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BOOK REVIEW

Marcelo Hoffman, *Foucault and Power: The Influence of Political Engagement on Theories of Power* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), i-ix, 1-221, hb \$120.00 (US), ISBN: 9781441180940

There is a widely felt temptation in interpreting Foucault's writings on power to try to sever his *theorization* of power from his contemporary *practice* as a political activist and an organiser. Accordingly, what he says *of* power and the ways in which he seeks to exercise and practice it are two separate and eminently severable domains. For many, this interpretive temptation becomes nigh on impossible to resist in certain (in)famous cases where the particular position Foucault adopts at the time is seen to be a troubling or an unpopular one. "We suggest that there is no embarrassment in holding that some of Foucault's own political stances, such as his naïve 'abolitionist' views about criminal justice or his ill-advised enthusiasm for the regime of the mullahs in Iran," opine socio-legal scholars Alan Hunt and Gary Wickham, for example, "are frankly silly and barely worth debating [...] [A]ny serious assessment of Foucault depends not on the causes he espouses but on what those who read him can do with his enormously fertile leads and suggestions."¹ This tendency is puzzling. It is hardly the case that Foucault's political activities are unknown or unremarked by scholars—indeed, detailed discussions of them occupy many of the pages of Foucault's biographies. But then again, as Marcelo Hoffman observes in his recent and excellent book, *Foucault and Power*, the man himself arguably contributed to the separation between the theory and practice of power in "keep[ing] something of a distance between his discussions of these [his own, political] struggles and his theoretical presentations, as if they belonged to two markedly distinct, if not separate, registers" (6). Possibly this separation of the theoretical and the practical was abetted also by Foucault's own rather too-cute insistence, taken to untenable extremes by many of his subsequent readers, that his theoretical interventions merely constituted a set of disparate "tools" and thus fell short of establishing an integrated approach to whatever its

¹ A. Hunt and G. Wickham, *Foucault and Law: Towards a Sociology of Law as Governance* (London: Pluto, 1994), 36.

object was, especially an object (in Foucault's hands, at any rate) as fissiparous as modern technologies of power.

It is one of the great achievements of Hoffman's *Foucault and Power* that in returning anew to the well-trod territory of "Foucault and power" it not only resists the temptation to separate the theoretical and the practical but in fact explicitly attempts to reunite them in something approaching a Foucaultian *praxis* whereby "Foucault's thinking about power was *dialectically* related to his political practices" (8, his emphasis). Hofmann's argument is that we cannot hope fully to understand either Foucault's practice as a political militant (another distinguishing feature: Hofmann insists, correctly in my view, on reading Foucault as a militant political actor right up until the end of his life) or his diverse theorisations of power in isolation from each other. Instead, he contends that reading the practical and the theoretical dimensions of Foucault's work in relation to each other reveals a rich set of insights about each and that insights derived from his practice as a political militant fed into his theoretical work, and vice versa. (This is essentially what Hofmann means by describing, as he does on page 8 and repeatedly thereafter, a "loosely dialectical interplay" between the theoretical and the practical. In his conclusion he is at pains to stress that Foucault would doubtless, and doubtless he is right, have refused an explicit self-understanding of his own work as "dialectical" in the classic Marxist sense. Thus far did he journey with Maoists, but no further.)

Hofmann sustains what is an original, powerful, and insightful argument over the course of four substantive chapters, a brief introduction where he lays out the argument of the book as a whole and a brief conclusion where he takes gentle issue with Julian Reid's critical treatment of Foucault in his *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror*.² In addition, Hoffman has included a lengthy appendix which is his translation of the first pamphlet report of the *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (the "GIP") entitled *Investigation in 20 Prisons*. It is impossible to do justice to the close and careful readings that Hofmann provides in each of the substantive chapters, but I shall first attempt briefly to survey them and then to suggest what I think some of the interpretive and political stakes of Hofmann's reading of Foucault are, and consequently what some of its achievements are.

Foucault and Power tracks three important moments in Foucault's career as a militant political activist and seeks to show how each related to his theorisation, and re-theorisation, of power relations. Doubtless there are other moments but I think, in selecting Foucault's engagement with the GIP in Chapter Two, Foucault's oft-misinterpreted and frequently condemned work on the Iranian Revolution in Chapter Four, and his late work in support of the Solidarity movement in Poland in Chapter Five, Hofmann has chosen some very important and revealing case studies. (Chapter Three, entitled "Beyond the Bellicose Model of Power?" is actually the longest of the substantive chapters and it sees Hoffman entering the debates over whether Foucault, in the years

² J. Reid, *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror: Life Struggles, Liberal Modernity, and the Defence of Logistical Societies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

after his Collège lecture course of 1976, "*Society Must be Defended*," jettisoned the "war model" in favour of governmentality or "power as conduct" as a way to understand relations of power).

