

REVIEW

Alain Beaulieu and David Gabbard (eds.), *Michel Foucault and Power Today: International Multidisciplinary Studies in the History of the Present*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006. ISBN 0-7391-1181-7. Hardcover. \$85.00; ISBN 0-7391-1324-0 Paperback. \$27.95.

Michel Foucault and Power Today, edited by Alain Beaulieu and David Gabbard, collects eleven essays that seek among other things to “reevaluate the relevance of Foucault’s ideas for understanding contemporary conditions” (viii). This is an important task, given the rapid transformations experienced both in our subjection to technologies of power and in the critical discourses that seek to analyse them. The essays develop work originally presented at a conference on “Michel Foucault and Social Control” held in Montreal in 2004. As the book’s subtitle suggests, these studies are both international and multidisciplinary, and these characteristics produce both what is most fruitful and most disappointing in the collection.

The book is divided into five sections, each containing two or three essays which (except for those in Part V) seek to situate Foucault in relation to a current-day theoretical or practical domain. The first section, “Law & Politics,” takes as its themes the State, law and control, and the second, “Politics & Culture,” discusses education and music. Sections three and four focus on the fields of “Psychiatry” and “Health Care,” while Part V considers Foucault in relation to “The French Context.” Each of the diverse essays is self-contained and immersed in the author’s field of specialisation, and though they average only ten to twelve pages in length, the 171-page collection nonetheless manages to open onto many of the contexts in which Foucault’s promiscuous toolbox continues to be used.

Foucault’s legacy holds a central and contested position in the high profile contemporary debate over the work of Giorgio Agamben on biopolitics and sovereignty. Warren Montag provides a philosophical discussion of Foucault in relation to Spinoza and Agamben that seeks to supplement Foucault by considering law as immanent to power, while Monique Lanoix uses Agamben’s notions of “bare life” and “the gray zone” to help theorise sites of abuse in long-term institutionalised care.

It is likely that the debate over mental illness will be reinvigorated by the recent publication in English of both Foucault's 1973-74 course *Psychiatric Power* and the complete edition of *The History of Madness*. Both of the essays in the section on psychiatry by Italian scholars Mario Colucci and Pierangelo Di Vittorio provide important historical and political contexts for these texts, from Foucault's relationship to the international anti-psychiatry movement of the time to the contemporary implication of psychiatry in the biosecurity paradigm.

While interdisciplinary encounters with Foucault are central to the brief of the collection, they are only inconsistently realised. Dario Melossi helpfully places Foucault's critique of sovereignty side by side with American and European discourses of State obsolescence, while Thomas Lemke, without needing to constantly reference Foucault's work, is nonetheless able to show how the medico-moral technologies of genetic government insinuate the power structures of neo-liberal risk management into modes of responsabilisation. Frank Pearce provides a fascinating and detailed account of the important but limited influence on Foucault of *Collège de Sociologie* thinkers Michel Leiris, Pierre Klossowski and George Bataille, but in this goes no further than suggesting that a fuller encounter with the collegians would help to counter Foucault's (here unsubstantiated) late contamination by liberalism.

It is the two essays that comprise the section on "Politics & Culture" that are least successful as interdisciplinary convergences, partly, it seems, because the partial nature of their engagement with Foucauldian literature has misdirected some elements of their use or critique of his work. David Gabbard's "No 'Coppertops' Left Behind: Foucault, *The Matrix*, and the Future of Compulsory Schooling" unhelpfully combines two different lines of reasoning – a reading of the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix* films in terms of disciplinary power, and a critique of the U.S.A.'s *No Child Left Behind* education policy – when each was already sufficiently problematic on its own. Gabbard argues that *The Matrix*'s depiction of human bodies as batteries providing bioelectricity for A.I. machines, all the while plugged into an everyday virtual reality, helpfully illustrates Foucault's depiction of disciplinary power as creating economically useful but politically docile bodies. But this analogy seems rather to diminish the space for immanent critique made possible by a more nuanced Foucauldian approach to power as agonism. For Foucault, the domination of the A.I. would be described not as relations of power at all, but rather as the final term of a relationship of confrontation, in which "stable mechanisms replace the free play of antagonistic reactions. Through such mechanisms one can direct, in a fairly

