Understanding Foucault

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Foucault famously noted, ‘in political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king’ (Foucault, 1990a, 88–89); so announcing his most original of clarion calls: to conceive of power without a sovereign determinant. This move towards an alternative, non-reductionist analytics of power, allows us to better understand the historical conditions of possibility concomitant with the emergence of certain power relations; and how we are made subject to such practices through modern techniques of governance.

However, whilst Foucault propounded an analytical method, he never actually formulated a coherent political theory and/or practice. Rather, his work culminates in a radical ethics of austere self-mastery that necessarily involves a ‘symmetrical reciprocity’ between taking care of the self *vis-à-vis* taking care of the other. That is to say, Foucault advocated an ethos whose principle, though ‘singular in its manifestation within each person’, is nevertheless ‘universal by the form it assumes in everyone, and collective by the community bond it establishes between individuals’ (Foucault, 1990b, 93).

As with most introductory texts, *Understanding Foucault* provides the reader with a collection of impressionistic sketches that are sufficiently detailed to be engaging; and tangible enough not to alienate. As well as a comprehensive glossary — always a comfort, even for those who are familiar with the Foucauldian lexicon — each chapter concludes with a summarisation and suggested further reading. The bibliography, though by no means exhaustive, is instructive and lists most of Foucault’s seminal texts, including the recently published *Essential Works, 1954–1984*. The authors succinctly expound most of Foucault’s key thematics: ‘knowledge’, ‘power’, ‘discipline’, ‘governmentality’, ‘liberalism’, ‘subjectivity’, ‘truth-effects’, ‘ethics’, ‘aesthetics’, ‘technologies of the self’, etc. Moreover, they also attempt to ground their analysis and provide an articulation between theorising about Foucault and demonstrating as to how one might apply Foucault — never an easy task.

Whilst *Understanding Foucault* is suitable for most social science and/or humanities undergraduates, I felt that the book was particularly suited to those studying media and/or cultural studies. Much of the exposition is illustrated with references to popular culture, media, and artefacts. Political theory students would be better advised to read the so-called ‘governmentality’ literature and/or texts that systematically attempt to assess the implications of

Foucault's political thought (cf Smart, 1983; Simons, 1995; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999; Barry et al., 2001). And, of course, who better to read but Foucault in person: particularly on those rare occasions when interviewed about the political significance of his work *vis-à-vis* the Marxist tradition of theory and practice; or when he explicitly discusses the contemporary mechanisms, techniques and effects of power (cf Foucault, 1990a, 1991; Burchell et al., 1991).

That said, Danaher et al. very definitely succeed in evoking some of the curiosity and excitement that one experiences when reading Foucault, particularly for the first time. For this the authors are to be commended. Often, secondary literature on Foucault can be unnecessarily convoluted; *Understanding Foucault* makes no such pretensions.

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