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If only the task of writing a popular introduction to Foucault were as simple as it is thankless. I know this, having tried it once and vowed never again (McHoul & Grace 1993). The present offering makes the job easier by eschewing close attention to Foucault’s actual writings and supplementing its paraphrases thereof with anecdotes about 1990s popular cultural and political phenomena, persons and events. So we hear of what Foucault might have thought about Bill Clinton’s sexual exploits; what he could have made of Princess Di’s self-aesthetic; and how he may have pondered the historical truth effect of Robin Hood: Men in Tights. Mostly the ‘what-ifs’ are submerged; occasionally they come to the surface: ‘Although Foucault did not devote much [any?] of his work directly to geopolitical issues, we can draw from his studies a number of insights and concepts that can help us make sense of geopolitical issues shaping the world today’ (p98).

This strategy gives free rein to a rather partial, if popular, version of Foucault — one that puts him awkwardly in bed with Bourdieu, de Certeau, Kafka, Said and Virilio — and which we might call the Foucault of social, cultural and political criticism. Many examples could be cited here, but I will confine myself to an exemplary one concerning discipline.

In a précis of some of Foucault’s work in Discipline and Punish — a work which, incidentally, is remarkably uncritical of anything except Marxism — the authors write: ‘All these disciplinary procedures, and the panoptic gaze, emerged at an historic moment when it had become necessary to produce a pliable, healthy and sober workforce to service the factories of the Industrial Revolution’ (p57). So, despite the book’s surface tracing of some distinctions between Foucault and Marx (pp92-3), this is a markedly Marxish version of discipline. It sits well with, for
example, Marxism’s mischaracterisation of schooling as a ““subtle” way of moulding working class children to the bourgeois ethics of regularity and conformity required by industrial labour’ (Hunter 1993, pp158-9).

This may be a perfectly acceptable and accepted position for critical intellectuals today — especially when extended, as here, to cover such controversies as optimum body shapes, the control of sexuality and the ‘release’ of mental patients into the ‘community’ — but was it Foucault’s in 1975? It seems to me not. Rather, Foucault wanted little more than a description of non-oriented historical specificities, an eventalised and non-critical mapping of institutions, discourses and techniques, in order to arrive at a (very rarely explicit) sense of who we are today. And that description can just as easily serve such institutions, discourses and techniques (e.g., those of ‘policy’) as it can be mobilised for ‘critique’ (cf. Bennett 1992; O’Regan 1992). If the latter (‘critique’), then the impetus behind this use of the description must always be outwith anything strictly recognisable as Foucauldian and must derive instead from one or more of critical apriorism’s avatars: Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and so on.

Such ‘criticalist’ revisions of Foucault are still popular and have wide circulation today via, for example, the work of Judith Butler and Lois McNay — the most frequently recommended secondary sources in the present work. But we have to wonder whether this critical Foucault is the effect of anything more than what used to be called ‘Chinese whispers’. From the authorised texts, the core of Foucault scholarship ... to the hybrid essay collections ... to the more conjectural and inconsistent interviews ... to the secondary commentaries ... right down to the synoptic genre we can only call ‘Look, look, see Michel run’: much is lost along the chain.

One possible guard against this almost inevitable loss is to keep in mind one of Foucault’s own self-descriptions. He was ‘an optimistic positivist’ through and through. What has become of this ‘cartographer’, as Deleuze (1988) called him; this figure who set so much store by the pragmatics of unmotivated historical
description? And what might cultural studies and political science look like under the influence of a generation of scholars carefully trained in such a pragmatics? I fear we shall never know if, as it seems from this recruitment manual, the army of theocratic critical apriorism marches on — still, curiously, under a banner bearing a barely believable Foucault.

References

Bennett, Tony. 1992. ‘Useful Culture’. Cultural Studies, 6 (3).


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