

REVIEW

Béatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*. Trans. Edward Pile (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). ISBN 0-8047-3709

Michel Foucault is not now normally associated with Immanuel Kant. But there are some indications that he should be. Writing an entry about himself, pseudonymously, for a French dictionary of philosophy, he described himself as essentially Kantian.¹ One is tempted to pass this off as a playfully esoteric self-description.

However, Béatrice Han takes up this relatively obscure perspective on Foucault's thought²—and runs a long way with it. Han has a powerful additional piece of evidence for her treatment of Foucault in relation to transcendental idealism: it is Foucault's own doctoral dissertation, a translation of and a commentary on Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. The commentary was itself book-length, but the only copy remains buried in the Parisian archives that hold Foucault's *Nachlass*. Han brings this material to us for the first time. In doing so, she performs a significant service to Foucauldians, much as Ann Laura Stoler did with her précis of *Society Must Be Defended* in *Race and the Education of Desire*.³ Now that that lecture course has itself appeared,⁴ in unforeseeable violation of Foucault's testament that there be no posthumous publications of his work,⁵ however, Stoler's work has lost much of its importance. We cannot know whether the same fate might befall Han's book, but as things stand it is invaluable.

¹ Michel Foucault, "Foucault" in his *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*. Ed. James D. Faubion. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: The New Press, 1998. pp. 459-463; the pseudonym under which Foucault writes is 'Maurice Florence'.

² Béatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*. Trans. Edward Pile. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 3.

³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*. Trans. David Macey. London: Penguin, 2003.

⁵ According to Pierre Nora, quoted in Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, p. 323.

Like so many books on Foucault, Han's *Foucault's Critical Project* comprises a chronological survey of his thought, with a unique angle. The angle in this case is to examine Foucault's trajectory through the concept of the 'historical *a priori*', a concept used by Foucault himself (although one first used by Husserl, if with quite a different meaning), but one hardly prominent in his work, even where he does employ it.⁶ The historical *a priori* is, of course, Foucault's update of Kantianism, charting not the conditions for the possibility of experience, but rather the *historical* conditions for the possibility of knowledge.

This approach is extremely apposite, in that it chases the elixir of Foucault scholarship, a solid philosophical basis underlying Foucault's work and the shifting sands of his varying methodology. What Han uncovers, however, is not stable bedrock, but rather the continual redefinition of the historical *a priori*: it might always be there underlying Foucault's thinking, but its own specific meaning shifts over time—it is this change then that Han traces.

The first piece of Foucault's work Han comes to chronologically is the aforementioned commentary on Kant's *Anthropology*. The chapter on the commentary sets the scene for Han's book, because it is there, and there alone, that Foucault is explicitly concerned with the transcendental (as one must be when writing on Kant). After this comes a chapter on what Han identifies as the three works of Foucault's 'archaeological' period. Then comes the second part of the book, which is on Foucault's genealogical works. The third and final part of the book consists of the treatment Foucault's late thought and the return of subjectivity therein.

In this Han follows the normal pattern for books on Foucault. Her treatment is indeed conventional, following the well-established tripartite periodization of Foucault's oeuvre. The only thing that is remarkable about it is Han's inclusion of Foucault's commentary on Kant in the part of the book dealing with archaeology. It is also interesting that another work by Foucault is *not* included in this section, or anywhere in the book, namely *Madness and Civilization*. This is generally considered the first major book by Foucault (his only previous publication being a book for students, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, which he had himself later severely reedited and finally withdrawn from publication). *Madness and Civilization* was, moreover, the primary thesis for Foucault's doctorate in 1960, alongside which the *Anthropology* translation and commentary constituted a mere supplementary thesis.⁷ In displacing the *History of Madness* in favour of the commentary, Han

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷ Strictly speaking, *Madness and Civilization* is not quite the same as the doctoral thesis. Of course, this is because it is the English translation, but also because that translation is a heavily abridged version of Foucault's *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*.

creates a new trajectory for Foucault, one which begins with a work in which the conjunction of the transcendental and the historical is the key theme. What would ordinarily be an obscure feature of Foucault's thought is transformed into an obvious line of approach by placing Foucault's encounter with Kant first, and quite unobtrusively so given its simple chronological priority among the books dealt with by Han.

