

REVIEW

David Macey, *Michel Foucault* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005). ISBN: 1861892268

David Macey's *Michel Foucault* provides an interesting and enjoyable introduction to the life of the French philosopher. This very brief book (only 160 pages, half letter-page size) is very suitable reading for those curious about the context in which Foucault's work emerged, while the rich collection of photographs (twenty) puts a face on one of the most popular names in today's social sciences. Macey's work succeeds in constructing a very complex, contradictory and fluid Foucault, escaping our attempts to label or categorize the person, his life and his work.

However, for those already familiar with Macey's previous work on Michel Foucault,¹ this book does not add anything new (with the possible exception of the photos): the 2005 book is an abridged copy of *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, and given the space constraints (some 600 pages had to be cut down to less than 140 pages of text), many significant details and contextual elements have been lost. The book is divided into seven chapters, arranged in chronological order and followed by a list of references, a short bibliography and photo acknowledgements. The first chapter reconstructs Foucault's childhood years in Poitiers, marked by the social etiquette of the bourgeoisie. As Foucault himself put it, it was an "apprenticeship in silence"²: the child was trained to follow social rules and roles. But at the same time, it was an apprenticeship in becoming a dedicated and ambitious intellectual, who set high goals for himself and was expected to succeed.

Still, Foucault was no stranger to academic failure and his emergence as an intellectual during his years at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) - one of the most prestigious higher-education institutions in France at the time - was equally marked by success and depression, determination and indecision. The second chapter presents a Foucault oscillating between philosophy and psychology, starting his apprenticeship in asylums and prison medical services, and becoming emotionally involved in a passionate relationship with a tempestuous composer.

1 David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Hutchinson, 1995).

2 David Macey, *Michel Foucault* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 13.

However, one cannot help noticing the patriarchal and masculine environment in which Foucault built his way up. The ENS was an exclusively male institution, where bonding and mentor/ pupil almost feudal relations were extremely important in his future career. The network of relations formed during those years provided him with many opportunities, and soon Foucault took up various positions in Sweden, Poland and Germany. The third chapter traces his traveling years and their impact on the crystallization of his doctoral dissertation and first important work, *Madness and Civilization*³.

In the next chapter we witness Foucault's emergence as a leading intellectual both in the academic and wider public spheres. The brief experiment in literary criticism (materialized in the publication of *Raymond Roussel*⁴) was abandoned in favor of the larger focus on the construction of knowledge in relation to systems of rules. After exploring the emergence of modern medicine in *The Birth of the Clinic*⁵, in *The Order of Things*⁶. Foucault further refined his thesis that "the body of knowledge produced in any given period is organized around its 'unconscious' or a stratum of rules of which its thinkers are not consciously aware."⁷

Although the book turned him almost overnight into one of France's leading intellectuals, Foucault surprisingly left Paris for Tunis. In retrospect, his choice proved to be crucial for his further intellectual development: as he witnessed the violent events of 1967, he increasingly assumed an oppositional role towards power. Unfortunately, Macey's 2004 book only briefly looks at the Tunis years, though the interested reader can find a more in-depth discussion of those times in his earlier biography.

Upon his return to Paris, Foucault was to be confronted with another wave of violence in the aftermath of the 'May 1968' events. In chapter five, we find an omnipresent Foucault on the streets, involved in signing petitions, participating in protests and even enjoying the direct confrontation with the police, an administrative Foucault, involved in the daily functioning of the *Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons* (GIP) (Prisons Information Group) and an intellectual whose understanding of the world is shaped by the context of his own life.

3 Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Plon, 1961) reprinted by Gallimard, 1972 as *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* and translated into English by Richard Howard as *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Pantheon, 1965).

4 Michel Foucault, *Raymond Roussel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

5 Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie de regard medical* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), trans. Alan Sheridan Smith, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London: Tavistock, New York: Pantheon, 1973).

6 Michel Foucault. *Les Mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), trans. Alan Sheridan Smith, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, New York: Pantheon, 1971).

7 Macey, *Michel Foucault*, 73.

It is throughout those years of continuous resistance to governmental control over individual life and to direct and indirect violence that Foucault develops his understanding of 'power', which is the focus of chapter six. Foucault's first-hand experience with resistance to power in its various instantiations (be it in the form of institutions such as government or in the form of discursive practices, such as the construction of the 'healthy' individual) materialized in the emergence of his concept of biopower, briefly summarized by Macey as "the strategies born of the realization that governments have to deal with a population of living beings whose needs have to be met by social technologies that create as well as meet their needs in the domains of health care, housing, town planning, social work, education and so on."⁸

In the latter years of his life, Foucault would develop this theory, adding to it the concept of governmentality - "the techniques and procedures designed to direct human behavior"⁹-, the Panopticon model of power and relation between power and sexuality. Although Foucault remained interested mostly in various places of confinement (from prisons and asylums to families), the relationship between the production of knowledge, power (both in terms of its exercise and resistance to it) and the shaping of the self would soon become a model for re-examining all aspects of social life, making Foucault the herald of a new critical understanding of society.

Yet, in spite of becoming an internationally acclaimed public figure, Foucault was growing increasingly unhappy with the general climate in France. Although the political regime had changed in the beginning of the '80s and the internal security measures had been alleviated, Foucault remained disappointed with the French government's failure to act in various situations where individual freedom was at stake, choosing, for instance, a policy of non-interference during the times of struggle between Solidarity (the Polish workers' union and main opposition actor) and the communist party. On the other hand, traveling provided Foucault with enjoyable escapes to Japan and the United States. In the last chapter of Macey's book, we find Foucault interested in sexuality and pleasure, both in terms of intellectual thought and personal experiences. In spite of experiencing health problems for some time, Foucault seemed to be well when he was suddenly hospitalized in June 1984. A few days later his death was announced.

Macey's book complements this brief incursion into Foucault's life with a rich variety of details about the people, the times and the institutions intersecting in the development of France's most famous contemporary thinker. Interestingly enough, Foucault's life was in itself an example of the complex nature of power, as the intellectual who tried for most of his life to

8 Macey, *Michel Foucault*, 108.

9 Macey, *Michel Foucault*, 113.

resist the exercise of power over the individual was also the one whose own career resulted from the networks of power-relations that he built around himself. In other words, he did not hesitate to make use of his connections and power over other people.

My familiarity with Macey's previous work on Foucault's life was of help in filling in many of the gaps of this abridged version. As no life can be completely exhausted in writing, this review has had to lose sight of many other facets of Foucault's life, such as his relationship with Daniel Defert, his conflicts with the various leftist political organizations, his trips to Spain and Poland at the height of violent times, his involvement in (or absence from) the gay liberation movement, the speculations surrounding his awareness of having AIDS, the feminist critiques against Foucault's work and Foucault's own mistakes when it came to considering women as a target group of power.

The strength of Macey's work lies in its attempt to capture not the 'essence' of an individual identity, but rather the contradictory multiplicity of the self, its fluid and mosaic nature. The writings and the personality of an author might appear to us as coherent and unitary, but this is merely a retrospective illusion: Macey's books make the effort of deconstructing this illusion, showing us that every work is merely a series of attempts, of trials and errors, which we, the readers, turn into a coherent argument in interaction with our particular contexts and our contingent positions. Foucault himself hated labels and avoided exposing himself to the public for fear of being reduced to a 'name'. He would perhaps have enjoyed this book about his own life.

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