constant manner and with reasonable certainty, the conduct of others.”¹ Gabbard recognises that, like the Panopticon, such visions of power’s omnipotence comprise utopian models towards which concrete strategies of power can only tend (p. 45). But it is precisely for this reason that his enthusiasm for the dystopian vision of *The Matrix* serves to detract and regress from the heterotopian analytic of Foucault; it occludes the spaces of subjectification and resistance within relations of governance, depicting rather a subject who must break free from his enslavement to the ideology and repression of the system through some sort of mystical, revolutionary awakening. This can be witnessed in the manner in which Gabbard applies this vision to education. His critique of compulsory schooling, understood to be part of a conservative “counter-reformation” to the educational changes wrought by the social movements originating in the 60s, brings broad notions of “enclosure” and “the market” (as opposed to democracy and “the social”) under the umbrella of Foucault’s critique of “the excesses of political rationality.” But like other recent work on the same vital topic,² this top-down focus on the panopticism of national education policies provides little specific analysis of pedagogical micropolitics. Comparing students to the perfectly disciplined batteries of *The Matrix* unfortunately serves to obscure the potential of the classroom as a site of resistance to the political excesses that the author justly sees as intolerable.

Tracey Nicholls’ “It Does Too Matter: Michel Foucault, John Coltrane, and Dominant Positions” broaches the interesting topic of Foucault and music, but in a restricted way. Her argument is a largely negative one: that Foucault’s “What is an Author?” expresses a kind of formalism that threatens to refuse the radical potential of socially-engaged musical genres such as jazz by eliminating reference to their mode of creation. But her use of Foucault in this debate is both ungenerous and problematic. Firstly, she unfairly positions Foucault’s argument, rejecting its application (one she in fact proposes) to a context that is by definition outside of its scope, i.e., those (non-Western) artistic traditions that do not operate according to the restrictive notion of the author that he is challenging. Secondly, she misconstrues Foucault’s text, particularly in her emphasis on its “formalist” character. Her reconstruction of his argument includes such oversimplified claims as that Foucault “call[s] for unlimited freedom to attribute meanings to artworks” (52), when he explicitly rejects this at the end of his lecture; that Foucault “treats [works] as discrete entities” (53) (when to question the author-function is necessarily also

1 Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 3 (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 326-48, 346-7.

2 Rebecca A. Goldstein, “Who Needs the Government to Police Us When We Can Do It Ourselves? The New Panopticon in Teaching,” *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 4 (3), 2004: 320-328.

to question the idea of a “work”); and that “Foucault assumes that any identification of an artistic work’s creator acts to suppress the meanings attributable to the artwork” (53) (when in his own criticism he of course refers to the work’s author). She misreads his description of contemporary formalist criticism as an endorsement of it, leading to some confusion about his suggestion that the mode of delineating the “author-function” he has demonstrated allows for the “study [of] discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations but according to their modes of existence [... and t]he manner in which they are articulated according to social relationships’.³ But it is precisely such a method that would not erase but allow for analysis of socially-engaged forms of art such as jazz. That this is the case becomes clear when one moves beyond Nicholls’ selective, single-text approach and looks at Foucault’s work more broadly. Not only are there biographical intimations of his having been profoundly affected by what Deleuze and Guattari call the deterritorialising effect of the “smooth space” of music, following these threads into Foucault’s work might furnish us the resources to describe and provoke both political and desubjectifying analyses of music of precisely the type that Nicholls accuses Foucault of excluding – a task that has been admirably begun elsewhere.⁴

This collection draws together work from a variety of professional and linguistic domains. If its multidisciplinary nature means it occasionally sacrifices some properly “Foucauldian” rigour (in the sense of specialisation in the field, rather than loyalty to a brand) for a greater breadth of expertise in other fields, its international make-up is less ambiguously positive. Essays are included from contributors who normally publish in French, Italian and German, the only downside being some occasional grammatical and stylistic deficiencies. Overall, it is a worthy collection of varied essays, in the pages of which scholars from many fields will find much of value.

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3 Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” trans. Josué Harari, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion. Series ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others. *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 2 (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 205-222.

4 Tom Beaudoin, “From Singular to Plural Domains of Theological Knowledge: Notes Toward a Foucaultian New Question,” in *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience*, eds. James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette (Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 171-89.