

REVIEW

Alan McKinlay and Ken Starkey (eds.) *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory: From Panopticon to Technologies of Self* (London: Sage Publications, 1997). ISBN: 0803975473

I

The breadth of Michel Foucault's influence is often astounding. Foucauldians can be easily found in such disparate fields as geography, architecture, queer studies, and, more recently, management studies. Indeed, in relation to this last academic discipline, business schools are seeing a "growing interest in the contribution of the work of Michel Foucault to our understanding of organizations, accounting and the control of work."¹

In reflection of this trend, Alan McKinlay and Ken Starkey bring together a series of previously published essays from various authors in their book *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory: From Panopticon to Technologies of Self*. The essays in this collection "attempt to apply Foucauldian categories and procedures to throw fresh light on the history of the factory, management and the modern corporation."² The book is divided into three sections: essays in the first section establish the general applicability of Foucault's thought to management and organization studies, the second section focuses on accounting and the rise of the modern corporation; the third section provides analyses of recent changes in the post-Taylorist rationalization of work, particularly in relation to the techniques of self-management that characterize contemporary methods of human resource management (HRM).

If there is a single, discernible Foucauldian theme running through all of the essays in *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*, it is the development of techniques of observation, measure, and performance

¹ Alan McKinlay and Ken Starkey, "Managing Foucault," Introduction to *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory: From Panopticon to Technologies of Self* (hereafter referred to in the footnotes as *FMOT*), p. 1.

² *ibid.*, p. 3. Contributors to *FMOT* include: Pippa Carter, Stewart Clegg, Stanley Deetz, Patricia Findlay, Trevor Hopper, Keith Hoskin, Norman Jackson, Norman Macintosh, Alan McKinlay, Tim Newton, Mike Savage, Ken Starkey, Philip Taylor, and Barbara Townley.

appraisal within modern private-sector organizations. In this regard, the editors situate Foucault's work in close proximity to Weber's metaphor of the "iron cage" of modern rationality "which simultaneously materially enriches Western civilization and spiritually impoverishes the captive individual."³ As the book's subtitle suggests, the Panopticon features prominently in the first two sections, while Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self" forms the theoretical basis of the analyses in the last section. Though many critics would claim a clear break between Foucault's work of the mid- to late-1970s on modern technologies of power and his turn in the 1980s to modes of the production of subjectivity, there is a firm line of continuity in these works that is evident in *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*: in both phases, Foucault critically emphasizes the internalization of imperatives of power by the modern subject. This is the theme that runs "from Panopticon to technologies of self" and which undergirds the arguments of the essays collected in *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*.

II

The essays in the first section situate Foucault's contribution to management and organization studies much as one would expect, given the above-mentioned theoretical emphasis. Here, Foucault is a firmly "postmodern" thinker whose work reveals that contemporary organizational life is not necessarily "part of some modernist march to a better tomorrow."⁴ Indeed, organizational life often has an ominous tone in this section, as one contributor expresses in his assertion that "as individuals, we are incarcerated within an organizational world."⁵

As stated above, some of these essays place Foucault within the tradition of the critique of organizational rationalization that began with Weber. In this context, Foucault's contribution is to underline "the development of disciplines of knowledge shaped almost wholly by the 'disciplinary gaze' of surveillance," which foster the categorization of "individuals or bodies ... through diverse and localized tactics of ratiocination" within modern organizations.⁶

The most successful essays in this collection, however, are those that eschew the general, preferring instead to "use" Foucauldian theoretical constructs to analyze particular historical formations. These essays tend to come in the second and third sections of the book. Among them is a persuasive piece on Britain's Great Western Railway from 1833 to 1914 that

³ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ Gibson Burrell, "Modernism, Postmodernism and Organizational Analysis: The Contribution of Michel Foucault," in *FMOT*, p. 26.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶ Stewart Clegg, "Foucault, Power and Organizations," in *FMOT*, p. 38.

details the discovery of career incentives as a more efficient technique for shoring up company discipline than traditional threats of negative sanction.⁷ This essay is remarkable for its balanced, critical appropriation of Foucault's work, which includes questioning the Foucauldian notion of "discipline." In addition, there are a number of essays which chronicle the rising use of internal management accounting – as opposed to accounting for external communication and audit – to create the visible and measurable responsibility centers that structure contemporary corporations. In this vein, the editors contribute a piece on the use of detailed accounting practices to create the "corporate Panopticon" that brought Alfred Sloan's Ford Motor Corp. success in the postwar years.⁸ And there is a similar analysis of the disciplinary techniques instituted during the rise of ITT under "super accountant" CEO Harold Geneen.⁹ In the spirit of Foucault's emphasis on the often indispensable phenomena found at history's margins – "the details and accidents that accompany every beginning"¹⁰ – another essay of this middle section proposes to place the usually quiet field of accounting at the center of our understanding of "the economic."¹¹