In each of the three case study chapters, Hoffman deftly shows how Foucault's thinking of power was affected by insights gained through political struggle and how, in turn, these practical political engagements were underpinned (and sometimes problematised by) theoretical insights about power made in the written work. In Chapter Two, "Foucault, the Prisoner Support Movement, and Disciplinary Power," for example, Hoffman argues that Foucault's work with the GIP prepared the way for his theorisation of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish* and that the latter text has to be understood in the context of his collective struggles, through the GIP, over the intolerable conditions in French prisons. Hoffman contends that many of the central themes of Foucault's later analysis of disciplinary power (such as, for example, the spatial partitioning of prisoners' bodies and the temporal control of their movements and location) are prefigured in the information produced through the GIP, especially in the *Investigation in 20 Prisons* pamphlet reproduced in the book as an appendix. Hoffman then goes on to suggest that Foucault, in the years after his withdrawal from it, generated a "critical dialogue with the prisoner support movement" (39) on the basis of theoretical insights developed in *Discipline and Punish*; (over, for example, the necessity to conduct broader struggles against forms of disciplinary power beyond the prison, and the challenges of constituting a resistant collectivity in the context of a form of power dedicated to "the decomposition of collective activities" (38)). In Chapter Four, "People versus Population: Foucault on the Iranian Revolution," Hoffman advances the argument that Foucault makes a radical shift in his thinking on biopolitics in the late 1970s, ultimately jettisoning it in favour of the notion of governmentality. According to Hoffman, biopolitics, in focusing on population as an object of regulation, failed to capture the subjective dimension of the population (i.e. its being not only acted upon and objectified, but *also* acting—that is, its status as a "subject-object correlative to security techniques" (10)). Hoffman then poses a second distinction between the notion of the *people* and that of the *population* as constituted by liberal security apparatuses in order to help explain Foucault's fascination with the Iranian revolution. On Hoffman's account, Foucault's interest in Iran (*pace* Afary and Anderson, *et. al.*)³ was not motivated by a fanatical adherence to tradition over modernity but rather in the prospects that the Revolution fleetingly disclosed, in the figure of "the people," a collective political opposition *beyond* liberal figures of population. Finally, in Chapter Five, "Foucault, Poland, and *Parrhesia*," Hoffman neatly traces the connections between the philosopher's late reflections on the Stoic practice of *parrhesia*, or frankness in truth-telling, in his Collège lecture courses, *The Government of Self and Others* and *The Courage of Truth*, and his engagement with the French government over its handling of the 1981 coup and the repression of the Solidarity trade union movement.

³ J. Afary and K. B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

This is an excellent and a thought-provoking book from which I have learnt a great deal. As with all thought-provoking books there are elements with which Foucault scholars will no doubt (productively) disagree (as some will, I expect, with Hoffman's arguments about the continuing relevance of the "war model" of power in Foucault's later work, as pursued in Chapter Two, or with the contention that Foucault summarily rejects biopolitics in favour of governmentality, as argued in Chapter Four). But there is very little, almost nothing, to find fault with in the quality of Hoffman's scholarship, his astute yet creative readings of the different moments in Foucault's work, and his powerful interpretive premise that in order to understand Foucault the theorist of power we need first, or simultaneously, to come to grips with Foucault the militant political actor. And, that Hoffman's Foucault is primarily a militant sets him apart from many of the more anodyne Foucaults doing service in the Academy today. *Foucault and Power* is a patient and well-argued interpretation of Foucault the thinker, but its political stakes are clear. In contending that Foucault continues to think about power in bellicose and strategic terms well into his late work, and in his insistence that the philosopher remains politically engaged to the end (that is, against the readings of Eric Paras and others that contend that Foucault morphs into a liberal ethicist in late life),⁴ Hoffman manages to achieve that rarest of feats: a return to Foucault's texts that puts us back in touch with some of the pressing political motivations behind the theorisations many of us know so well (and that in other hands have become somewhat tired, mantric, platitudinous). In his concluding chapter Hoffman takes issue with a criticism that Julian Reid makes of the philosopher in his book *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror*; namely that, in Hoffman's words, whilst Foucault "offers an acute analysis of the disciplinary subjugation of bodies and the biopolitical subjugation of populations in liberal societies" (151) he does not provide a way to think beyond or to conceptualize life beyond these subjugations. Reid here rehearses a familiar critique of Foucault made by a range of different thinkers in a range of different (epistemological, normative, practical) registers. And such a critique (as many readers leaping to Foucault's defence have done) can be answered in a range of ways. Hoffman's approach (*contra* Reid, who turns to a series of other thinkers to remedy Foucault's supposed defect) is to return to Foucault to insist that "an answer to the question of what life may become beyond its disciplinary and biopolitical subjectification" (153) is already there in the dialectic of theoretical word and political deed, in Foucault's exemplifying a critical philosopher engaged with, consumed by, and responsive to his present in critical philosophy as *praxis* and as a way of life. What, in the end, could be more Foucaultian than that?

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⁴ E. Paras, *Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge* (New York: Other Press, 2006).

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