

Foucault Studies

Richard A. Lynch *Foucault's Critical Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016) ISBN 9780823271252

The lack of normative and ethical standpoints provided by Michel Foucault have been a source of confusion, debate and inquiry by a wide set of scholars. Foucault explicitly refrained from providing a normative theory regarding how power could be organized. In an interview he stated that:

For reasons essentially having to do with my political preference, in the broad sense of the term, I have absolutely no desire to play the role of a prescriber of solutions. I think that the role of the intellectual today is not to ordain, to recommend solutions, to prophesy, because in that function he can only contribute to functioning of a particular power situation that, in my opinion, must be criticized (Foucault 2000)

The absence of a normative position as well as the suggesting that power is omnipresent and always includes truth and knowledge are core reasons why "Foucault disconcerts" (Taylor 1984) and seems to provoke scholars and theorists to nail down a position from which Foucault's analysis and methodology of power still could align with normative principles and doctrines (Golder 2015, McClure 1995). It is argued that he seemed to develop an inclination to liberalism and rights in his later writings (Moss 1998) while other scholars has been discussing his normative standpoint with regard to neoliberalism (Brown 2015: 73, Dean 2014, Zamora and Behrent 2016: 1-3).

David A Lynch follows another trajectory and explores Foucault's own writing more closely in order to revisit the ethical foundation in the "third shift" in Foucault's work which concentrates more narrowly on the subject of power (Foucault 2012: 6). With this shift, Foucault returned to the micro-physics of power, leaving bio-power and governmentality to explore sexuality, pleasure, aesthetics, and relationship to and care for oneself, including the role of parrhesia (truth-telling) (Foucault 2010, Foucault 2012).

It is foremost the writings provided by Foucault from 1974 until his death in June 1984 that is the material that Lynch analyze. The core argument is that the analysis of power and the account of ethics must be integrated: "only once they are interwoven can a full

Foucauldian social analysis be given” (p. 14). Thus, the most important contribution of the book, according to the author, “will be an elaboration of this relationship” (p. 14). This is an interesting approach but another valuable contribution of this book is the close reading, contextualization and remodeling of Foucault’s books, lectures and interviews that reveals the ethical and normative foundation that makes sense of the ‘third shift’ in Foucault’s analytical approach to power.

The book is organized in four substantial chapters that does not include the introduction and the conclusion. The introduction suggests that there is a Foucauldian ethics which is critical at its core, encompass new grounds for freedom and will enable new visions and practices. This is, as Lynch suggest, ‘in a certain way, very unfoucauldian’ (p. 16). As such, the book and the argument provides a counter image to the notion of Foucault as an uncritical yet disconcerting theorist, neither accusations are true according to Lynch.

In chapter one, Lynch suggests that if we later are to understand a Foucauldian ethics, “we must situate that ethics within the framework in which it acts...an imperative first step is to understand Foucault’s conception of power relations and their role in society” (p. 19). This chapter is therefore devoted to revisit Foucault’s alternative approach to power foremost through *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality: an introduction* (1976), as well his lectures in Collège de France 1974-1979. Lynch shows in this chapter the alternative approach and analysis of power as relational, omnipresent, at the same time as it is reversible and demands a level of freedom on part the subjects. Readers familiar with Foucault’s original writings may enjoy an insightful summary and readers somewhat unfamiliar with Foucault’s explicit critique of the ‘juridico-discursive’ view of sovereign power will receive a rich lecture of his alternative approach to power analysis.

Chapter two offers a close reading of *Discipline and Punish* in order to show how power evolves over time and that Foucault’s analysis of different modalities of power at this time was devoted to specific mechanisms and the micro-physics of power at the individual level. The articulation of disciplinary power, in contrast to sovereign power, demonstrate, according to Lynch, “the central importance – even ontological necessity – of resistance within and for power relations And, it is on the basis of that understanding of power relations... that a new agenda for action – an ethics – can be articulated” (p. 87). Lynch also shows how disciplinary power is harder to resist, it is much more docile as it works on the soul rather than the body, it utilize psy-knowledge of the human species, and it is invested in great number of institutional settings, which suggests that “disciplinary

power has in fact 'infiltrated' the whole of society, creating a closed web of interwoven micropowers (p. 82).