It is in the commentary, it seems, that Foucault first hits upon the concept of the historical *a priori* (which is why *Madness and Civilization* does not concern Han—it was written before this discovery). The historical *a priori* then recurs in one guise or another throughout the rest of his output, and it is this trace that Han is intent on following, watching how Foucault's thinking on the questions first broached in the commentary develops. "The overall importance of Foucault's interpretation of Kant is *strategic* rather than theoretical, and is played out *within* the Foucauldian corpus."⁸ As such, Han sees it as constituting the "prehistory" of archaeology.⁹ Foucault interprets Kant, in the commentary as in his later meditations on Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?*,¹⁰ as the thinker standing at the threshold of modernity: in the *Anthropology*, Kant is inaugurating the question, "Was ist der Mensch?,"¹¹ which Foucault so famously criticised when he portended the death of man.

Foucault's historical *a priori* remains obscure across the archaeological period, in that Foucault posits it as something which must exist, but cannot be any more specific: it is the condition of the possibility of knowledge—a highly Kantian formulation. There must be such a guiding condition to account for the epistemic unities he identifies, the fact that at one time people are clearly constrained to talk only in particular way, and at other times a different regime of truth obtains. The reason for this obscurity becomes quite clear: Foucault has found himself resorting to metaphysics, positing a limit which is not internal to language yet has no other domain for its existence. Han paints a picture of him in the archaeological period stripping away his presuppositions: in *Birth of the Clinic* he implicitly depends on (Merleau-Ponty's) phenomenology for his *a priori*; by *The Order of Things*, it is experience and hence subjectivity; by *The Archaeology of Knowledge* he has excised the subject, leaving him with pure abstraction.¹² This historical *a priori* was neither the Kantian *a priori*, a necessary precondition for experience, nor something simply logical, but something more in the line of a Platonic form, not merely ideal but in fact more real than the real things it governs, the condition of the possibility of their reality.

⁸ Han, *Foucault's Critical Project*, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰ See Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in his *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Ed. James D. Faubion. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1997. pp. 303-319.

¹¹ See Han. *Foucault's Critical Project*, p. 32.

¹² See *ibid.*, p. 50.

The solution to this problem is Foucault's discovery of power. Reading Foucault from the point of view of the historical *a priori* allows for a novel spin on the turn Foucault takes at the beginning of the 1970s, from archaeology to genealogy (to use his own terminology). The concept of power allows him to shift the regulatory functions of language into a domain which, though it is of his own invention, is nevertheless anchored in reality in a way that his previous *a priori* was not. In Han's account, at this point Foucault makes the leap of understanding the historical *a priori* in explicitly political terms, through his development of the concept of 'power-knowledge', where power and knowledge are seen as inseparably intertwined.¹³ For Han, this is a response to the *failure* to find a plausible historical *a priori* at the level of discourse itself—examining knowledge endogenously will never reveal what makes something count as true at a particular historical conjuncture. In this, Han shows her debt to her doctoral supervisor, Hubert Dreyfus, under whose tutelage this book was originally written.¹⁴

In dealing with the fate of the *a priori* in the genealogical period, Han continues to chase the most elusive element of Foucault's thought, the question of his position on truth. This gives rise to a quite original contribution to the ongoing debate of this topic, as well as providing an interesting and knowledgeable survey of the issues involved in it. Han concludes that, ultimately, Foucault was in this period confused about his profound nominalism and his wish nonetheless to take strong positions.¹⁵ This is not an original criticism by any means—except insofar as Han couches this as a confusion between the empirical and the transcendental, a novel way of declaring Foucault philosophically unsatisfactory.¹⁶

When Foucault changes tack again in his late work, in his (in)famous 'return to the subject', Han is less than impressed. For her, this entire turn is in fact marked with the same basic problems that marked his earliest work: the maintenance of phenomenological concepts, without the appropriate underpinnings, particularly his reliance on a notion of 'experience'; a "regress to a prephenomenological perspective". She particularly accuses Foucault of being ultimately rather Sartrean, in spite of his overt hostility to Sartre's philosophy. Ultimately, she accuses him of being merely "prephenomenological" because, unlike Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, he does not go far enough into his presuppositions to purge himself of his "pseudo-transcendental understanding of the subject."¹⁷ This is some of the

¹³ Ibid. pp. 132-2.

