

# Foucault Studies

© David Lee Carlson 2008

ISSN: 1832-5203

*Foucault Studies*, No 5, pp. 108-111, January 2008

---

## REVIEW

**Jeremy W. Crampton and Stuart Elden (eds.), *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). ISBN: 9780754646556.**

It seems peculiar that a collection of essays on Foucault and space has not appeared in Foucault studies until now. As the editors<sup>1</sup> of *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography* note, matters of space permeate much of Foucault's works. This is not your typical edited collection, however. While other edited collections<sup>2</sup> have contextually sanitized his works, the editors of this collection highlight the exchange between Foucault and the editors of *Hérodote* to ground a reconsideration of Foucault's questions about space and geography. They seek to examine the ways that geographers use Foucault's ideas, and to ignite and continue a scholarly discussion about how to use Foucault's notions of space in the present moment. At the risk of sounding hackneyed, they provide scholars with a multi-faceted toolbox, one that reveals Foucault's thinking at this time in his life and presents translations of essays written by Foucault and French scholars that were previously unavailable to English audiences, in an array of essays on how to apply Foucault.

If biographies<sup>3</sup> are any indication, Foucault's engagement with the editors of *Hérodote* warrants merely a footnote in Foucault's intellectual life. He emerged as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Elden's *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001) and Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) are, in my view, the best books on the topic.

<sup>2</sup> A few of the most recent edited collections are: Alain Beaulieu and David Gabbard, *Michel Foucault and Power Today: International Multidisciplinary Studies in the History of the Present* (New York: Lexington Books, 2006), Diana Taylor and Karen Vintges, editors, *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), and Bernadette M. Baker and Katharina E. Heyning, *Dangerous Coagulations? The Uses of Foucault in the Study of Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, translated by Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991) and David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault: a Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

public political figure and as a consummate organizer for important causes. Hélène Cixous described Foucault as a “pragmatic person”,<sup>4</sup> always looking to be “effective”.<sup>5</sup> Eribon writes that the GIP<sup>6</sup> represented a new “intellectual engagement” that focused on the “realities that have gone unnoticed, showing what is intolerable and what it is in an intolerable situation that makes it truly intolerable”.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that in addition to prisons, the targets of the GIP included: “courts, cops, hospitals, asylums, school, military service, the press, television, the State”,<sup>8</sup> all of which deal with issues of space and geography. For Foucault, to protest against these institutions was not a theoretical exercise, but arose out of a personal desire to contest specific power relations. Throughout most of his life, and certainly in the 1970s, Foucault participated in political movements, and linked his intellectual work with a materialism that sought to expose everyday power struggles and their intolerable effects.

The vital link between Foucault’s political projects and his works does not go unnoticed in this book. The book begins with newly translated versions of Foucault’s questions to the editors of *Hérodote* and their responses to him, all of which took place in 1976. In brief, the questions focused on the questions of whether power as strategy implies war, whether geographers constitute their knowledge as a science, and how they conceive of power. While many of their answers seem to be aligned with Foucault’s, the addition of space to knowledge and power is useful. For example, the editors of *Hérodote* assert in their response to Foucault’s questions that while there is no fluid whole to power, strategy involves the topography of the “knowing-how-to think-space”.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Brabant argues in response to Foucault’s question about power that “what characterizes power is the way that its internal complexity goes hand in hand with a multiform intervention on the place of space”,<sup>10</sup> Racine and Raffestin state in response to Foucault’s question about science that “Geographers no longer begin with science, but with ‘popular knowledge’”, in order to “produce a counter-discourse of possible alternatives”.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of doing so, they contend, is to allow for more “democratic control” over the “production of their space”, which, in their view, is the

---

<sup>4</sup> Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, 230.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>6</sup> *Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons*.

<sup>7</sup> Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, 234.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>9</sup> Crampton and Elden, *Space, Knowledge and Power*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

“sole criteria [sic] of truth”.<sup>12</sup> Thinking of discourses, action, and knowledge within and throughout spaces can be a very useful way to look at Foucault’s works.

