

REVIEW

Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault* (London: Routledge, 2003). ISBN: 0415245680

One difficult task for educators is the struggle to decide what should be included in the curriculum. All teachers, regardless of disciplinary field or level of education, grapple with the selection of topics and texts to organize discussions of a particular subject. What is not common to all teachers, perhaps, is the problem that arises when the “subject” (multiple meanings intended) specifically writes against the academic practices typically utilized in making curricular decisions. Foucault rejected many standard academic practices, such as canonization, biographical reading, and attempts to totalize an author’s theoretical contribution by reading her “oeuvre.” Given these constraints, how does one write a book intended to serve as an accessible introduction to a critical theorist whose scholarship and political affiliations were prolific and complex? This was the challenge Sara Mills faced as she wrote the text at hand.

Overall, the author has successfully produced a straightforward and instructive examination of the work of Michel Foucault that is mindful of the potential theoretical pitfalls of such an endeavor. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested the work of Foucault, but especially to persons who have little prior exposure to the philosopher, and/or who want a brief survey of his ideas. It will make an excellent textbook for undergraduate or graduate courses that deal with issues of power, culture and social problems. The book will also be a good sourcebook for policy makers or professionals in the human services interested in linking critical theory, practice and activism.

Michel Foucault is part of the Routledge series Critical Thinkers: Essential Guides for Literary Studies. This text places Foucault in prestigious theoretical company, including Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Sigmund Freud, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Foucault has been selected as one of four theorists from the field of philosophy (Deleuze, Derrida and Heidegger are the others) whose work is considered “essential” for contemporary literary studies. This series gestures towards the type of interdisciplinary scholarship of which Foucault might approve.

Also significant regarding the Routledge series is that the editors intend all volumes to present an “accessible overview” of each of the

respective theorist's scholarship.¹ To that end, Mills does an excellent job of presenting Foucault's ideas, as much as possible, without assuming that the reader has an extensive knowledge of Critical Theory, philosophy or even literary studies. For example, in Chapter 2, "Power and Institutions," Mills presents Foucault's analyses of the relations between the individual and society. Informing the reader that Foucault's ideas were part of an ongoing debate regarding theories of human agency and the nature of social structures, she eases the reader into this discussion via the connections between the theoretical tradition of Marxism and post-structuralism. Specifically, Mills notes that both traditions are interested in theorizing the nature of oppression, but differ in their understanding of how oppression takes place (i.e., ideology versus discourse). Immediately, then, Mills offers a highlighted text box which summarizes a Marxist position on ideology, offering the reader a quick primer on the concept, which allows the reader to return to Foucault's ideas, rather than getting "stuck" on unfamiliar terminology.² The accessibility of Mills's text will help Foucault's work to reach new audiences in a variety of academic (or political) fields.

Mills organizes the book into four sections: Why Foucault? Key Ideas, After Foucault, and Further Reading. To address the question, Why Foucault? Mills identifies four themes: skepticism; lateral thinking; curiosity; and thinking beyond our limits.³ Much like Foucault, Mills frustrates the reader by introducing terms without providing linear definitions of them. While Mills does not explicitly return to a discussion of these four themes until the end of the book, she makes occasional references to them in her treatment of Foucault's primary works in the following section. For example, Mills recounts Foucault's productive theory of power as an example of "lateral thinking." Here, Mills skillfully weaves together excerpts from more familiar texts, such as *History of Sexuality Vol 1*⁴ and *Discipline and Punish*,⁵ with less familiar texts, such as "Iran: The spirit of a world without spirit."⁶ Mills does so to articulate how "lateral thinking" is less an abstract concept theorized by Foucault, than a methodological practice employed by the philosopher, a marker of a particular mode of socio-political analyses of knowledge and

1 Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault* (London: Routledge, 2003), x.

2 Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 34.

3 Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 5-7.

4 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

5 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish; The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

6 Michel Foucault, 'Iran: the spirit of a world without spirit', in L. Kritzman (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (London: Routledge, 1988), 211-224.

knowledge production that she urges young scholars to take up in their own work.

Mills's selection of topics and key insights from Foucault are consistent with similar texts aimed at providing scholars with an introduction to Foucault. These topics, power and institutions, discourse, power/knowledge, the body and sexuality and questioning the subject: madness and sanity are each explicitly discussed in particular chapters.

As someone who has been working with Foucauldian scholarship for several years, I found each of the chapters to be interesting and insightful yet keeping close to the goal of providing an accessible overview of Foucault's ideas. One exception is the chapter on discourse, which prompts as many questions and problems as clarification. In my assessment, as well as that of Mills, this may be a function of Foucault's contradictory and in some ways inchoate writing on the subject.⁷ Mills reminds us that Foucault readily admitted that his writing style was "unbearable."⁸ To be sure, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is difficult to read, both because Foucault's writing style and the text's apparently close affiliation with a structuralist position.⁹ Additionally, Mills points out, as have others, that Foucault's other writings on genealogy seem to offer a "correction" of, or at least amendment to, his earlier thoughts. However, I appreciate Mills's assertion that the contradictions in Foucault's writing should not necessarily be thought of as problematic, in that the philosopher himself was not intolerant of self-contradictions. Following a post-structural perspective, these contradictions are viewed as indicative of the slippery nature of language and knowledge, and can serve a productive function of inciting discourse. In this way, we see the coming together of various aspects of Foucault's ideas.

