foucault studies

ISSN: 1832-5203
Foucault Studies, No 4, pp. 164-168, Feb 2007

REVIEW

Clare O'Farrell, *Michel Foucault* (London: Sage, 2005). ISBN: 0-7619-6164-X

There have been three distinct waves of Foucault scholarship in the Anglo-Saxon world, reflecting phases of interpretation and translation of texts. The initial phase of reception from the late 1970s and early 1980s marked the first conceptual reception outside France, across French studies, philosophy, history, sociology and political theory. The second wave, 10 years after his death, was linked to the publication of *Dits et écrits* in 1994.[1] The publishing market explosion of books on Foucault and the interdisciplinary celebration of his work, which marked this wave, were in part stimulated by the theoretical links established within feminist theory, cultural studies and queer theory. Here there was also a fascination across the humanities and social sciences as Foucault became a hallmark of contemporary theory. The third on-going phase is the reading and reception of Foucault's Collège de France lectures at the beginning of the 21st century and an appreciation of how the lectures and the "late Foucault" critically enhance the understanding of Foucault's main corpus of writing.

What is striking about Clare O'Farrell's scholarship is that her work is prominent in all of the successive waves of study – and arguably marks out some of its very shape. With her first work, *Michel Foucault: Historian or Philosopher*,[2] she was at the forefront of studies attempting to translate Foucault's conceptual language for the disciplinary apparatus of his English-speaking critics. In her edited - and yet to be fully appreciated - collection *Foucault: The Legacy*[3] she brought together a diverse range of cultural engagements with Foucault's work; and, importantly, reported her own interview with Foucault in November 1981. Her present work *Michel Foucault*[4] while displaying a very different style and tone from the other studies, carries forward the third phase by integrating the Collège de France

1 Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits. Vols I-IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).*
2 Clare O'Farrell, *Foucault: Historian or Philosopher?* (London: Macmillan, 1989).
3 Clare O'Farrell, *Foucault: The Legacy* (Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology, 1997)
4 Clare O'Farrell, *Michel Foucault* (London: Sage, 2005).

lectures, especially *Sécurité, Territoire, Population*[5] and *L'Herméneutique du subject*.[6] The former lectures, for example, provide a "very significant addition" to ideas on governmentality and the State and enable O'Farrell to overcome previous obscurities (46, 106). In this way, the new material within the lectures provides greater depth and insight into the emergence of Foucault's thinking. Indeed, what makes O'Farrell's latest work so significant is precisely the attempt to make Foucault even more accessible for the demands of the cultural theorist while integrating new material from the archive (a fact which reveals how the relatively short length of the book and the amount of work behind it are in great disproportion). It is clear from this situation that O'Farrell's scholarship carries the political vision of a democratic opening of Foucault's complex studies for those involved in cultural analysis and critique. The work is carried by a strong belief in the need to make Foucault's "toolbox" of concepts available for people in many diverse areas, in the firm sense that to ignore something is to tolerate it (109, 120); and this, in turn, means that ignoring the detail of Foucault's texts is to tolerate intellectual misunderstanding. O'Farrell's careful struggle with this issue is seen in the very method of using Foucault to find strategies to read Foucault, which is not lost in carrying his concern for social justice (3, 54, 72, 86).

O'Farrell's painstaking analysis of Foucault's texts, her uncanny retrieval of the lost edges of Foucault's intellectual world and her ability to capture, rather than discipline, the dynamic edges of Foucault as thinker show precisely why her work will stand out in the explosion of introductory texts. The work holds the tension between archival mind and introductory exposition extremely well, presenting important textual insights for the specialist inside the necessary overview and summary. This double movement is seen in O'Farrell's indirect critical consideration of what David Macey called in his recent shorter account of Foucault's life, the "unimaginable" number of publications on Foucault.[7] Although she does not mention specific secondary sources, she is in large part seeking to correct many of the "misunderstandings" (78), to rethink the "common critical view" (111) and to challenge the "received wisdom in the secondary literature" (64). This corrective reading, which runs through the text, often emerges in the presentation of key concepts, such as archaeology, discourse and power. O'Farrell re-presents concepts that have been so heavily marketed in the

5 Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, Territoire, Population. Cours au Collège de France, 1977-*1978 (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2004).

6 Michel Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du subject. Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982* (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2001).

7 David Macey, *Michel Foucault*, (Reaktion, 2004).

previous Anglo-Saxon studies – we might even say at times manufactured for an American audience – with a new subtle appreciation. This meticulous reading of Foucault's texts is where O'Farrell's introduction excels. In its careful reading of the French texts, there is a deep appreciation of issues of translation (7, 8, 13, 162), which often results in her putting forward a new translation of previously published passages. Moreover, O'Farrell has been one of the few, both in this study and in her first examination, to appreciate the difference between Foucault's reception inside and outside France. Thus there is much sympathy to be had with her appreciation in this work of those aspects of "fine distinction that a number of English-speaking imitators have ignored" (87). In this sense, this work is a rare introductory text in shedding new light on old material inside a basic explanatory study. The specialist will appreciate the archival challenge to the previously marketed Foucault, and the new reader will find a refreshing and reliable presentation of Foucault by someone sensitive to the French text. In this respect, O'Farrell's work shares the same subtle appreciation of Foucault's French that is displayed in Dan Beer's short account of *La Volonté de savoir*,[8] but by virtue of being an introductory text it cannot outline in detail the deliberate shifts of language and parody that are often found in Foucault's playful but serious writing.

