

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Kelly, Mark. G. E. *Foucault and Politics: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. \$43.95 paper (0748676864)

This book directly poses the question of politics to Foucault's works to see what can be got by doing so, arguing that Foucault is "the most significant political thinker of the twentieth century" (1). The book accessibly introduces Foucault's central lines of research, highlighting how they transform his approach to politics, and is less philosophically technical than Kelly's 2009 book, *Foucault's Political Philosophy*. The accessible quality of writing and inclusion of pertinent biographical events in Foucault's life and career also distinguish it from Jonathan Simon's more theoretically oriented 1995 book, *Foucault and the Political*. Kelly contends that Foucault developed a novel approach to state politics by demonstrating how governance depends on broader political conditions in society and by developing a distinctive libertarianism (8). Foucault's work in the 1970s is viewed as "certainly close to being sociology" (6) and evidence is presented for this view. Foucault is correctly described as an anti-subjectivist focused on the historical analysis of discourse offering "objective" "explanations" (6) in light of "broader social processes" (7). Hermeneutically, Kelly focuses on Foucault's books stating that "there is some necessity to insist on the privileged status of the material that he actually saw fit to publish" (3). He also eschews interpretive relativism to "insist on a correct interpretation of Foucault" (189). The book displays Kelly's exegetical rigour with its critical discussions of "biopower" and commentary on the meaning of the French word "*jeu*" in Foucault (96-97) in particular.

Chapters 1 and 2 locate Foucault's early work in relation to the French Communist Party (PCF) and Marxism in general. He pertinently describes the homophobia in the PCF, something concerning to an aspiring gay academic like Foucault. Kelly notes that Foucault rejected main currents in French ideas and politics including Marxism, phenomenology, Hegelianism, psychoanalysis, and anarchism. Still, Kelly helpfully attends to the relationship between Foucault and the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. Both Althusser and Foucault focused on "the calling into question of the theory of the subject" (20), something contemporary liberal-leaning engagements with Foucault underappreciate. Indeed,

Foucault's genealogical formulation of "strategy without a subject" (Foucault 1980:202) directly borrows from Althusser's 1970 explication of Marx's critique of Hegel in which history is "*a process without a subject*" (Althusser 2007:185). Kelly also uses Althusser's concept of "interpellation" to describe Foucault's analysis of subject formation in *Discipline and Punish*, but fails to note that Foucault *inverts* Althusser's *theorem*. For Foucault, *contra* Althusser, it is not individuals who are interpellated as docile subjects; rather disciplinary practices targeting subjects constitute "individuals."

Chapter 2 addresses Foucault's approach to madness and the "psy" disciplines. Kelly holds Foucault's *The History of Madness* (HM) in high esteem stating that "it is not hard to see Foucault's entire intellectual career unfolding quite organically from *The History of Madness*, and never straying far from it. There is no break, but only an attempt to master questions first raised there" (33). There are good reasons for this view, since it is there that Foucault begins to analyse systems of exclusion and their medicalization, for example (cf. 37). The discussion of HM misses key points however, such as the moral valorization of work in justifications for the "Great Confinement" in 1656. The description of Foucault's methodology as attending to "the way people talked about certain things" (29) unfortunately lends itself to idealist-humanist distortions running contrary to Foucault's materialist conception of discourse. Furthermore, Kelly understates the extent to which Foucault's questions were *Kantian* ones concerning "experience" and "the *a priori*," a point made by Foucault himself (2003).

Chapter 4, "Genealogy and Discipline," situates Foucault's shift to questions of power in light of the May 1968 events and Foucault's exposure to violent homophobia and Marxist student resistance in Tunis where Foucault read radical thinkers like Rosa Luxemburg, Che Guevara, and the Black Panthers (67). Kelly nicely distills the connection between archaeology and genealogy in terms of the analysis of "prohibitions on speech" (70). The roots of Foucault's libertarianism are also discussed and linked to his involvement in the Prison Information Group (GIP), an organization designed to assist in the publication of prison inmates' accounts of their conditions under incarceration. This helps locate Foucault's research on modern penality and how bodies are disciplined. Foucault's analysis of how bodies are targeted in order to become productive forces in capitalist societies made it possible to "outflank" Marxism with its frequently limited focus on relations of production (78). Kelly also compellingly explicates the viscosity of Foucault's Nietzscheanism: "under the surface calm, society remains a churning mass of contestation, in which everyone strives for power" (95). This Nietzscheanism

allows Foucault to rethink politics from the vantage point of power and analytically decentre the state (85). Critically inclined readers will appreciate Kelly's dismantling of Charles Taylor's misplaced normative criticism of Foucault's conception of resistance (100-102).

Discussion of Foucault's problematization of sexuality and analysis of modern biopolitics in Chapter 6 rivals Chapter 5 as the book's "heart" (85). Foucault's arguments about sex being a "recent invention" and "profoundly political," his critique of the "repressive hypothesis," and attention to the bourgeois family experimenting with power-knowledge are exemplary. Additionally, Kelly adeptly discusses the differences between Foucault's views, gay politics, and "identity" theory stating that identity "is a problematic foreign to Foucault's thought," given Foucault's focus on displacing "the categories of sex and sexuality in general" (120). Discussions of sexual assault, feminism, and the possibilities for pleasure round out the chapter.

Concerning Foucault's analysis of the state, Kelly elaborates on the uses of the word "governmentality," pointing to shifts in its meaning and the confusion this has sometimes caused. The last substantive chapter deals with "ethics and spirituality" and articulates a defence of Foucault's writings on Iran. This is a poignant argument because distilling Foucault's dedication to experimenting with ways to rethink the political. To his credit Kelly refuses to valorize Foucault's last two books, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, noting that they are "oddities in Foucault's corpus" (173) given their focus on the ancient Greco-Roman world rather than on the emergence of modern western civilization found in his other books. Moreover, in those two books, "[t]he link to the present is not palpable, and the political stakes are almost invisible [...]" (174). Kelly concludes by reminding the reader that Foucault's critical project sought to remind us of the openness of the present and how important it is to actually analyze power relations. Unfortunately, his discussion of how one might actually go about analysing contemporary power relations is underdeveloped (189). For my part, I would distill Foucault's project differently as tracing emergent problematizations of the actualities of human existence, "politics" being one form of this.

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