Essays in the third section provide case studies to illustrate recent techniques through which contemporary enterprises effect the internalization of management imperatives in their employees. One of these essays chronicles the shift within one firm of a subgroup of workers from regular employment to contracted consultant status. The author of this essay finds that by increasing the visibility and individual accountability of these employees-turned-consultants within the company, management was able to effect a shift in their orientation towards their work, after which "[m]ost worked harder for the same pay."¹² Through interviews, the author of this study finds significant evidence of an internalization of company imperatives that neutralized the tension between managers and workers. In such a case, "[t]he enemy is no longer the managers' expectations. The company is integrated into the self."¹³ Another essay in the third section details a process through which a company hand-picked its job applicants for their docility and then set up a system of

⁷ Mike Savage, "Discipline, Surveillance and the 'Career': Employment on the Great Western Railway 1833-1914," in *FMOT*.

⁸ Alan McKinlay and Ken Starkey, "The 'Velvety Grip': Managing Managers in the Modern Corporation," in *FMOT*, p. 113.

⁹ Trevor Hopper and Norman Macintosh, "Management Accounting Numbers: Freedom or Prison – Geneen versus Foucault," in *FMOT*, p. 126.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. D. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 144.

¹¹ Keith Hoskin, "Examining Accounts and Accounting for Management: Inverting Understandings of 'the Economic'," in *FMOT*.

¹² Stanley Deetz, "Discursive Formations, Strategized Subordination and Self-surveillance," in *FMOT*, p. 160-1.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 166.

“teamworking” and intense “peer review” that delegated management surveillance to all employees.¹⁴ The authors of this essay come to a very different conclusion than in the preceding essay: in this case, the intensity of the expectation of self-surveillance is found to have stimulated multiple sites of resistance in the employee group.

III

The Foucault scholarship in *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory* is generally competent, the essays are clearly written, and the book does much of what it sets out to do. There are some significant shortcomings in what it sets out to do, however. First, *every one* of the book’s contributors is affiliated with an Anglophone university, either in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, or the United States. This is surprising when we consider one contributor’s admission that “[i]t should not be assumed that Foucault’s writings are fully coherent to the Anglo-American eye.”¹⁵ Such homogeneity inevitably leads to a narrowness of view. For example, while Japanese management techniques are mentioned in two of the book’s essays, in both cases they arise only to mark the effect that their importation into the United States had on American companies.¹⁶ Furthermore, there is no mention of the globalization of labor markets or management techniques, and no acknowledgement that, far from being universal, Anglo-American management culture is very particular.

This cultural one-sidedness might partially account for the book’s narrow critical focus. In resting overwhelmingly in Foucault’s critique of modern power relations – a critique that Foucault sometimes (unfortunately, in my view) raises to the level of a social ontology¹⁷ – the essays in the book ignore the emphasis on subjective autonomy in Foucault’s later (re)turn to Kant and tend to avoid a deep engagement with the limitations of Foucault’s view of modern power relations. The editors’ concluding essay is an exception to this, but it appears as an afterthought in comparison to the dominant focus of the previous essays which avoid a larger theoretical domain.¹⁸ As an example of the limitations of this approach, take Foucault’s view of normativity, a central concept in his thought that has been criticized

¹⁴ Alan McKinlay and Phil Taylor, “Through the Looking Glass: Foucault and the Politics of Production,” in *FMOT*.

¹⁵ Burrell, “Modernism, Postmodernism and Organizational Analysis,” p. 15.

¹⁶ McKinlay and Starkey, “The ‘Velvety Grip’”; McKinlay and Taylor, “Through the Looking Glass.”

¹⁷ See Thomas McCarthy, “The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School,” *Political Theory* 18(3): 437-69, Aug. 1990.

¹⁸ Ken Starkey and Alan McKinlay, “Afterward: Deconstructing Organization – Discipline and Desire,” in *FMOT*.

as “one-sided” and “unsociological.”¹⁹ In contrast with Foucault’s Nietzschean association of normativity with coercion, for many social theorists the internalization of norms is a necessary stage in socialization and solidarity formation. Although the better essays in the collection question the validity of some Foucauldian categories and raise the possibility of resistance to disciplinary power,²⁰ the book’s contributors tend to leave the prospects – and occasional empirical actuality – of normatively-based worker solidarity to the side.