The section “The Anglo Responses” focuses on the way in which scholars have used or could use Foucault’s ideas within certain fields of study. The editors begin appropriately enough with an essay by David Harvey, whose “Social Justice and the City” (1973) represented a shift in the field of geography from quantitative and “law-finding” analysis to a “political account”. No doubt, as the editors point out, this was largely the result of the political unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Harvey’s “The Kantian Roots in Foucault’s Dilemmas” criticizes Foucault for upholding a Kantian view of absolute space and time, or, perhaps more specifically, for not developing a “critical theory” of space and time prior to the interview with *Hérodote*. Raffestin’s “Could Foucault have Revolutionized Geography?” posits a different view of the relationship between Foucault’s ideas and the field of geography. He asserts that the lack of interest in and use of Foucault’s work is less due to Foucault’s lack of articulation than the field’s insistence on stability and certainty. He states, “The geographical gaze is self-conditioned by a canonical tradition that finds legitimation in itself, without realizing that these practices are at fault”.<sup>13</sup> They are “at fault” because they refuse to utilize the “elliptical” movement between the philosophy of relations and the philosophy of the object, where the “relations determine the object, and only what is determined exists”.<sup>14</sup> Mill’s “Geography, Gender and Power” describes how feminist linguists and geographers understand Foucauldian power, arguing that spatial arrangements determine and are determined by a “consciousness” of appropriateness and effectiveness. Using the confessional as an example, she asserts that space, power and knowledge emerge together to resolve specific, local problems. Thrift’s “Overcome by Space: Reworking Foucault” exposes four “blind-spots” of Foucault’s political project, arguing that scholars should consider utilizing Foucault’s interest in care of the self in order to construct “social-cum-spatial” associations that would expand our understanding of ourselves. The final essay in this section is perhaps the most useful in terms of explicating Foucault’s notion of power as strategy and how it relates to knowledge. Thomas Flynn’s “Foucault Among the Geographers” responds directly to each of the questions Foucault posed in *Hérodote*. What makes this chapter so effective is Flynn’s ability to weave in current material with Foucault’s ideas. He makes the important distinction between power situations and power institutions, a point that

---

seems to get lost in much of the scholarship on power, where writers rely on the “power is everywhere”<sup>15</sup> mantra.

This book challenges scholars in Foucault studies to reconsider how they engage with his ideas. Contextualizing Foucault reminds us that he was continually responding to and contesting the socio-political affairs of his time, all of which directly informed his works. While Foucault may be used as an explanatory lens to revisit previous historical moments (see Crampton’s “Maps, Race and Foucault: Eugenics and Territorialization Following World War I”), and exegetical work to parcel and position Foucault within a larger field of study (see Huxley’s “Geographies of Governmentality”), the section that contextualizes Foucault’s works (part 4 ) illustrates how his ideas become realized when they are applied to current situations, specifically in Kerns’s “The History of Medical Geography after Foucault”, Howell’s “Foucault, Sexuality, Geography”, and Coleman and Agnew’s “The Problem with Empire”. Wood’s post-surveillance essay provides a brilliant analysis of the various theories of power beyond panopticonism. His push to utilize Action-Network Theory (ANT) , while may not be the most “comprehensive” iteration of a post-Foucauldian conception of power, seems to be a very practical way to look at how practices and discourses of surveillance intrude on our everyday lives. In addition, he is correct to assert that not every matrix of power is the panopticon recreated, and that using other theories of networks and relations that may be linked to Foucault’s understanding of power can help us to complete critiques of social institutions and cultural products.

In the end, those who are even remotely interested in Foucault will find this book to be most helpful in their scholarly pursuits. The book provides us with a stronger, more in-depth analysis of Foucault’s concept of power, specifically focusing on power as strategy, and the relationship between space and epistemology. The editors successfully demonstrate that Foucault had a profound interest in space, and that it played a vital role throughout much of his work. Perhaps most important is that the book flows as smoothly as a conversation, placing Foucault as an interlocutor across time/spaces, providing scholars with additional avenues for future research. It also reminds us that Foucault was a scholar-activist and that his personal and political activities informed and directed his works and ideas, work and ideas that should continue to motivate those who choose to use his multifaceted collection of tools.

Dr. David Lee Carlson, Arizona State University

---

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 93.