Also attractive in Mills's approach is her use of Foucault's unconventional thinking as it is expressed in interviews. For example, to explore the significance of Foucault's work on/with/through the prison system, Mills offers this quotation from a French interview: "They tell us that the prisons are over-populated. But what if it were the population that were being overprisoned?"¹⁰ That quotation (and moreover Mills's representation of Foucault) gets to into the heart of Foucauldian thinking in several ways. Using "Foucault" as an analytic tool-box, Mills invites readers to interrogate this statement for its multiplicity of meanings and effects; for its relationship to overdetermined and thoroughly saturated discourses on relations of power, discipline and punishment; for the normalizing function of

7 Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 52.

8 Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 110.

9 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 1972).

10 Michel Foucault, cited in Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 18, originally published in *Le cause du people*, 35, 17 February 1971.

power/knowledge; for its challenge to common-sense assumptions; and for its potential for catalyzing strategic action.

In this excerpt, the seemingly simple interchange of terms and rewording of a problem, we see Foucault in the ways Mills presents him to the reader, as a critical theorist interested in relations of power; a (post) structuralist who analyzes the relations between power, subjectivity, institutions and language; a deconstructionist who seeks to undermine common-sense constructions of social problems; a radical philosopher more interested in “displacing” than elaborating terms of Modernist philosophy, history or social science. Finally, Mills represents Foucault the activist, someone deeply committed to political issues, who used his power and institutional authority to bring attention to social injustices. Citing his activities in prison reform, change in the psychiatric field and gay politics, Mills characterizes Foucault himself as a person subject to “marginalization” and one who attempted to help empower marginalized others.

Another appealing aspect of Mills’s analysis is how she clearly identifies the ways in which Foucault’s ideas are distinct from those of other theorists and theoretical traditions. She states:

... his work has also been drawn on by a wide range of readers because he has managed to attempt to theorise without using the notions of the subject and the economic; both terms which have been foundational for psychoanalytical theory and Marxist and materialist theory... ¹¹

Though Mills notes that this departure is “dangerous,” she also shows why and how Foucault views it as a necessary departure for theorizing relations of power. Like other Foucauldian scholars, she discusses Foucault’s notion of governmentality as a form of “disciplining of the self by the self.”¹² Thus, there is a self, but that self is constituted by discourses and moreover power/knowledge regarding what can and cannot be said about the self. Similarly, Mills later discusses the dangers of displacing the subject — especially for marginalized groups struggling for “voice” — yet relays Foucault’s position that the construct of the “individual” is a product of discursive relations of power, emphasizing that this danger is both positive and negative. In the section on *The Body and Sexuality*, Mills cites this statement by Foucault:

...the individual is not to be conceived of as a sort of elementary nucleus...on which power comes to fasten...In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of

11 Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 4.

12 Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 43.

power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals.¹³

She notes the implications of this idea for political activism:

Thus, rather than seeing individuals as stable entities, he analyses the discursive processes through which bodies are constituted. This is a particularly useful notion for feminists and Queer theorists who wish to theorise the forms of oppression of women, gays and lesbians without falling into false assumption about essentialism (the notion that sexual or other difference is due to biological difference).¹⁴

Mills conveys a reading of Foucault that emphasizes the utility of his work for multiple audiences both within and outside of academe. This emphasis is pursued in two ways. First, she outlines Foucault's first-hand participation in political activist endeavors (especially in the realm of prison reform). Second, she discusses how Foucault's work has been taken up by "cultural workers," specifically, feminists, post-colonial and cultural critics in scholarship and practice. Since Foucault's impact in terms of prison reform has been the focus of other biographical treatments, I will here point out the connections Mills makes between Foucault and feminist and post-colonial projects.

In terms of Foucault's connections to feminist projects, Mills documents how various theorists have taken up Foucault's theorizing on the body and sexuality. Mills uses Sandra Bartky's work on disciplinary practices of women and body image, Dorothy Smith's work on femininity as discourse, and Nicola Gavey's research on female sexual practices as examples of feminists who have mobilized Foucault's notions of bio-power, discourse, discipline and the need to reconsider the "self-evident nature of our responses to sexual acts."¹⁵ Mills offers a particularly "fair" assessment of Foucault — balancing these examples with alternative assessments of Foucault as androcentric.¹⁶

Equally provocative is Mills's discussion of how post-colonial theorists have embraced Foucault. Rather than dismissing Foucault altogether on the basis of his privileged position as a white European male, Mills shows how Foucault's notions of a "regime of truth" and "the will to knowledge" have been useful for deconstructing the imperial project of colonization. Here, Mills brings the work of Edward Said and Mary Louise Pratt to bear on the discussion of how European knowledge systems did not "discover" classificatory systems regarding everything from botany to intellect; rather,

13 Michel Foucault, 'Two lectures', in C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 98.

14 Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 83.

15 Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 90.

16 Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 123.

according to Pratt, Foucault argues that European regimes of truth destroyed existing indigenous ways of knowing.¹⁷

Especially important in this introduction to Foucault is the author's keen understanding of Foucault's myriad selves. She shows this by seamlessly weaving together examples from Foucault's formal writing, lectures, interviews, biographical details as well as secondary sources. Though there are moments of questionable reading practices in this book (such as looking for the author's intentions vs. the author-function), Mills is readily aware that such practices are sometimes inevitable, and that the best we can do is to bring attention to their limitations. I applaud Mills for taking up the difficult task of consolidating an amorphous body of information into something intelligible and instructive, yet holding on to the contradictions and complexities that are part of Foucault's thinking, writing and contribution to critical theory.

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17 Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 71.