Foucault Studies

REVIEW

Shelley Tremain (ed.), *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2005). ISBN 0-472-06876-8

The essays that comprise *Foucault and the Government of Disability* represent a cross-disciplinary approach to writing Michel Foucault into the burgeoning cross-disciplinary field of "disability studies." The book is divided into four sections: Epistemologies and Ontologies, Histories, Governmentalities, and Ethics and Politics. While "no one model, doctrine, or vocabulary with respect to disability governs the essays," two major themes from Foucault's work run more or less constantly throughout the book.[1] First, the essays offer a critique, implicitly or explicitly, of the governmentality of disability, specifically its neo-liberal modalities, and the legal and political distinction made in the U.K. between "disability" and "impairment." Second, following Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, the essays explore the related theme of power in late-capitalist societies, examining, with varying degrees of success, the ways in which the individual subject becomes complicit in the functioning of power—implicating the individual in the very processes of power that serve to control and delimit acts and behaviors, as well as the very possibilities of agency, identity, and perceived reality.

At their best, these articles convince by uncovering and describing specific circumstances whereby individuals submit to and/or resist forms of disciplinary control within concrete practices of subjectification. Just as often, however, these articles fail to substantiate their initial claims made along the lines of this most important of Foucault's themes, and the arguments devolve into crypto-Marxian critiques that push the limits of Foucault's conceptualization of power and resistance.

Given that Foucault himself dealt directly with the histories of "feeblemindedness" and "idiocy," as well as medical, psychological, and biological deviation in general, some might be surprised that Foucauldian analyses of this kind are not already firmly entrenched in the study of disability. Yet, with a handful notable

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[1]   Shelley Tremain, "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critical Disability Theory: An Introduction," *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, p. 13.

exceptions (such as Bernadette Baker's work on "ableist normativity" in education[22]), given the ostensible appropriateness of his theory to this subject, Foucault is conspicuously under-represented. The best articles in this collection represent an important, prescient, and *necessary* contribution both to the study of disability and to the study of Foucault—a kind of litmus test for the efficacy of Foucault's concepts in the study of disability, concepts that lead to a refusal of the biological essentialism implied in the disability/impairment binary.

Many will conclude that Foucault's absence in disability studies is owed to the tenuous political rights afforded to those with disabilities; along these lines, in this collection, Bill Hughes calls into question the efficacy of the Foucauldian conceptualization of the body—which he characterizes as non-materialist—to meeting the imperative to "improve the circumstances of disabled people's lives."[3] Rebutting the skepticism of Hughes and others relative to putting aside the more established and ostensibly more materialist critique responsible for activating the current identity politics, many essays argue that the implicit dangers of the problematic ontological assumptions involved in identity politics are already evident in concrete practices, policies, and laws.

Beginning with Shelley Tremain's introduction, the authors in this volume convincingly show how this identity politics reinscribes the subject within the transcendental norm of the "able body"—an evocation at least as binding as it is liberating. Within the loose confederation of scholarship comprising the increasingly popular field of "disability studies," these convincing responses to the old paradigm of understanding disability reveal that there is a sea change occurring in the critical understanding of disability. Foucault has finally arrived.

"Inclusive Education for Exclusive Pupils," by Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, represents the very best of what this book, and Foucauldian scholarship in general, has to offer to the field; while remaining loyal to a distinctly Foucauldian project, this essay is at the same time forward-looking and profound, picking up where Foucault left off with a careful and deliberate analysis of our subjectification that contextualizes our contemporary situation. Specifically, this article explores the shift from a modernist discourse on disability, characterized by normalization and *exclusion*, to a contemporary discourse characterized by the "entrepreneurial self" and compulsory *inclusion*.

Simons and Masschelein show that "this individual with needs and entrepreneurial freedom is not one who 'naturally' appears when segregation and

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[2]   See Bernadette Baker, "The Hunt for Disability: The New Eugenics and the Normalization of School Children," *Teachers College Record*. 104 (4): 663-704, June 2002.

