Foucault Studies

BOOK REVIEW

P. Cesaroni and S. Chignola (eds.), *La forza del vero; Un seminario sui Corsi di Michel Foucault al Collège de France (1981-1984)* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2013), 7-179, € 15.00, ISBN: 978-88-97522-54-6

With the publication of the whole series of his lectures at Collège de France, Foucault's theoretical and political experience in the 1980s has become one of the major focuses of critical investigation. As is clearly explained in the short introduction by Sandro Chignola, the authors of the essays composing this carefully crafted edited volume share a common take on this period of Foucault's philosophical production, which can be articulated along two fundamental claims: on the one hand, his late ethical inquiries into the ancient and Christian worlds are regarded as a change of perspective that brings to light the aim of his philosophical enterprise as a whole, namely, a practice of critique as historical problematization of the limits that shape our ways of thinking and acting in the present. On the other hand, by tracing the source of many of the current misunderstandings in the view of Foucault as a philosopher obsessed with power, the authors see in his late notion of "governmentality" the way Foucault chooses to dispose such an obsession in order to strategically analyze the antagonistic relations between freedom and deployments of seizure in their historical contingency. Bearing this background in mind, I shall show that *La forza del vero* has the distinctive merit to examine a cluster of problematics drawing a still little-known trajectory of Foucault's thought, according to which his well-known Greco-Latin "trip"[1] should not be understood as a consolatory disengagement from politics but rather as a profound radicalization of the task "to refuse what we are,"[2] namely to identify resources and tools for courageously inventing alternatives to the forms of modern power. To this end, given the heterogeneity of the themes tackled, I shall proceed by reviewing each of the essays in turn, while at the same time affording a possible line of reading that connects them to one another.

The collection opens with an essay by Frédéric Gros dedicated to "The Treatises on Marriage and the Question of the Sexualisation of Eros in *Subjectivity and Truth*." Although it finds its full-fledge account only in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Gros cogently argues that Foucault's 1981 lectures are already organized around the irreducible distinction he draws be-

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[1] M. Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-84*, edited by A. I. Davidson, translated by G. Burchell (London and New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2011), 2.

[2] M. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in J. D. Faubion (ed.), R. Hurley *et al* (eds.), *Power; Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 3* (New York: New Press, 2000), 336.

tween the ancient idea of *bios* as a material to be shaped through a specific set of techniques, and the mode of subjectivation proper to the Christian hermeneutics of desire. Indeed, whereas Christianity comes to define a framework of obedience based on the confession of one's own hidden desires and the redeeming conversion towards a transcendent truth, the ancient wisdom of *bios* points to modalities of experience characterized by the ethical striving towards "immanent goals," which can only be attained through a laborious work of transformation carried out by the self upon itself (21). However, *Subjectivity and Truth* is not just a mere preview of the themes developed in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Rather, by exploring the articulated sexual experience of the ancient subject, it ends up representing a further step in the archaeo-genealogical reconstruction of the division between the ancient styles of life and the Christian subject. As Gros clarifies, this distinction stems from a "rift internal to antiquity itself," namely from the difference between the classical Greek ethos and a Roman one which takes shape in the stoicism of the imperial age (22). While in the Greek regime the question of the truth of *eros* is completely desexualized and the mastery of one's pleasures (*aphrodisia*) is connected to one's status as socio-political agent, for Foucault the Hellenistic and Roman generalized appeal to heterosexual marriage determines a progressive synthesis of these two poles followed by the consequent erotization of sexual pleasure, whereby the couple relationship becomes the structure of veridiction of "a first and pagan hermeneutics of desire" (29). In this sense, rejecting the common impression of a monolithic fascination, Gros' detailed analysis of Foucault's 1981 still untranslated lectures provides a far more nuanced picture of Foucault's position with regard to ancient ethics, thus helping us account for the historical changes in the constitution of the subject that have "led us up to the modern concept of the self."[3]

For Foucault, then, there is a fundamental ambivalence in Greco-Latin stoicism: on the one hand, it represents an anticipation of the colonization of the ancient techniques of the self by the normalizing morality of Christianity. On the other, as he explains in 1982, it epitomises a certain culture of the self that finds in the moral theories of the 16th century – particularly in the work of Montaigne – an unexpected moment of renovation.[4] As its title "'*Techne tou biou*'; Foucault after Montaigne" suggests, the bulk of Paolo Slongo's contribution consists exactly in providing a thorough examination of this renewal, focusing especially on the affinities between Montaigne's notion of *franchise* (frank-spokeness) and Foucault's account of *parrhesia*. To this end, two elements appear as crucial: firstly, Slongo argues that the displacement Socrates' *parrhesiastic* mode of living operates with respect to the constituted order of the community represents the common point of reference for both the resisting practice of *franchise* of Montaigne's *Essays* and for the critical, ethopoietic attitude of Foucault's own philosophical enterprise (80-90). Secondly, although he blurs Foucault's shift from the war-like schema of power to the notion of government in the 1970s, Slongo rightly contends that Foucault's late conceptualisation of "agonistic" processes of subjectivation marks the definitive dismissal of the model of Law in favour of an "ethics of distance" based on a constant, perfectionist negotia-

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[3] M. Foucault (1993), "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutic of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth", *Political Theory*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1993), 201.

