sup> this book can be a great resource for any course introducing students (even at the undergraduate level) to Foucault’s *Archaeology*, his “Discourse (on) Method.”

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<sup>12</sup> It can, for instance, help clarify the stakes of a debate hosted by this very journal a few years back on the issue of Foucault’s transcendentalism. See Colin Koopman, “Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages”, *Foucault Studies*, 8 (February 2010), 100-121; Kevin Thompson, “Response to Colin Koopman’s ‘Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages’”, *ibid.*, 122-128; and Colin Koopman, “Historical Conditions or Transcendental Conditions: Response to Kevin Thompson’s Response”, *ibid.*, 129-135.

<sup>13</sup> And, one should hope, also corrected at the level of copy, by the time the paperback rolls out. Though not so many as to riddle the text, the typos are still distracting – even misleading on one occasion, i.e. the misspelling of a phenomenological *terminus technicus* in French (*le vécu*) in endnote 2 on page 166. The issue would be minor, if the same note were not promising to correct an oversight in the English translation of *The Order of Things*, which renders *le vécu* as ‘actual experience’ instead of ‘lived experience,’ as Husserl’s *Erlebnis* is generally translated. This correction is in fact forgotten quite quickly, and Webb soon returns to ‘actual experience’ in the body of the text.

*Arvatu: Review of David Webb*

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