



Political genealogy after Foucault

M. Clifford

Routledge, London, 2001, 240pp.

Paperback, ISBN: 0-415-929156/92164.

Contemporary Political Theory (2002) 1, 254–255. DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300007

Michael Clifford describes his *Political Genealogy After Foucault* as ‘a genealogical critique of modern political identity’ (p. 5). Although, what we actually get is a Foucauldian inspired elucidation and critique of the way in which liberal political thought exercises a decisive influence over the discursive construction of modern and contemporary American political identity. More particularly, Clifford takes certain canonical figures from the history of political thought in order to genealogically underline as to how their ideas have helped shape the American political imagination. Hobbes’s ‘discourse of threat’, (p. 21), Mill’s thoughts concerning ‘autonomous selfhood’, (p. 70), Rousseau’s notion of ‘noble savage’ (p. 1) are all thought to be at play in the emergence of ‘modern political subjectivity’ — what Clifford calls the ‘Savage Noble’ (p. 5).

The ‘Savage Noble’, Clifford tells us, is something of a ‘hybrid’ representing a Europeanisation of the American savage/Indian and an Indianisation of the European settler — a ‘new form of identity that married the courage and robustness of the native American savage with the reason, culture and civility of the white, European male’ (p. 5). As a political concept, the notion of the ‘Savage Noble’ is taken to be important in so far as it impacts on our modern consciousness and contemporary understanding of issues such as ‘freedom’ and ‘rights’ (p. x). Or, more specifically, it is said to represent a political logic of identity and difference which can function to repress the ‘rights’ and ‘freedoms’ of those discursively constructed as different or ‘Other’ (p. 91).

Clifford affirms the notion of genealogy as a critical tool capable of resisting the ‘subjectivational process’ that gives rise to this logic of identification. This ‘genealogically informed and thus subversive attack against identity’ (p. 91) is ethically motivated by a desire for ‘freedom’. Foucault, we are told, provides the conceptual resources for theorising a ‘strategic’ notion of freedom: ‘this avenue of freedom involves identifying and putting into play certain strategic responses to power relations (p. 133). ‘Strategic freedom’ is, in turn, conditioned by the subject’s capacity for countering memory: ‘counter-memory consists of essentially forgetting who we are, ‘a forgetfulness of essence’, of the



moral and ontological obligations that bind us to an identity' (p. 134). These ideas of freedom are theorised as a challenge to the 'traditional' rights-based conception found in liberal thinking (p. 132).

If Clifford's book lacks a little verve and vitality, this is clearly because the thrust of his argument fails to really challenge us to see Foucault, or indeed modern American political identity, in a new light. Very few of us would be surprised to hear that liberal modes of thinking exercise influence over the American political imagination. Seasoned readers of Foucault would struggle to find anything novel in the suggestion that his concept of freedom represents an implicit challenge to a liberal rights-based notion. All in all, Clifford has produced a solid, if at times predictable, piece of work. Those familiar with the work of Foucault will not be surprised by what they read. That said, those new to the work of Foucault, and especially those teachers and students of liberal political theory who are curious to explore the relevancy of Foucault's thought, will undoubtedly find it a useful resource.

Robert Porter
School of Communication,
University of Ulster.