The most significant shortcoming of *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*, however, is a more general problem. The book and its individual essays tend to be unclear about their intended scope. While it is clearly a “critical” series of essays that takes normative aim at modern management practices, larger contextual questions of political or economic orientation are unfortunately given little emphasis. As nearly all of the essays in the book take late-capitalist, private-sector organizations as their objects, obvious questions silently loom above the page. Do these writers wish to launch a quasi-Marxian critique of the unequal forms of social organization and resource distribution engendered by and within contemporary private-sector organizations? Or do they instead wish their critique to remain safely within the boundaries of the company, thus confronting hierarchical discipline within organizations while ignoring larger political questions of unequal social power?

A few of the essays in the collection take some steps in the direction of these questions, but they are exceptional in this regard. For example, one essay associates contemporary HRM practices with “the emergence of a new language of work” that “denies the very possibility of class conflict” within the company.²¹ And another essay takes the argument for enlarging the domain of critique one step further in its authors’ suggestion that the discipline of the organized workplace has a larger function than simply production. In this view, labor is a technique of *dressage*, which “escape[s] the imperatives of production” and instead “functions to suppress deviance,” thus taking part in the larger system of “governmentality” that permeates modern (presumably Anglo-American) societies.²² This essay hints at the

¹⁹ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), chs. 9, 10; and Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), chs. 1, 2, 3.

²⁰ See, for example: Savage, “Discipline, Surveillance and the ‘Career’”; and Hopper and Macintosh, “Management Accounting Numbers.”

²¹ McKinlay and Taylor, “Through the Looking Glass,” p. 173.

²² Norman Jackson and Pippa Carter, “Labour as Dressage,” in *FMOT*, pp. 59, 49. Governmentality is a Foucauldian neologism that refers both to the micrological performance of power on the individual subject and to the mentality of internalized discipline that this performance produces.

larger picture, suggesting that the wider societal function of labor be “examined in terms of its consequences and its progeniture in order to understand how it arises, how it functions and whether it needs to be resisted.”²³

More typically in the collection, however, the essays come close to larger political and economic questions only to pull away cautiously. One author even seems to take positions on both sides, equating the employment relationship *in itself* with “economic domination and subordination” one moment, while seeming content simply to try to improve modes of communication within late-capitalist enterprises the next moment.²⁴ Given that for-profit enterprises are the major focus of the book, it is surprising that the essays in *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory* tend to avoid the owner-worker cleavage – acknowledged as central to Western modernity by writers from Marx to Lipset and Rokkan – in terms larger than the internal workings of individual organizations.

Some may argue that this is asking too much, that the contributors are not political scientists or economists and thus should not be expected to raise such questions in their essays. Perhaps. But surely Foucauldians should recognize the dangers of the compartmentalization of knowledge into tidy “disciplines.” As an illustration of the need for critical management theorists to look beyond the inner workings of the corporation, consider Robert Anthony of the Harvard Business School, perhaps the predominant postwar American proponent of (non-critical) “management control theory.” Anthony served as Robert McNamara’s Assistant Secretary of Defense (Controller) from 1965 to 1968 (McNamara, by the way, makes an appearance in one of the book’s essays as president of Ford Motor Corp.).²⁵ Just as the American “revolving door” that shuttles members of the upper managerial class between the private sector and the state transcends the bounds of the corporate organization, thus highlighting the porous separation between public and private, so should the focus of critical management studies. The specter of Anthony’s presence in Robert McNamara’s hyper-rationalized Pentagon during the critical years of the expansion of the war in Vietnam should illustrate the potential real-world effect of rationalized business

²³ *ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁴ Clegg, “Foucault, Power and Organizations,” pp. 39, 45-6.

²⁵ Robert Anthony and Vijay Govindarajan, *Management Control Systems, 8th ed.* (Chicago: Irwin, 1995), p. ix. David Otley credits Anthony with quasi-foundational status in “Management control in contemporary organizations: towards a wider framework,” *Management Accounting Research* 5, 1994: pp. 289-99. Anthony’s most influential work is perhaps *Planning and Control Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Boston: Division of Research, Harvard Business School, 1965). McNamara appears in McKinlay and Starkey, “The ‘Velvety Grip’,” p. 116.

models when they inevitably wander into to the blood-and-guts sphere of political action.

While the contributors of *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory* often argue persuasively for a Foucauldian look at management practices, they just as often fail to appreciate the wider significance of their work. Given that Foucault clearly emphasized the wider societal significance of the local technologies of social organization that emerged in early modernity, I look forward to a Foucauldian study of contemporary corporate practices that resolutely considers our global political and economic situation.

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