[4] M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France (1981-1982)*, edited by A. I. Davidson, translated by G. Burchell (London and New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2005), 251.

tion with moral codes (96). As Slongo concludes, then, in accordance with Montaigne's reflec-
tions, Foucault's *parrhesiastic* subject is not the Kantian subject of the moral Law but rather the
Nietzschean subject as an instance of valorization, i.e. the subject of *askesis* capable of coura-
geously turning truth into the ethical force of a self-fashioning practice of freedom.

The theme of *askesis* represents one of the most fruitful theoretical nodes Sandro Chi-
gnola refers to in his attempt to reveal the startling consonances between Foucault's late ethi-
cal investigations and Weber's thought. After identifying the common matrix of Foucault's *his-
torie fiction* and Weber's method of ideal types in Nietzsche's perspectivism – whereby the his-
torical problematization of our present operates a selective, partisan reconstruction of past
singular events in order to open up displacing and transformative possibilities in the future
(47-57) –, in the second section of his essay "'Phantasiebildern'/ 'historie fiction'; Weber, Fou-
cault" Chignola detects in Weber's account of the protestant *Lebensführung* the theoretical cata-
lyst of Foucault's later inquiries into the ancient practices of subjectivation. Indeed, whereas in
The Government of the Living Foucault still concentrates his attention on the regime of obedi-
ence defined by the juridico-confessional technologies of Christian monasticism,[5] his 1982 ex-
amination of the subjectivizing techniques of veridiction of the stoic *askesis* clearly resonates
with Weber's portray of puritan asceticism as a rational and immanent "counter-conduct
against pastoral power" (67). In this respect, as Chignola clarifies, both the protestant ethics
and the spiritual exercises of stoicism do not point to a form of sacrificial renunciation, but ra-
ther to "practices of constant test of the degree of self-mastery and self-government that con-
stitute the subject by decentring self-reflection from the paradigm of self-consciousness" (69).
More generally, therefore, Chignola's meticulous analysis of Foucault's convergence with We-
ber brings to light the crucial role played by the "discovery" of the techniques of the self not
only in Foucault's reformulation of power in terms of the elliptic relationship of governmen-
tality, but also in his elaboration of "an ethics of dedication and commitment" (64), which
seems to find in the Greek notion of *parrhesia* its seminal formulation.

In 1983 Foucault recognizes that the archaeology of this notion goes much further back
than its ethical configuration in stoicism. Indeed, *parrhesia*'s original context of emergence is
represented by the political constitution of the Athenian democracy (*politeia*), within which the
exercise of *parrhesia* comes to depend on the equal right of every citizen to speak in front of the
public assembly (*isegoria*).[6] However, according to Foucault's detailed analysis of Euripides'
tragedy *Ion*, *isegoria* would be just one of the two indispensable criteria for *parrhesia* to occur.
The second one should be traced in the condition of autochthony, according to which only a
person whose parents are born in Athens can effectively practice *parrhesia*, thus fully enjoying
her citizenship rights.[7] Now, through a compelling re-examination of Euripides' tragedy, the
aim of Gaetano Rametta's essay ("Autochthony and *parrhesia*; Foucault as a reader of *Ion*"), is
to problematize Foucault's interpretation by questioning exactly this connection between *par-*

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[5] See M. Foucault, *On the Government of the Living; Lectures at the Collège de France (1979-80)*, edited by A. I.
Davidson, translated by G. Burchell (London and New York : Palgrave McMillan, 2014), especially the last 4
lectures.

[6] See M. Foucault (2010), *The Government of Self and Others; Lectures at the Collège de France (1982-83)*, edited by
A. I. Davidson, translated by G. Burchell (London and New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2010), 157.

[7] Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 106.

rhesia and autochthony. Here, I shall limit myself to the last part of Rametta's essay, where he investigates the crucial consequences of Athena's command to conceal from Xuto the finally recognized descent of Ion from Creusa. According to his argument, far from confirming the indissoluble knot between autochthony and *parrhesia* – as Foucault suggests –, what the imposed secret shows is that *parrhesia* ends up "untying itself from autochthony" (129), whereby, as *parrhesiastes*, Ion remains the son of a stranger in the eyes of his fellow citizens. Hence, as Rametta concludes, Ion appears essentially as a reformist figure, whose role consists in no longer connecting the rights of citizenship to the criterion of autochthony but rather to "politics as the exercise of freedom" (131), i.e. to the antagonistic dimension of democracy as a *parrhesiastic* game.