In chapter three, Lynch follows Foucault in his turn to bio-power and governmentality. According to Lynch this shift to the macro-level was necessary as Foucault found that power functions differently on the micro and macro-levels. Still, it is not a return to sovereign power and the juridico-discursive model. Rather, bio-power and governmentality are introduced by Foucault to show how states are highly involved in the care and catering of population. This is done for the preservation and prosperity of the state, creating apparatus of security. According to Lynch, it is through the presence of "...multiple, irreducible forms and modes of power constantly at play with and against one another, the field of power relations has become exponentially more complex. This complexity actually means that there is more freedom within the system – multiple kinds of power that are overlaid upon each other create more possibilities for resistance against any particular form (p. 128).

The three first chapters provide the necessary clues for Lynch that allow him to explore the ethical foundation in Foucault's writings. Following Foucault, Lynch suggests that ethics is a practice, and exploring this practice enables us to speak of and explore "kinds of relations other than power", "active self-transformation" and "critique as an attitude" (p. 136). The foundation for this ethics is mainly founded in sexual practices and practices of friendships (between men) as this constitutes important sites of resistance against disciplinary power and bio-power. However, as noted but not further explored by Lynch is Foucault's "quasi-utopian evocation of bodies and pleasure" (p. 150) exemplified through roleplay in S&M should be differentiated from social power (p. 151). In the pursuit of pleasure, freedom from power relations may emerge according to Lynch close reading but it is not entirely convincing because it could also be the foundation of some internal critique against Foucault. In the end of the chapter, Lynch makes the case that "Foucault's ethical project is profoundly Kantian in character: the normative resources are internal to the project, and they turn out to be the very conditions of possibility for the social relations that are to be normatively evaluated" (p. 194). Resistance to power is about 'not wanting to be governed like this', through caring for oneself and others to governing oneself and others which also gives us the tools to evaluate the exercise of specific instances of power always from within. The ethos of Foucault's ethics are internal and local resistance and the caring for others which, according to Lynch, ultimately reinvents the motto of Enlightenment 'Sapere aude!' or the 'courage of truth' (p. 195).

In the conclusion, Lynch is not so much concluding as advancing his argument and interpretation of Foucault by situating his reading and understanding of Foucault in relation to a wider set of Foucauldians and other authors. The concluding chapter is short but insightful, perhaps because the previous chapters have offered extensive and close readings of Foucault's many texts. Lynch illustrates what he hinted in the introduction, that Foucault does not disconcerts but rather induces hope and new forms of resistance:

"Hope motivates us to continue our struggles to fashion a better self and to forge a better world – in other words, to grapple with the demands of an art of governing, this art understood as not only the governing both of oneself and of others but also the critique of government (one's own and others) in an ongoing and unending cycle (p. 204).

Overall, the author is thorough in his reading and citing as he wish to guide the reader towards the critical ethos and ethics provided by Foucault. Yet it is a long journey and it is not until page 135 that the author is ready to launch his more advanced analysis and connecting the analysis of power with the account of ethics. The revisiting and dissecting of Foucault's alternative analysis of power is perhaps necessary for the argument but to readers familiar with Foucault it is a bit tedious and repetitive. Citations and paraphrasing appears several times throughout the book which gives the impression that the author and the text are not at their final stage. Lynch insist on calling Foucault's analytical approach to powers, a 'theory of power' even though Foucault explicitly denounced this misleading concept as it hides contextual aspects more than it illuminates general traits (p. 21-25). A more general note that is made possible only through Lynch's insightful and well cited reading of Foucault's 'third shift' is that this trajectory substantially breaks with previous insights provided by Foucault regarding the omnipresence of power and necessary and vital part in all relations which are substantially reversed in these latter writings. A less Straussian and esoteric reading might instead revealed incoherence and inconsistency between the different periods and shifts in Foucault's texts. Still, Lynch has done an excellent job in showing how analysis of power and accounts of ethics are two different sides present in the writings of Foucault that potentially could be integrated. That said, it might also have been possible to pursue a project that aimed to dis-integrate the analysis of power from the ethical reasoning and exploring a substantial inconsistency between the second and the third shifts of Foucault's analysis of power.

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