[3]   Bill Hughes, "What Can a Foucauldian Analysis Contribute to Disability Theory?" in *FGD*, p. 78.

normalization are resolved, and inclusive education is established." "To the contrary," the authors continue, "the 'individual' of the discourse on inclusion is *an effect*, or *product of* that discourse and the neo-liberal forms of governmentality with which it correlates."[4] In short, the authors argue that the new rationality of inclusion is based on a particular conceptualization of the relation of the individual to society, where the entrepreneurial nature of the subject (individualization) is a common property that is doubled in the community (totalization), forming a "double bond" based on the production of a new "true nature of human beings."

In other words, a new governmentality appears in the production of a new kind of human nature—a human nature no longer referenced to a norm of corporeal ability achieved through *compensation*, but to a norm of rational-economic choice based on an ability to *participate*. In these terms, disability differs from normality only by degree of *need*—that is, the same kind of choosing entrepreneurial identity is germane to the disabled subject, only he/she requires more from the school to construct/fulfill this identity—rather than *kind* (e.g., abnormal, deviant, etc.).

Ultimately, the authors show how this double bond ironically "immunizes" the individual from various social obligations by establishing a new kind of governmentality through transparent rules, contracts, and exchanges that define what individuals in an inclusive society should and do have in common—namely, "communicated skills, enterprising capacities, and the ability to define and agree up on a common good."[5] They point out that this emergent rationality of inclusion creates a *new* kind of double bond of governmentality between the individual and society, one that, although different from the previous regime of normalization, "shared values," and exclusion, nevertheless entails a new kind of "totalization" of the normal individual.

Julie Allen, on the other hand, draws different conclusions about the new rationality of inclusion. Arguing from the starting point that the "individual has a *right* to belong to society and its institutions," Allen postulates that the project of inclusion is necessarily an *ethical* project that will require "major structural and attitudinal changes and a fundamental shift away from the deficit-oriented thinking that has for so long driven educational practices."[6] While less successful using Foucauldian concepts than Simond and Masschelein—Allen's interpretation of Foucault's "ethics" seems at points interchangeable with Foucault's "archaeology," or critical examination in general[7]—the

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[4]   Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, "Inclusive Education for Exclusive Pupils: A Critical Analysis of the Government of the Exceptional," in *FGD*, p. 220.

[5]   Ibid., p. 222.

[6]   Julie Allan, "Inclusion as an Ethical Project," in *FGD*, p. 282.

[7]   For example, "To pursue a mode of subjection in relation to inclusive educational practice, the academic might attempt to unravel the existing misconceptions about inclusion and problematize

author nevertheless makes a convincing case that a successful shift to an inclusionist mentality must necessarily entail new ethical relations.

Where these articles grapple primarily with theory, other articles present case studies cast in Foucault's terms. Martin Sullivan's "Subjected Bodies" explores how the rehabilitation of paraplegics (re)produces a body based on *function* and a docile and self-governing *productive* subject. The author shows, for example, that the disciplinary standardization of bowel evacuation and other such bodily processes is reinforced by a concept of "self-neglect," so that anyone who does not "buy-in" to the institutions' regimens based on the objectification of the functional body, in the ethical framework of peers, medical staff, and self, is seen as "just plain lazy, incompetent, a no-hoper, wants attention, can't hack it, [is] giving up."[8] At the same time, resistance to these objectifying regimens is common, and is "as much about the rejection of authoritarianism as it is about stating corporeal ownership…."[9]

Similarly, in analyzing the impairment/disability binary written into British law, Fiona Kumari Campbell conceives of "legitimate" identity as a kind of self-ownership, bent on maximizing returns, by showing that "The formulations of disability that disability activists often engage, and which are enshrined in disability-related law, in effect discursively entrench and thus reinscribe the very oppressive ontological figurings of disability that many of us would like to escape."[10] Ontological concepts of citizenship, Campbell finds, are thoroughly invested in an idea of freedom that is isomorphic with a certain kind of enterprising autonomy—"The 'free' citizen is one who can take charge of herself, that is, act as her own command center."[11] Ultimately, however, rather than exploring the ostensibly complicated relationship between disabled subjects, productivity, and discrimination claims, Campbell settles on the more basic point that claims of discrimination tend to reinscribe sanctioned or reified subject positions.