Organising a study of Foucault is not an easy task, because it demands a complex wager between the veracity of the texts and the elucidation of the ideas. O'Farrell's solution to this problem is strategic. Inevitably there are areas not covered and O'Farrell makes no pretensions to "'tell all' in this short book" (3). She imaginatively restricts her work to cultural studies, common themes, methods and Foucault's own texts (12); only indirectly - as we have noted - making allusions to the vast secondary works. There are always times when the selection criteria themselves restrict a particular avenue, such as the philosophical concern of Foucault as an Enlightenment thinker in the 1984 essay 'What is Enlightenment?', but O'Farrell is loyal to her method and responds with adequate pointers to wider references in her impressive key concepts Appendix (134, 152). Every reader will want more or less of something, but markers are here and provide sufficient introductory service and much more besides.

One third of O'Farrell's book deals with the hermeneutical problem faced by any writer introducing Foucault, dealing with the iconic, linguistic, disciplinary and life work relationship issues that Foucault's unique epistemological critique and practice bring to the scholar. O'Farrell frames the "prolific", "evolving" and "changeable" nature of Foucault's work creatively inside her "layered approach" (something that looks at the same issue from different angles in each third of the book) and through her five "toolbox" concepts of order, history, truth, power and ethics, each of which is outlined

8 Dan Beer, *Michel Foucault: Form and Power* (Oxford: Legenda, 2002).

in respective chapters in the second third of the book. This creative mapping of the "basic underlying structures and principles" (3, 53) is the primary strategy for dealing with the interpretative problems and it provides the point of access for "applying" Foucault. Anyone trying to write a summary of Foucault knows the Herculean nature of this task, something Alec McHoul discussed in the last essay in O'Farrell's previous edited collection.[9] The final third is constituted by two Appendixes, the first outlining Foucault's life and the second a rich tapestry of archival material offering brief definitions of Foucault's terms and an incredible network of links to his key texts, *Dits et écrits* and the Collège de France lectures. This is no easy task and it is here we see the rich roots of scholarship behind O'Farrell's introduction and her tireless concern for detailed reading. With the ever-increasing amount of material, O'Farrell's Appendix of concepts offers an invaluable cross-referencing of resources. Significantly, for the cultural theorist at least, the Appendix is not just a list of the usual key Foucauldian concepts, but, in addition, offers wider entries on colonialism, freedom, homosexuality, intellectuals, law, medicine, music, race, religion, spirituality and writing as transformative practice.

The fact that O'Farrell can retain a complex picture of Foucault in the very act of producing a clear and comprehensive account is evidence enough of the success of her task, but there is also this other dynamic of corrective reading that adds important depth to the work. As we have already noted, she is responding to previous presentations in the very act of re-reading the familiar sections of Foucault's work and this results in important re-evaluations for the specialist to debate. However, this will require meeting O'Farrell on the same ground of translation and archival insight. We have, for example, the assertion that Foucault's relation to structuralism turns on the un-translated texts on the topic (28), the reading of the archaeology-genealogy relationship as "levels" of "conditions" and "constraints" (66-69), the clarification of Foucault's idea of discourse as reductionism by focusing on the "already happened"(78), the appreciation of ideology in relation to power (96), the correction of the idea of the "subject" as a sudden shift in Foucault's thinking by outlining its consistency and development from his earliest publications in 1954 (111) and the argument – against the popular view - that if one "looks more closely" one sees that Foucault is critical of Greek ethics in his earlier work and in his interviews (114). This art of looking "more closely" shows what can be done when textual specialists and archivists bring Foucault into detailed reading. There is originality in this introduction for serious scholars to take note of, disabusing us of the idea that we know Foucault clearly from previous presentations. What O'Farrell shows is that the new publications and translations are "contributing new and unexpected

9 Alec McHoul, "Condensing Foucault", in O'Farrell, *Foucault: The Legacy*, 771-82.

material for specialists to consider" (120). It is clear that there are new waves of Foucault scholarship emerging in this on-going process, and writing introductions that hold together such detail with clarity is going to get ever harder. O'Farrell provides us with one current example of how this can be done. In doing so, she perhaps answers her own critical discussion about "academic validity" (51-6, 91) in relation to Foucault and cultural studies by bringing both areas of work into the critical and longstanding space of archival and textual scholarship, something she performs to the highest standards inside the difficult art of presenting an accessible and nuanced introduction.

Jeremy Carrette, University of Kent