

REVIEW

Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, eds. *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004). ISBN: 0252071824

The first time that I heard Michel Foucault speak was in the 1970s at the *Schizo* conference held at Columbia University, New York City. At that time I was just starting out as a psychotherapist and was heavily influenced by the anti-psychiatry movement, particularly by the writings of R. D. Laing (who also gave a presentation at the aforementioned conference). My concerns focused on the treatment of women and gays and lesbians by the psychiatric profession. Very critical of the mental health field, I was searching for alternatives to the medical model of diagnosis and the categorization of certain social behaviors as symptomatic of deviancy and “otherness.”

At this conference, Foucault spoke about the rise of the mental asylum, as well as the development of psychiatric discourse. His presentation was a revelation to me. I felt, at long last, that someone was exposing the “emperor’s new clothes” of psychiatric “truth.” The questions that he posed regarding the construction of the normative and “otherness” have influenced my work as a psychotherapist and teacher of women’s and gender studies.

In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges have put together a collection of fourteen essays written by internationally known feminist scholars: Jeannette Bloem, Kathy E. Ferguson, Stephen M. Barber, Mariana Valverde, Helen O’Grady, Sylvia Pritsch, Ladelle McWhorter, Jana Sawicki, Judith Butler, Susan Hekman, Margaret A. McLaren, Amy Allen, and the editors themselves, Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges. As the title suggests, all of the essays explore the late work of Michel Foucault in relationship to feminism and women’s issues.

The editors, Taylor and Vintges, have as their “overarching objective ... not merely to debate the merits or limitations of Foucault’s later work vis-à-vis feminism ...,” rather, they “aim to elucidate, put into practice, and experiment with the political ‘tools’ that the final Foucault provides for feminists today.”¹ To expedite their project, they have divided the book into three parts. The first part is called “Women’s Self-practices as Ethos:

1 Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (eds.), *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 4.

Historical Perspectives.” In this section, the lives of Anna Maria van Schurman, Emma Goldman, and Virginia Woolf are looked at from a later Foucauldian viewpoint. The second part of the book, “Feminism as Ethos,” is described by the editors as a section that “explores the production of various manifestations of feminist identities, subjectivities, and modes of existence.”² Part three, “Feminist Ethos as Politics,” contains essays that deal with the “political significance of Foucault’s later work and its relevance for feminist theory and practice.”³

This eclectic book offers the reader a fresh perspective on Foucault and feminism. Each essay succeeds in challenging the reader to question her/his assumptions and biases regarding Foucault and feminism. Taylor and Vintges’ bold and visionary introduction outlines the major points of controversy, as well as skillfully points the reader towards new ways of understanding Foucault’s ideas about the relationship of feminism to “technologies of the self.”

I began this review with a discussion of my first encounter with Foucault and his ideas. After reading *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, I find that his ideas are even more helpful to me in my work as a therapist and teacher of women’s and gender studies. His ideas about “self care” and “aestheticism,” meaning transforming yourself⁴ are completely compatible with feminist critiques of Freud and psychoanalysis. For example, the early feminist practice of consciousness-raising was designed to help women to become aware not only of the sources of their oppression, but also of the sources of their agency. Moving away from the gender-biased structures of normative psychological and psychoanalytic theory, the focus of consciousness-raising was to provide a forum for discussing sexuality, men, mothers, housework, creativity, childhood, abuse, violence and agency. Consciousness-raising provided women with the support to transform themselves in ways that a century of psychoanalytic practices could never do!

Similarly, Foucault’s culling of classical sources for self-cultivation techniques was inspired by his desire to go beyond the stranglehold of the psycho-social normative. Two articles in *Feminism and the Final Foucault* are noteworthy for their discussion of the ways in which Foucault’s ideas on “self-care” relate to feminist self-practices. In “Experience and Truth Telling in a Post-Humanist World,”⁵ Mariana Ververde discusses Foucault’s ideas

2 Taylor and Vintges, *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, 6.

3 Taylor and Vintges, *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, 9.

4 Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*; trans. Alan Sheridan and others, edited with an introduction by Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York and London: Routledge Books, 1990), 14.

5 Mariana Ververde, “Experience and Truth Telling in a Post-Humanist World: A Foucauldian Contribution to Feminist Ethical Reflections,” in *Feminism and the Final*

about “different practices of truth telling” as “handy tips” for living. She focuses on those places where Foucault struggled to find “non-territorializing ways of thinking about selves, bodies, desires, and ethics”⁶

Ververde delves further into Foucault’s ideas about “askesis” or asceticism as “the work that one performs on oneself to transform or make the self appear.” She sees consciousness-raising as “a site for ‘askesis’” and observes that “the dialogic practices developed in peer support groups and feminist consciousness-raising create a strong link between individual stories and collective issues and political demands.”⁷ In addition, “the same practices also have effects that go in the opposite direction: they inscribe larger political analyses into one’s own biography and even one’s very body.”⁸

In “An Ethics of Self,”⁹ Helen O’ Grady focuses on “the relationship between gendered processes and self-policing in women’s lives.”¹⁰ She is interested in looking at “two factors typical of many women’s experience: the cultural legacy of subordinate status and an imbalance between the care of others and care for the self—that are likely to enhance the power of self-policing.”¹¹ She maintains that “the therapeutic environment (and other possible environments) makes it possible to destabilize the common assumption that self-policing technologies form an inevitable part of identity and to critically examine the cultural context in which they prosper.”¹²

As a psychotherapist, I find O’Grady’s article very challenging. For many women the care of self is often positioned in opposition to the care of others, as an either/ or and not an either/and formula. As a woman, if I take care of myself, I am seen as a selfish bitch; if I care only for others I am seen as a saint with no self and no life. On top of all of this is the question of what constitutes self-care? Is performing gender necessary to taking care of the self? Is cosmetic surgery essential to caring for the self? How does a woman really take care of herself?

The early critique of Foucault’s lack of feminist consciousness vis-à-vis his positions regarding deconstruction of the subject, identity politics, and the normative within patriarchy needs to be problematized within the context of his later theories of self-care. *Feminism and the Final Foucault* offers the reader a wonderful opportunity to learn more about Foucault’s later work and how

Foucault, eds. Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 67-90.

6 Ververde, “Experience and Truth Telling,” 72.

7 Ververde, “Experience and Truth Telling,” 82.

8 Ververde, “Experience and Truth Telling.”

9 Helen O’ Grady, “An Ethics of Self,” in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, eds. Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 91-117.

10 O’ Grady, “An Ethics of Self,” 91.

11 O’ Grady, “An Ethics of Self.”

12 O’ Grady, “An Ethics of Self.”

that work might be integrated within a feminist context today. I recommend this book for students, scholars, and anyone interested in Foucault, feminism, and “the technologies of self.”

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