¹⁴ See Han's comments in her "Reply to Gary Gutting", p. 5. However, she is also critical of some of Dreyfus's views on Foucault—see, for example, *Foucault's Critical Project*, p. 192.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 187.

harshest criticism of Foucault's late work that I have ever encountered, and, if correct, is devastating. Han manages to be peculiarly effective here because she analyses things from the point of view of the historical *a priori*, which in the final work really disappears to almost nothing, and without anything new emerging to replace it.

There has been a backlash against Han on this front, however. Garry Gutting has complained against Han that she simply presumes that a philosophical basis is required for genealogy to work.¹⁸ Gutting accepts that there are dubious philosophical foundations to Foucault's 'archaeological' thought of the 1960s, but that is not the case of the later work, which is governed by a "strict nominalism", in which Foucault simply refuses to address the issue of what might be beyond language. Gutting argues that Han implicitly concedes that genealogy works well as an historical device, and thus thinks her complaints about it at an ontological level are misplaced.

Gutting's review has been answered by Han herself at some length.¹⁹ She rightly defends Foucault as being a philosopher, not merely someone with some interesting readings of history. To my mind, the approach Gutting takes to Foucault is a very easy one, and one which is unsatisfying philosophically. There is an unchallenging reading of Foucault, made by both enthusiasts and detractors, for example by Richard Rorty on one side and Charles Taylor on the other, which sees Foucault as an intellectual *bricoleur* who sometimes throws up some interesting concepts, but whose writings are without depth.

It is in relation to such views that Han's book actually provides a very valuable service, situating Foucault as a philosopher within the philosophical tradition, and not merely within the current of 'poststructuralism' or of recent 'continental' philosophy, but rather really in the Western tradition, as engaged with the Kantian heritage which is the common background of contemporary Western philosophy *per se*.

Nevertheless, though Han argues that Foucault does have significant philosophical underpinnings, she argues that there is an incoherence to these. It would be that incoherence that gives rise to allegations that Foucault is a non-philosopher. It seems to me that this is, in fact, indicative of a prior disagreement with Foucault's orientation that is indicative of a greater philosophical conservatism on the part of Han. At the outset of the book, Han postulates that

¹⁸ Gutting, Gary. "Review of Béatrice Han's *Foucault's Critical Project*." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, May 2003.

<http://ndpr.icaap.org/content/archives/2003/5/gutting-han.html>

¹⁹ Han, Béatrice. "Reply to Gary Gutting's review of *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*." http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~beatrice/Gutting_answer_2003-05.pdf

If Foucault's project is coherent, then it should be possible to organize it around a central theme to which the others could be subordinated. The present book's hypothesis will be that this central theme is situated at the convergence of an initial question with an object that appears later, a convergence that occurs only retrospectively to Foucault himself, by means of a reflection on his own course and strategies.²⁰

Firstly, there seems to be an obvious dubiousness to Han's initial premise: a coherent project does not have to be one which has a central theme; rather, it could be highly nebulous, but nevertheless coherent. Of course, Han could still argue correctly that there is such a central theme to Foucault's work. However, the terms in which Foucault ultimately couches his project, which Han mentions before making these claims, while being claims for the ultimate coherence of all his effort, and while in fact implicitly admitting that he only realises what they are retrospectively, there is to my mind no suggestion of a central theme. Rather, what is central, in keeping with Foucault's late philosophical orientation, is a problematic, or cluster of problematics. What he had done, in short, and by his own account, was to problematise truth and subjectivity. It would be incorrect to say that this problematisation was a central theme, since it was not thematised as such. It would also be incorrect to say that the things problematised (sexuality, mental illness, power) were central themes of Foucault's work as a whole, since they were in fact only the central themes of particular studies. Insofar as Han does *not* find the central theme that she looks for, she takes it not as a sign that there is something wrong with her thesis, but rather that there is something wrong with Foucault.

Han has produced a book of solid scholarship. She clearly knows Foucault very well, including parts of his oeuvre unknown, really, to anybody else. The direction in which she takes Foucault is, I think, one which needed to be taken, to study Foucault's relation to standard philosophy, in the light of the seemingly nihilistic iconoclasm of his critiques. In taking this line, Han has unearthed much that is buried deep in Foucault's texts, an entire level of his thought that is generally passed over, perhaps precisely because it is so infuriatingly (apparently) incoherent. In doing this, she has done something valuable for her readers. And while I do have substantial disagreements with some of her conclusions, the scholarship is of such a standard and originality that this book is required reading for those interested in really engaging with Foucault.

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²⁰ Han. *Foucault's Critical Project*, p. 2.