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## Review

# Foucault and power: The influence of political engagement on theories of power

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Interpretations of Foucault that take him to be a neutral commentator on modern forms of power strike me as tone deaf to Foucault's quiet anger at all he analyzes in his lucid text. Readings of Foucault's later work as a turn away from politics and power, and a return to a subject not totally imprinted by discipline and biopolitics, are more understandable, as the close connections between technologies of the self and political technologies are not entirely obvious. Marcelo Hoffman's clear and cogent interpretation of Foucault's work in light of his political activism, from the start of the 1970s until his death, strikes the right chord to alert us that for Foucault it was always personal and it was always political, always subject *and* power. Combining some of the best aspects of intellectual biography with the interpretive acuity to be gained from archival research in Paris, Hoffman portrays Foucault as a consistently activist thinker. As a bonus, the appendix to Hoffman's book is his translation of 'Investigation in 20 prisons', collated, edited and prefaced by Foucault as one of four reports produced by GIP (Information Group on Prisons), a key site of Foucault's activism, over 1971 and 1972.

Hoffman's thesis is that there is a 'dialectical interplay between Foucault's political practices and analyses of power' (p. 8), in light of which the lines of interpretation mentioned above (among others) are disputed. Another key aim of the book is to address an interpretative puzzle about how Foucault's analytics of power changed over time. The book is more persuasive in the latter regard than the former, as Hoffman does not elaborate the notion of dialectical interplay enough, leaving gaps in his effort to link activism with analysis.

As the interplay is most easily drawn between Foucault's activism in GIP, his subsequent lecture series, and *Discipline and Punish*, covered in Chapter 2, I'll focus on it and the appendix to illustrate where the argument falls short. Hoffman provides valuable background about post-1968 political imprisonment and prison revolts (the context for the GIP) that motivated Foucault's activism, and traces Foucault's affirmations that his scholarly work was deeply informed by his activism. The crux of

the matter is to explain how Foucault arrived at his analysis of disciplinary power from his experience in the GIP, which Hoffman does (in the space of five pages) on the basis of the translated report, the contents of which are two responses by prisoners to written questionnaires, two narratives about prison experience and some typical answers to the questions, in addition to Foucault's preface. Yet does Hoffman mean that Foucault found evidence for his understanding of disciplinary power in the testimony of the prisoners, or that Foucault's political experience in GIP informed his analysis, or both?

Certainly, the content of the report does touch on some of the familiar themes of discipline – spatial and temporal regulation of bodies, visual and auditory surveillance, the prevention of collective action by the prisoners (or individualization). Hoffman also rightly points to the prisoners' frequent references to their lack of rights and the arbitrary nature of the guards' often violent exercise of power, which he says is echoed in Foucault's theme of 'the autonomy of the prison administration from any form of juridical regulation' (p. 37). Yet, contrary to Foucault's analysis and politics, such complaints could easily lead to liberal demands for reform, the application of juridical norms to the darkest corners of the state, and the shedding of light on abuses of rights (the latter point is indicated in the report's aim of 'penetrating the prisons and revealing what goes on there right now' (p. 157)). Similarly, prisoners also complain about filth, cold and poor diet, a range of conditions that could be improved. The report questions prisoners about being examined by doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists, but their answers indicate that the prisoners' problem isn't with disciplinary examination but with cursory examinations and poor care.

There is still a jump to be made from the prisoners' reports to Foucault's critical analysis of the very mode of power exercised in prisons, his notion of normalization and the imbrication of juridical forms by scientific truths and the mutual constitution of power and knowledge. In light of normalization, the key issue for Foucault, as Hoffman notes (p. 33), isn't the arbitrary exercise of power but non-violent regular techniques of disciplinary subjection that induce self-subjection, thereby engendering potentially defiant as well as compliant subjects. Hoffman's key interpretive intervention in this chapter is to argue that Foucault's portrayal of disciplinary power is not totalizing, but Hoffman provides little ground to claim that Foucault learned this lesson from the GIP other than that the revolts did happen. Given the richness of the translated report, the puzzle as to why he turned to historical archives to write a history of the present, rather than writing an ethnography of contemporary prisons and disciplinary practices, is intensified rather than dispelled. If, as Hoffman says, the confluence of Foucault's activism and analysis is in compiling information about 'collective striving' for non-disciplinary and non-biopolitical forms of life (p. 153), then why didn't Foucault focus on how prison revolts happen in spite of the political technology of surveillance?

Hoffman does not explore the power/knowledge theme, but the political practice of the GIP is directly concerned with it, especially in the form of what Foucault

referred to in 1976 as ‘an insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ in ‘the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical notion of struggles’ (Foucault, 1980, pp. 81, 83). As Hoffman correctly points out, the GIP was not simply trying to give a platform for prisoners to speak, but was ‘mediating the voices of the prisoners’ (p. 21), even though according to the preface, the report is ‘about giving the prisoners ... the means to speak about conditions’ (p. 157) rather than having experts investigate them. It would be helpful to have a fuller account of the politics of the relationship between intellectuals and prisoners in GIP, and some explanation of why Foucault’s intellectual practice was determinedly individual and historical rather than collective and contemporary.

The second articulation of activism and analysis is Foucault’s controversial writing about the Iranian Revolution and spiritual politics (which is not so much an example of activism as an engagement with a political movement). If Hoffman is correct that Foucault saw in the Iranian Revolution a collective will, a people, it’s not clear why he didn’t settle on other examples of collective will, or finesse his notion of a people refusing the self-regulation of neoliberalism, especially as he acknowledged that such forms of collective will needed the affective charge of some form of chauvinism.

The third episode of Foucault’s activism on which Hoffman focuses is with the Solidarity movement and in particular a dispute between a group of intellectuals and the new socialist French government about intervention in Poland. Hoffman traces the connection between that latter, conceived as a ‘parrhesiastic scene’, and Foucault’s last lectures in which the theme of *parrhesia* is central. Yet there remains a puzzle as to why Foucault took his ‘Greco-Latin “trip”’ (p. 142) rather than studying the collective resistance of the Solidarity movement if, as Hoffman claims, he was prompted to analyze collective activity. Hoffman rightly criticizes Foucault’s scant analysis of militant forms of life and disregard for political organization in the lectures, leaving us at a loss as to why Foucault spent so much time on cynical life as militancy. A more fruitful interpretative line to follow in connection with the last lectures and their focus on non-disciplinary and non-biopolitical forms of life would be Foucault’s (1989) concern for (if not activism in) gay forms of life and community that transgress the limits of who we are. Regrettably, Hoffman’s Foucault isn’t at all queer, and the theme of transgression as critical practice in his work is neglected.

There is much value in Hoffman’s contextual interpretative approach that often makes good cases in contrast to alternatives. He argues that Foucault did not abandon his model of power as war or struggle (which suited his perception of political militancy at the time), but displaced it. In a subtle reading of the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures, Hoffman reveals how the discourse of war-like struggle is not radical but the discourse of the state, not about wars of ‘races’ but about war on behalf of the race. At the time of his writings on Iran, Hoffman argues, Foucault was moving away from the analytic of the biopolitics of population because it posited the population as the object of a repressive power, leaving no room for the correlate of a self-directing subject–object of power, the people. Bucking the trend, Hoffman thus



cautions against adaptations and appropriations of biopolitics (or biopower). There are also a series of concise overviews of key themes, such as *parrhesia*, throughout the book.

Overall, then Hoffman has set the course for a comprehensive assessment of Foucault's critical practice, intellectually and politically, and intervened smartly in a set of debates about Foucault's analysis of power.

## References

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