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Review - The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault

by Lisa Downing
 Cambridge University Press, 2008
 Review by Valentina Gentile, Ph.D.
 Jun 23rd 2009 (Volume 13, Issue 26)

The book under review is part of the "Cambridge Introductions to Literature" series, which aim at comprehensively introducing students to key topics and authors. However, these introductions are also directed to readers who want to "broaden their understanding of the books and authors they enjoy." In this respect, this introductory volume, written by Lisa Downing, combines well these two objectives. On the one hand, it provides a detailed introduction to Foucault's major works, analyzing critically most of his key concepts, such as *subjectivity*, *discourse* and *power*. While, on the other hand, it explores the impact of Foucault's work on contemporary post-modern literature, with particular attention to feminist and queer studies. Therefore, if the first section is ideally directed to students, the book as a whole contains key information and suggestions for readers and scholars from different backgrounds who seek to understand the relation existing between Foucault's work and the more recent discipline of Gender studies.

In her preface, Lisa Downing lists the three major objectives of the book. It is aimed at (1) explaining the historical and philosophical context behind Foucault's ideas, (2) explaining and removing some of the confusion caused by translations to get back to Foucault's original meaning, and (3) offering detailed analyses of major texts. However, if the first and the last objectives are fully achieved, Downing's effort to "get back to Foucault's original meaning" is largely unfulfilled. Only in a few cases does she focus on problems raised by translations, clarifying the original meaning of some crucial Foucauldian notions, such as the actual usage of "madness" instead of "folly" (p.23). In general, no explicit reference is made to the French passages either in the main text or in footnotes, and this leads us to question whether the author could fulfill her second objective, which would have entailed a different kind of work based on careful examination of the original texts and confrontation with current translations.

The book comprises seven chapters. The first introductory chapter is focused on the historical and philosophical context that influenced Foucault's work. Downing locates Foucault's ideas in a specific epoch (1960s), place (France) and context, characterized by cultural and political trends (essentialism, Marxism, post-structuralism, etc.). In this chapter, a long section is devoted to the discussion of Foucault's relationship to Essentialism and Marxism; this allows the author to

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introduce important aspects of Foucauldian thought related to the idea of "specificity." The intellectual should be a "specific intellectual," and the model of power relations should be understood in "specific ways." These ideas translate into Foucault's peculiar understanding of history, which is aimed at offering an actual alternative to Hegelian dialectical historicism. Even though Downing is aware of the difficulties raised by any attempt to locate Foucault in a defined theoretical framework, she seeks to reconstruct Foucault's eclectic approach as the result of both influences and reactions to several philosophical doctrines. Therefore, she also discusses Foucault's relations to structuralism and his debt to Nietzsche's ideas.

The outcome is interesting; the author raises several crucial aspects: she clarifies Foucault's understanding of history, introduces the idea of "knowledge" as an instrument of power, emphasizes the originality and interdisciplinarity of Foucault's work. However, only a few lines are devoted respectively to his political activism and his contribution to the academic study of politics and government. This raises two kinds of problems. On the one hand, the book underrates a relevant aspect of Foucault's thought. His activism in the 1970s in fact represents an important side of his political project based on a kind of "disjunction" between theory, which was supposed to explain the power mechanisms existing behind institutions and rules, and practice, which was understood as the positive ground for reacting to these power structures. On the other hand, the modest attention paid to his contribution to the academic study of politics makes the introduction hardly useful for students and scholars, who approach Foucault from a political point of view in both post-colonial studies and political theory.

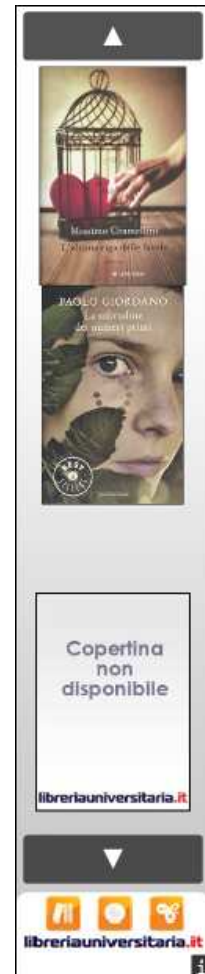
From chapter two to chapter six, the author summarizes thematically Foucault's major works, from "Madness and Medicine" to the "History of Sexuality." Downing offers a critical analysis of Foucault's major texts, stressing some of the most important aspects of Foucauldian thought. In particular, chapter two, on the institutions of psychiatry and medicine, and chapter six, on the history of sexuality, are rich in information and references to the current debate in post-modern literature. In addition, the thematic structure of the chapters is likely to be employed as a general guide for students who are for the first time approaching Foucault's works. However, the absence of a chapter on Foucault's political thought represents again a limit to the didactic use of the text. In this respect, the notion of discourse, which is treated in the third chapter, and the link between "discursive formations" and systems of power, mostly discussed in the fifth chapter, are not adequately developed.

In the closing chapter, the author analyzes the impact of Foucauldian thought, especially the nexus of power and discourse, on contemporary works in feminism and queer theory. With respect to feminist theory, she argues that there are two general ways to look at Foucault's work. Scholars who attempt to reformulate concepts, such as *power* and *identity*, are likely to consider Foucault as a "fruitful ally" (p.109); while those who see feminism as a form of identity politics, especially in continental Europe, tend to see Foucauldian thought as an obstacle to the realization of a feminine model of power. Foucault's work has instead broadly contributed to theories that put into question the notion of sexuality as "naturally given" and consider both gender and sexuality as resulting from discursive constructions. The section concerning queer theory is mostly focused on Butler's works on the "denaturalization" and deconstruction of gender.

Unlike other sections in the book, here Downing goes beyond the general aim of the book and the chapter seems to be directed to a public of scholars, who are interested in understanding the role of Foucauldian post-modern thought in contemporary literature on gender studies. She makes reference to several works, raises critical issues and discusses numerous arguments against and in favor of Foucault's employment to both feminist and queer theory. This closing chapter is also interesting and well written and offers key suggestions for further readings.

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