Review of “Michel Foucault”

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Barry Smart’s *Michel Foucault* is a sympathetic introduction to one of the seminal social thinkers of our times. The work is a revised edition of his original monograph, published in 1985. It belongs to the Key Sociologist Series, edited by Peter Hamilton, published by Routledge Press. This revised edition includes a new, updated preface as well as a useful, revised bibliography that incorporates much of the primary and secondary literature published in English by/on Foucault since the appearance of the 1985 work. The argument of the book is convincing in establishing both the unity and originality of Foucault’s thought, but it fails to make the case for Foucault as a coherent critic of modern societies.

All in all, Smart attempts to establish three separate theses which are generally reflected in the overall structure of the book. After offering a broad overview of Foucault’s main themes and issues in chapter one, chapter two is mainly devoted to demonstrating that Foucault’s oeuvre, while undergoing an evolutionary methodological transition from “archaeology” to “genealogy,” should not be regarded as discontinuous. Instead, Smart argues that the two distinctive modes of analyses share a common concern and thus simply constitute a “re-ordering of analytic priorities” (47). Smart’s second thesis is largely confined to chapter three (although traces of it can be detected already in chapter two), which maintains that Foucault’s contributions to many of the central themes dealt in humanistic sciences are groundbreaking and hence neither reducible to existing methods of history and sociology, nor to the approaches of various philosophical movements like phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, and Marxism. In light of this, Smart thinks Foucault’s ideas should be viewed as highly fertile ground for new insights into modern societies. The fourth and final chapter is dedicated to demonstrating that Foucault’s numerous historical studies of madness, illness, criminality, and sexuality should not merely be understood as so many descriptive analyses but instead as “a substantial contribution to radical and critical thought” (141). In other words, Smart does not consider Foucault merely as a neutral, social scientist but conceives his work rather as an indictment of specifically modern forms of power. Because of this, Foucault is ultimately said to provide us “a challenge directed to what is” (62).

At issue regarding Smart’s first thesis, then, is whether the distinction between the archaeological and the genealogical constitute a “rigid division or a break between earlier and later writings” or not (47). While the two methods are distinguished by their divergent procedures, objects, scope, as well as the dissimilarity of their objectives, Smart nevertheless insists on their fundamental thematic unity. The affinity of these themes, he argues, is sufficient for regarding Foucault’s methodology as continuous.
On the one hand, the archaeological by and large employs a synchronic approach (while not entirely neglecting diachrony) in order to gain access to its object of study, the archive, which in turn refers to “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements existent at a given period within a particular society” (48). In addition to such features, the aim of the archaeological method is said to be purely descriptive (50). On the other hand, the approach of genealogy is characterized as diachronic whose object domain is not only different but considerably wider from that of archaeology. It is said to include, but not be limited to, the study of power, sentiments, feelings, morality, and the physiology of the body (57). Also, in opposition to the descriptive nature of the archaeological, the genealogical is depicted as being normative: “In contrast to the detachment and neutrality evident in the archaeological analyses of discourse Foucault’s genealogical analyses of power-knowledge relations evidence a somewhat different stance, namely that of critique” (62). So, Foucault’s methodological evolution from archaeology to genealogy is regarded by Smart as a transition from purely descriptive considerations to concerns increasingly more critical.

In spite of such dissimilarities, Smart correctly insists on a fundamental kinship between the two approaches. The aim of both is to investigate and demonstrate the changing, the impermanent, and the thoroughly historical in our systems of thought and knowledge. Just as the main premise of the archaeological is that there are no “appearances to be overcome, nor secret principles to be uncovered” (49), the genealogical likewise “seeks to reveal the historicity of qualities and properties which either have been thought to lack a history or have been neglected” (57). The two methods thus exhibit considerable likeness in their fundamental assumptions, which is quite sufficient to reject the idea of an earlier and a later Foucault.

While the central argument for Foucault’s originality is to be found in chapter three, Smart’s discussion of Foucault’s method of analysis carried out in the previous chapter can already be regarded as supporting the thesis in question. This is because Smart is not only careful in distinguishing the archaeological approach from the genealogical, but also from the more conventional “history of ideas”-approach which analyzes discourses through the binaries of “originality/banality; new/old; revolutionary/normal” (49). Also, while the archaeological cannot be assimilated to the history of ideas, the genealogical method likewise resists any such absorption to the approach encountered in traditional history: “[G]enealogy stands in opposition to traditional historical anlysis; its aim is to record the singularity of events, to reveal beneath the constructed unity of things not a point of origin but dispersion, disparity, and difference, and the play of dominations” (59). Thus Foucault cannot be regarded as a historian in either one of these senses.

But surely if Foucault’s stature as an original thinker can be defended at all, an account of his concept of “power” is necessary. Smart recognizes this and argues, mainly in the third chapter (also elsewhere), that it is precisely Foucault’s employment of this notion which largely distinguishes him from other thinkers/schools of thought.