The developments of Foucault's account of *parrhesia* are at the centre of Pierpaolo Cesaroni's contribution entitled "Truth and Life; Philosophy in *The Courage of the Truth.*" After providing a lengthy but effective exposition of Foucault's treatment of this notion in his very last course at Collège the France, Cesaroni dwells on the difference Foucault draws between the Socratic-Platonic version and the Cynic formulation of ethical *parrhesia*. In particular, instead of reducing such discrepancy to the opposition between the metaphysical call for "the projection of one's own self into an other world" (153) and the immanence of the cynic idea of the manifestation of the truth in one's own life, Cesaroni remarks that for Foucault these forms of *parrhesia* also represent "two quite different […] stylistics,"[8] two divergent modes of thinking about life. On the one hand, in Platonic *parrhesia* the truth that reveals itself in life's ethical differentiation is the truth of the soul turned towards justice and the Good, a truth that – albeit not external to this world – transcends it by giving it a well-defined order. On the other hand, the truth embodied in Cynic *parrhesia* is "the truth of life itself," whereby Cynic *parrhesia* aims not at Plato's "just life" but rather at a paradoxical "animal life" deprived of any transcendent principle of order (155). Although his argument becomes rather blurred, Cesaroni's paper is to be praised for his attempt to help the reader understand this problematic division through the appeal to other texts, such as Foucault's posthumously published essay on Canguilhem entitled "La vie: l'expérience et la science."[9] Here the alternative Foucault establishes between the idea of organism and Canguilhem's reference to the biological notions of "information" and "error" parallels his own distinction between Platonic and Cynic *parrhesia*: indeed, whereas the *reductio ad unum* inherent in the shaping power of the transcendent principle governing Platonic *parrhesia* reproduces the well-articulated totality of the organic structure of the living, Cynic *parrhesia* can be seen as the embodied expression of the idea of thought as "the reply life gives to its aleatory dimension"[10] thus representing the enabling condition of the problematizing activity of thought itself, i.e. the acquisition of the critical distance necessary to engage "in the transformation of the current modes of life and in the creation of new forms of subjectivity" (160).

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[8] Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, 255.

[9] M. Foucault, "La vie: l'expérience et la science," in D. Defert and F. Ewald (eds.), *Dits et écrits II; 1976-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1582-95.

[10] M. Foucault, "Life: Experience and Science," in J. D. Faubion (ed.), R. Hurley *et al.* (trans.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology; Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 2* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 476, translation amended.

In this sense, as Judith Revel argues in her essay "Strolls, Small Excursuses and Historical Regimes," Foucault astonishingly ends up describing Cynic *parrhesia* as a trans-historical attitude, as an ideal-type profile that traverses the entire history of the West.[11] However, as Revel emphasises, this trans-historical configuration appears at odds with the common view of Foucault as a philosopher only concerned with archaeo-genealogical periodizations revealing the discontinuities that mark the emergence of different regimes of truth in the course of history (168). Now, in order to solve this tension, Revel provides an insightful examination of the two commentaries Foucault devotes to Kant's text *Was ist Aufklärung?* According to Foucault's reading, Enlightenment designates not merely a historical period, but also a distinctive ethos, namely a critical attitude characterized by a specific relationship to its own actuality.[12] Consequently, such an attitude comes to define a third form of philosophical interrogation, which points to "the voluntary experimentation of lines of conduct and modes of life" capable of introducing a difference between our present and our actuality, i.e. between what we are and what we might potentially become (178). Far from displacing the archaeology of past epistemes and the genealogy of our present, therefore, Revel proposes a vitalistic reading of this inventive attitude, according to which the latter opens history onto its own virtual surplus, thereby configuring itself as "an ethics of freedom and transformation" (179) intrinsically oriented to the future.

In conclusion, through an original blend of historiographic analysis and critical inquiry, Cesaroni's and Chignola's *La forza del vero* provides the primarily academic audience with a much welcomed, fresh new look on the still largely unexplored series of Foucault's 1980s lectures at Collège de France, which increases the need for Anglophone publishers to translate more of the continental work produced on Foucault. Avoiding the fixation of an interpretative canon, the result is a composite picture of Foucault's long detour through the ancient world, according to which the latter appears as the perspective guiding not only his reflections on (or better with) authors like Montaigne, Kant, Weber, and Canguilhem, but also his call for a new politics of truth, i.e. a politics of the governed as "the risky occasion for the reinvention of our relationship with ourselves and with others" (12) outside the constraints of the present. In the wake of Foucault, *La forza del vero* presents an exciting and enriching collection of essays in support of this call.

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[11] Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, 177-178.
[12] M. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in P. Rabinow (ed.), R. Hurley *et al* (eds.), *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth; Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, *Volume 1* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 309.