

REVIEW

Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (eds.) *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984* (New York: New Press, 2003). ISBN 1-56584-801-2

It is customary to periodize Foucault's work in terms of three phases, the archaeological writings of the 1960s, the genealogical writings of the 1970s, and the ethical writings of the 1980s. Though this is simplistic, it does help to highlight some discernible discontinuities in his intellectual trajectory. A less chronological classification of Foucault's works, also pointing to a fundamental differentiation, is suggested by a perusal of *The Essential Foucault* (New Press), a new anthology of short pieces by Foucault, edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose. In it we find a series of unmistakably philosophical interviews and occasional lectures or essays, but no excerpts from any of Foucault's largely historical monographs, such as *The Order of Things*, *Discipline and Punish*, and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. The omission reminds us that Foucault the philosopher, preoccupied by questions of method and aiming to elucidate basic concepts, can be distinguished from Foucault the historian, intent on tracing the genealogy of human kinds and present-day social practices. *The Essential Foucault* is a single-volume abridgement of the three-volume *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984* (New Press), itself a partial translation of the multi-volume *Dits et Écrits* (Gallimard). It would be wrong to expect from this book a kind of abbreviated summation of Foucault's career. Another anthology, *The Foucault Reader* (Pantheon), comes closer to that, since it includes substantial excerpts from *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality I*. *The Essential Foucault* contains nothing like that, although certainly some of the same thematic ground is covered, notably in some interesting lectures on the rise of bio-power and in a few interviews that reiterate and elucidate his claims about the importance of political technologies in the emergence of the human sciences. True, there are also shorter genealogical studies included, like the excellent and still timely "About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual,'" and the influential lecture on "Governmentality." Nevertheless, the picture that emerges from the pages of *The Essential Foucault* – taken on its own – is that of a historico-philosophical research program, underdetermined (so to speak) by actual research. Thus, his "strategical conception" of power is given

a lucid articulation, notably in both “The Subject and Power” and “Truth and Power,” but the detailed analysis of technologies of governance and “rituals of power,” familiar to readers of a book like *Discipline and Punish*, is largely absent. The conclusion seems inescapable that the works included in *The Essential Foucault* may be essential to a serious study of Foucault, above all by philosophers, but they are clearly not *the* essential works, even in the minimal sense of being a representative sample of Foucault’s major contributions.

Nevertheless, an anthology of many of Foucault’s central philosophical texts is surely something to be welcomed and embraced. It is true that one sometimes hears doubts expressed about whether Foucault was a philosopher at all, but in making their case the doubters make no reference to some of the important essays included here, like “What is Enlightenment?”, “What is Critique?”, “Truth and Power,” or “The Subject and Power.” These are plainly philosophical works, exploring essentially conceptual issues such as modernity, rationality, power, truth, and subjectivity.

The Essential Foucault invites us, then, to examine Michel Foucault the philosopher. But what sort of philosopher does he appear to be, based on the contents of *The Essential Foucault*?

Above all, he is a *critical* philosopher. The selections by Rabinow and Rose seem almost calculated to drive this point home, and this impression is only reinforced by the orientation of their “Introduction.” Critical philosophers, notably the line of German philosophers leading from Kant to Marx, tried to show that objectivity – the objectivity of knowledge, of human culture and history, of the commodity form – was, in one way or another, an achievement of human subjectivity (in the widest sense), that is, a product of human activity. Critique meant disalienation, or the reappropriation of the products of one’s own activity as knower, agent, or worker. Foucault’s project is similar at least to the extent that he too wants to dissolve the illusion that our experiences – of sexuality, say, or madness, or danger – confront us with an external necessity that permanently circumscribes our freedom to act or refrain from acting. But Foucault’s critique is, as he himself says, “a nominalist critique... arrived at by way of a historical analysis” (p. 258). The *philosophical* point, as opposed to the historical points about changes in the manner in which power was exercised in a certain period, and so on, is always of the same general type: where we are prone to find necessities, a more careful study reveals contingencies; where we have been taught to look for our deepest nature or essence, a second look finds only a historical artifact, arbitrarily assembled; where we tend to see the universality of an “anthropological constant,” a better-informed assessment would show us nothing but the “exorbitant singularity” of a recent cultural invention. Indeed, Foucault identifies – as his “first rule of method” – the principle that one should, “insofar as possible, circumvent the anthropological universals...in order to examine them as historical constructs” (p. 3). This applies, of course,

to madness, sexuality, delinquency, and so on. Ultimately this is an ontological commitment, or rather, a commitment to what he calls “historical ontology” (p. 55) or a “critical ontology of ourselves” (p. 56). To the question, ‘what are we?’ the answer must always be sought by way of a critical interrogation: “In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?” (p. 53).

The book begins with a substantial, 25-page “Introduction” by Rabinow and Rose, which offers a tour through Foucault’s key concepts (at least the concepts prominent in the last fifteen years of his career: problematization, bio-power, *dispositif*, etc.). After pointing out the provisional nature of even Foucault’s final self-characterizations, the editors proceed to reread his whole body of work largely through such late texts as “What is Enlightenment?” Personally, I find that approach compelling, and it seems to have become the norm among Foucault’s commentators. But it does mean that archaeology, in the form that project had in Foucault’s early work (including important books like *The Order of Things* and *Madness and Civilization*), takes a back seat to historical ontology and the ethics of self-formation. No doubt this could be justified by the relatively greater influence of Foucault’s “post-archaeological” writings (I use this expression in spite of the fact that Foucault’s later self-characterizations often retained the word “archaeology,” while detaching it from the theme of discourse analysis and generally giving it a broader sense; cf. p. 53). In any case, the “Introduction” succeeds well at what seems to be one of its main aims: to offer a clear articulation of the importance of Foucault’s work for contemporary critical analysis, without in any way encouraging the ossification of his concepts into a methodological orthodoxy or a banner under which “Foucauldian” partisans might assemble. On the contrary, the point is effectively made that precisely the dynamism of power and knowledge that Foucault so decisively disclosed renders any such position untenable: “After all,” the editors remind us, “Foucault wrote before the collapse of the Soviet empire, before the ‘New World Order,’ before the internet, before the genome project, before global warming, before genetically modified organisms, before pre-implantation diagnosis of embryos, before ‘pharmacogenomics’” (p. xiii).

To the extent that this book sets aside the historical and political emphases of (its main “competitor”) *The Foucault Reader*, in favor of a new emphasis on Foucault’s contribution to philosophy, *The Essential Foucault* does offer something importantly new to English-speaking readers: a single-volume survey of Foucault’s efforts, over a period of thirty years, to develop a new, “historical nominalist” mode of critical philosophy.

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