Foucault Studies

BOOK REVIEW

Mariana Valverde, *Michel Foucault* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2017), ISBN: 978-1-138-65708-3.

It speaks to the importance of Michel Foucault's work for contemporary criminology that Mariana Valverde's *Michel Foucault* was the first book to be released in Routledge's new series 'Key Thinkers in Criminology'. The reception of Foucault's thought has, in her account, enabled critical criminology to surpass the limitations of its Marxist heritage by shifting attention from ideological functions to problematizations, that is, to the practices of rendering some phenomenon as a problem for theory or society (8-10). His attention to practices follows Nietzsche's insight that philosophy and theory present "*ex post facto* rationalizations*" of existing social practices (18), which serves as a critique of a functionalist fallacy at work in, for example, the discourse of ideological functions. The functionalist fallacy posits that the reason of existence of a certain phenomenon is the function it fulfills in a given social order. Against this, the genealogical approach of Foucault and Nietzsche aims to show that practices can travel between contexts, rise to dominance, be forgotten, and then suddenly be retrieved from times past, all the while taking on new functions and meanings (18-21). Breaking with the triad of "acts, persons or institutions" (16), this attention to practices and problematizations significantly expands criminology's field of study because the practices it investigates may be found in, but are not restricted to, the fields of criminal justice and crime control (11-14). Therefore, Valverde sees her book less as an introduction to Foucault as a criminological thinker – and she criticizes such readings throughout – but rather as a critique of criminology whose "most significant legacy" is his unique style of thought (8).

Most chapters of *Michel Foucault* deal in detail with specific works of his, namely *Discipline and Punish* (chapter 2), volume one of the *History of Sexuality* (chapter 3), the Collège de France lectures on *Security, Territory, Population* (chapter 4, followed by chapter 5 on Governmentality Studies) and on *The Punitive Society* (chapter 6), as well as the two shorter lecture series *Truth and Juridical Forms* and *Wrongdoing and Truth-Telling* (chapter 7). Throughout the book, Valverde seeks to correct common errors of reception. In her reading of *Discipline and Punish*, she argues that Foucault's simplified mode of presentation and his use of "illustrative vignettes", as well as the translator's choice to render the French "suveiller" not as "Surveil" but as "Discipline", have contributed simplistic and reified readings of his work that miss the essential relationality of power (35-36). While Foucault shows how penal sanctions, from the Ancien Régime to the French Revolution, became less corporeal and more incarcerating, he did not aim to provide an accurate historical description, but to describe the formation of a certain type of governing.

Read in isolation, as is common in academic courses, the first part of *Discipline and Punish* seems to depict this history in a deterministic manner (43-48), whereas the second part not only offers a counterfactual presentation of the punitive city, but also demonstrates that discipline does not replace sovereign power, but rather complements it (48-52). This genealogical account shows that practices can travel, for example from religious to penal contexts, and how these transfers contributed to the birth of the prison as a penal facility (52-55).

One recurring theme is the difference of Foucault's thought to both Marxist and liberal theory. While the liberal tradition in political theory takes the individual for granted and posits it as the basis of society, so too does Althusserian Marxism consider individuality as prior to and stifled by ideology and control (57-60). However, discipline, as analyzed by Foucault, produces not only conformity and uniformity through hierarchical observation and routinization, but the individual itself through techniques of examination (55-57). Similarly, Foucault's account of racism differs radically from liberal and human rights approaches to racism and racist state violence, which see harms purported by states as abnormal exceptions to a normality of peaceful rule (68-72). On the contrary, Foucault's discussions of biopolitics in volume one of the *History of Sexuality* and the lecture series *Society Must Be Defended* show that the restriction and elimination of specific subpopulations can follow from the biopolitical logic of defending a governed population against, among other things, health threats (70-72). State racism is therefore not an exception to, but intricately linked to the programs of the welfare state (72-76).

Another thread running through the book is Valverde's critique of what she sees as a reification of Foucault's conceptual apparatus. She criticizes the commonly repeated triplet of power forms – sovereignty, discipline, governmentality – as too simplistic to understand Foucault's oeuvre; for example, it omits his discussions of biopolitics, police power, and pastoral power, and limits its possible uses (23, 27-30). The use of such schemes, she argues, reduces research to exercises in classifications (81-83). Rather than reducing them to schematics, these concepts should be regarded as "flexible and mobile" (31), which does not mean that categories or general concepts should be rejected per se – but they should not be treated as ends in themselves, but rather as means for the analysis of researched phenomena (84). Her argument against reification is especially dominant in the chapter *The Punitive Society*, which she presents as an important corrective to aforementioned simplistic readings of *Discipline and Punish* because it shows Foucault theorizing the subject in action (135-137).

Of prime interest to criminologists is chapter 7, which deals with two lesser known lectures held by Foucault in 1973 and 1981, in which he traces the genealogy of avowals and inquiries, which emerged as practices producing truth about crime and criminals and which form the basis of modern scientific practices (140-143). The technique of avowal connects the self of the subject to the system of justice, that is, it links subjectivity and juridical truth (152-153). It was 19th century criminology and its positivist program of

finding forensic truth about crimes and scientific truth about perpetrators that, by sidestepping avowal, severed the link between subjectivity and truth, which also led to a loss of reflexivity on the part of criminologists (158-160). It is Valverde's hope that Foucault's oeuvre, freed from its reduction to criminological demands, can help break open the conceptual and academic limitations of the field and open criminology to hitherto neglected perspectives (176-177): "But only time will tell" (177). Until then, *Michel Foucault* at least offers an elegantly written and very accessible introduction to this body of work, as well as a sovereignly argued counterweight to some of the myths still blurring Foucault's academic image.

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