According to Smart, power for Foucault cannot be conceived as a “property or possession of a dominant class, state, or sovereign but as a strategy” (77). A corollary of this is that power does not arise from a particular subject but emerges instead from “manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, [and] functionings” (77). Hence it cannot be regarded “as an institution nor a structure but as a ‘complex strategical situation’, as a ‘multiplicity of force relations’, as simultaneously ‘intentional’ yet ‘nonsubjective’” (77). Such a conception does not imply, however, that power cannot be located in
societal structures and institutions--it is simply not reducible to these. Quite to the contrary, Smart makes it clear that for Foucault all human activity is inherently imbued with power: “[F]or Foucault power relations are endemic in social life, or synonymous with sociality” (125). Indeed, power is considered by Foucault to be a necessary precondition for the construction of human sciences, truth, knowledge, and subjectivity. In the sexual construction of the subject, for example, Foucault finds sexual liberation thesis to be ironic, for “in his view ‘sex-drive’ cannot be free of power” (105). Rather, it is necessarily constituted by power. Hence it is not exclusively, perhaps not even mainly, the criterion of agency that separates Foucault’s notion of power from other theorists’. It is rather Foucault’s refusal to view power as a result of some other, more basic, fundamental category such as economy, knowledge, or sex (122). All such theorizing focuses necessarily on the more primary categories, normally in order to either explain power relations through them or to prescribe some remedy for such relations through the more fundamental categories. In contrast, for Foucault, there is no escaping power.

With this conception in hand, it is relatively easy for Smart to argue for Foucault’s irreducibility to other schools of thought. Marxism, for example, locates the source of power specifically in capitalistic economic interactions. As is well known, such interactions make power the property of socioeconomic classes instead of an ubiquitous social entity necessary for the production of knowledge. Similar remarks suffice for sociologists’ and political theorists’ interpretation of power. For there too, the main concern is with power residing in some sort of agency, whether it is thought of as an individual, sovereign, or the state. Other approaches not necessarily married to a theory of power residing in an agency nevertheless construe power in different ways from that of Foucault. Thus, we are told that phenomenology differs in its assumption of an autonomous subject; the distinguishing feature of hermeneutics is its reliance on a “deep or ultimate truth”; structuralism is divergent in its insistence on constructing “a formal rule-governed model of human behavior.” All such methods assume a conception of power separable from various different features of human activity. It is only Nietzsche whom Smart recognizes as having an “incontrovertible...influence on both the method of analysis and the principal themes and issues selected for examination by Foucault” (60). This may be the case as regards issues and themes, but an argument can be made that Foucault’s concentration on local histories is, in a sense, antithetical to the more global nature of Nietzsche’s approach.

In any case, Smart has made a convincing case for Foucault’s originality by distinguishing his model of power from other major movements and disciplines. It is, indeed, difficult if not impossible to locate another method or a thinker with as encompassing of a notion of power as one employed by Foucault. However, while the notion has the merit of originality, it also suffers from rendering Foucault’s alleged notion of critique untenable, if not incoherent.

As we have seen, according to Smart, the major contribution of Foucault to analysis of modern societies is his novel theory of power. There is not just a sense in which others’ conceptions of power are different from Foucault’s; there is also a sense in which they are deficient due to their reductionistic nature. Thus, if the analysis is merely limited to sovereign power or power residing in socioeconomic classes, the more insidious forms of disciplinary power analyzed by Foucault are missed. Such power is more insidious because it is harder to recognize and thus harder to resist. This implies that Smart does not merely consider Foucault’s theory of power to be theoretically more penetrating than the conventional approaches, but that he also regards it as having practical
import. That is, a recognition of unconventional forms of power makes resistance at the very least possible. Hence the alleged critical nature of Foucault’s undertaking.

But given the ubiquitous nature of Foucault’s conception of power, how exactly is resistance possible? For if Smart is correct in claiming that power is synonymous with sociality, there does not appear to exist a realm that could transcend power. Smart acknowledges the problem and offers a solution: resistance constitutes on ‘irreducible opposite’ of power relations (133). We are also told that, “both power and resistance are synonymous with sociality; their respective forms may change, but a society without relations of power and therefore forms of resistance is in Foucault’s view inconceivable” (133). Such an answer gets to the core of the problem. If resistance can only reconfigure power, the question still remains: why should one resist? The only sensible answer to such a question in the face of all encompassing power is that some forms of power are better than others. In other words, since resistance can only alter power without transcending it, there must be degrees of power that can be theorized as worse or better. Otherwise resistance is deprived of its raison d’être.

But Foucault does not offer us such an analysis of power, nor is it immediately obvious that he would, given his overall theoretical apparatus. To do so would be to lapse into the realm of liberation politics which has remained the target of Foucault’s critique throughout his oeuvre. For if one does not project a realm of complete liberation beyond the encirclement of power, some normative stance is nevertheless needed for motivating resistance. Also, if power is conceptualized principally as neither repressive nor prohibitive, as Smart claims, what exactly is wrong with it? (63) And if nothing is wrong with it, why resist it?

Other problems remain with Smart’s overly sympathetic account. We are told that for Foucault, every society has its “regime of truth, its general politics of truth” (68). This is surely consistent with Foucault’s theory of power. But if this is so, how can Foucault’s own theory escape this fate? In other words, if one does not posit an untainted notion of truth, how can one then claim the status of truth to one’s own undertaking? There may be answers to such problems but Smart does not attempt to provide them. We only get a few lines stating that sometimes Foucault contradicts himself with “prescriptivism” or an implication of an “ahistorical subject of resistance” (134) but such pronouncements are neither followed up with an extended discussion, nor seen as posing a real threat to Foucault’s critical undertaking. Thus, Smart leaves many crucial questions unanswered in an otherwise instructive work.

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