But where some articles succeed in giving concrete examples where governmentality works at the level of individual agency, others are lacking. "Docile Bodies, Docile Minds," by Licia Carlson, is a "history" of mental retardation that begins with early iterations of "feeblemindedness." For example, Carlson argues at one point

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what is known about special education by questioning the so-called scientific foundations of our knowledge," seems to confuse Foucault's "mode of subjection" (*mode d'assujettissement*), one of his four aspects of the ethical "relationship to self" (*rapport à soi),* with Foucault's archaeology.

8   Ibid, p. 38.

9   Martin Sullivan, "Subjected Bodies: Paraplegia, Rehabilitation, and the Politics of Movement," in *FGD,* p. 40.

10   Fiona Kumari Campbell, "Legislating Disability: Negative Ontologies and the Government of Legal Identities," in *FGD,* p. 113.

11   Ibid., p. 111.

that the emergence of the modern developmental subject (specifically, the emergence of "idiocy") reflects a historical turn from a qualitative to quantitative subject. However, for Foucault, modern knowledge was not constituted at a moment where knowledge turned from the "visible" to the "invisible," the "qualitative" to the "quantitative," but through radical reorganizations of the empirical fields that constitute these binaries in the first place. By the end of the article, when the author states "One important Foucauldian avenue that merits further exploration is the relevance of 'genealogy' to a critical examination of retardation,"[12] we seem to be left with more questions than we started with.

While some articles simply misinterpret Foucault on certain points, others come to conclusions that, while perhaps interesting, are not particularly Foucauldian. For example, "Who is Normal? Who is Deviant?" looks at the phenomenon of genetic counseling, making the point that we have moved from a "normativity" based on social norms, depicted here as juridical, "rule-governed," social norms, to a "normalism" based on statistics, "especially over the past three decades."[13] While I agree that there is something different that characterizes the operation of the norm in the last thirty years, certainly positing such a recent movement away from a distinctly juridical form of power does not accord with a Foucauldian chronology. In any event, Foucault scholars will hardly find revelation in the statement that "Normality—that seems to be the central buzzword of our time."[14] And when Jane Berger concludes in "Uncommon Schools" that "The spread of markets and the concomitant shifts in the patterns of production that accompanied the rise of capitalism led … to a new definition of independence in the late eighteenth-and early nineteenth-centuries," she may well be correct, but the clear implications of economic causation do not rest easily in a Foucauldian analysis.[15]

These misinterpretations and fuzzy uses of Foucault's terms add up. "Foucault on the Phone" simultaneously agrees and disagrees with Foucault's critique of power; while superficially discrediting the concept of disability as a "static, biologically originating deficit," the authors ultimately settle on the idea that a Foucauldian analysis is intrinsically limited in understanding disability because "the stark realities of living with disability entail an experience of power as direct and unidirectional, rather than

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12   Ibid., p. 148.
13   Anne Waldschmidt, "Who is Normal? Who is Deviant? 'Normality' and 'Risk' in Genetic Diagnostics and Counseling," in *FDS*, p. 195.
14   Ibid., p. 191.
15   Jane Berger, "Uncommon Schools: Institutionalizing Deafness in Early-Nineteenth-Century America," in *FDS*, p. 14.

indirect and diffuse."[16] And yet, the assertion that the disabled face everyday discriminations and exclusions—in this case, the authors cite the lack of representation of the disabled in telecommunications policy—hardly precludes, *ipso facto*, Foucauldian analysis. But per Foucault, one is left to wonder who, exactly, is committing this "direct" oppressive act, and why. And when the authors conclude that "If the needs and aspirations of people with disabilities were better understood … the technology would have been more accessible from the outset, and the corporations that produce it would have faced a better outlook in terms of their finances," they seem to fall back on the very kind of biological essentialisms that they initially discredit.

Despite the fact that all of these articles work from a Foucauldian perspective, they represent an impressive array of scholarly approaches. Ranging from theoretical work to field research, the articles also cut a wide swath of topics, from the history of "human oddities" as entertainment, to contemporary sports stadium architecture. However, while evidencing the potential of a dynamic Foucauldian framework to address a variety of problems, these essays also vary greatly in their quality.

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[16] Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell, "Foucault on the Phone: Disability and the Mobility of Government," in *FGD*, p. 273.