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REVIEW

Foucault in the Geographer’s Den


Michael Maidan

1. The editors of the left-wing geography journal *Hérodote* interviewed Michel Foucault for the first issue of their publication in 1976. Some time thereafter, Foucault sent to the editors of *Hérodote* a list with his own questions claiming that ‘[t]hese are not questions that I pose to you from any knowledge that I might have. They are inquiries that I ask [of] myself’ (19). This unusual event serves as the unifying thread stitching together this collection of papers by and about Foucault and his contribution to the development of a progressive geographical theory. While many readers are aware of Foucault’s fondness for references and insights concerning space, this book aims to go beyond such recognition and to: (1) provide a comprehensive overview of Foucault’s engagement with geography; (2) review Foucault’s reception and influence within human or political geography; and (3) identify a number of questions and open issues regarding the encounter between Foucault and geography that require further elaboration by geographers (Elden & Crampton, Introduction, 1).

2. The book is organized into six sections and a short introductory essay. Section 1 reproduces Foucault’s own questions to *Hérodote’s* board. Section 2 brings the responses these elicited as published in subsequent issues of the journal. Section 3, entitled ‘Anglophone responses,’ reformulates the questions from a contemporary Anglo-Saxon point of view. Section 4 provides a context and evaluation of Foucault’s contribution to geography. This is followed, in Section 5, by a collection of texts by Foucault. Missing here are two other texts that belong in this discussion and which are referred to in several of the papers: ‘Space, Knowledge and Power’ (1982) and ‘Different Spaces’ (1984, originally written 1967). Finally, Section 6 exemplifies the achievements and limitations of Foucault’s concepts when applied to contemporary issues.

3. While the book reproduces the replies of some of *Hérodote*’s contributors in order to illuminate the French reception of Foucault’s thought, most of the book concerns itself with a variety of Anglo-Saxon responses. As noted in Juliet J. Fall’s contribution, this is because there was hardly any interest in French geographical circles on Foucault’s work (108). Fall analyzes in detail what she calls the ‘intricacies of the French [educational] system and its potential for immobility’ which explains the ‘non emergence of Foucault within French geography’ (110).

4. 1976, the year in which Foucault gave the interview to the editors of *Hérodote*, was a turning point in the development of his thought. That year he published the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1976) and elaborated important materials that would be included in his recently published and translated Collège de France lectures. Earlier, Foucault published *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1975). These lectures, books, as well as his social and political engagements in that period, revolve around questions of power and the notions of biopower and governmentality, which, as this book shows, were appropriated in a productive and creative way by many critical geographers.

5. Could Foucault have revolutionized geography? Such is the question that Swiss geographer Claude Raffestin analyzes in a piece especially translated for this volume. He answers in a conditional way. It could, but only if geography had contemplated the ‘geographical gaze’, which was not the case (though Raffestin expresses hope that Foucault will ‘ultimately, revolutionize geography’, 136). Raffestin focuses on Foucault’s study of the emergence of modern clinical medicine in the *Birth of the Clinic* (Foucault 1963) rather than on the writings dealing with power and knowledge favored by other contributors to this volume. In his earlier response to Foucault’s original questions.
published in *Hérodot*, he seemed less sympathetic to Foucault, and more subtly criticized what he perceived as Foucault’s extreme historicism, preferring instead what he called ‘a necessary bit of positivism’ or a ‘minimal positivism’ (32).

6. Using ideas developed by Foucault in the *Archeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1969) and *The Order of Discourse* (Foucault 1971), Matthew Hannah proposes to bracket the actual biographical Foucault, and to focus instead ‘on systematic description of the different discursive things that have been done with and to Foucault in the pages of geographical books and journals, at the podium of academic conferences and around university seminar tables’ (84). While Hannah wonders if his reading is not a parody of Foucault, and if it is defensible against the standard criticisms of lack of attention to temporality and agency, he justifies its use as an alternative to standard intellectual history. Hannah does not discuss explicitly his own methodology, but there are several references in the text to a questionnaire sent to geographers known to quote or to use Foucault in their work. Several of the names mentioned are themselves contributors to this volume. Unfortunately, when Hannah tries to specify Foucault’s categories, his narrative turns into an events-based sort of history (‘X’ had a few doctoral students and he suggested they read Foucault, and so on).

7. Chris Philo proposes an ‘archaeological reading’ of *Society Must Be Defended* (Foucault 1997), the recently published and translated transcription of the 1976 series of lectures at the Collège de France. According to Philo, these lectures show a significant shift in Foucault’s understanding of power. In this period, Foucault was trying to analyze the various levels of biopower that operate alongside disciplinary power (341), while also returning to the questions of discourse and knowledge that have been sidelined in his other works of this period (342). Philo is particularly interested in the notion of ‘subjugated knowledge’ and the sort of division of labor that Foucault seems to be proposing between *archeology* and *genealogy* (348), according to which archaeology is the description of local ‘discursivities’, and genealogy ‘brings into play the desubjugated knowledges that have been released from them’ (348). He also emphasizes Foucault’s interest on the ‘local,’ which goes beyond the epistemological interest in space shared by other poststructuralist thinkers (359).

8. There is indeed a complexity traversing the whole book, one whose roots were already present in Foucault’s original confrontation with the geographers. Foucault is certainly interested in space, fond of spatial metaphors and we can say that he is a spatial thinker. However, is his potential contribution to the development of a critical geography related to his interest in space as a form of knowledge, or to his contributions to the study of power? David Harvey rightly claims that space is not geography. He asserts that Foucault narrow conceives of space in a Kantian way as the condition for the possibility of knowledge and that Kant’s concept of space and time are ultimately Newtonian. Foucault’s endorsement of the Kantian approach, he claims, is an obstacle for any attempt to position geography as a condition for the possibility of all other forms of knowledge (45). He concludes that the ‘fixity of Kantian space sadly ends up deadening Foucault’s approach to knowledge and power’ and that Foucault’s ‘arguments, full of initial spatial insights, collapse into stasis’ (46). Thrift voices a similar criticism. Foucault, he claims, ‘tended to think of space in terms of order’ and was largely ‘blind to ... space’s aliveness’ (55).

9. Other authors in the volume explore Foucault’s theory of power, including the pairing of power and knowledge, as a basis for his contribution to the project of a critical geography. Elden, one of the co-editors and a known figure in Foucault studies, reviews Foucault’s projects dating from the mid 70’s, which show great interest in issues such as public medicine, habitat and green spaces. Elden also sees 1976 as a pivotal time in the development of Foucault’s thought. Up to then, Foucault was mainly engaged in reworking, through the optics of power and genealogy, themes that he had already developed in the last sections of *Histoire de la Folie* (Foucault 1981). Based on materials eventually published in the Lectures, Elden claims that we can reconstruct the approximate content of the books that Foucault intended to publish as part of the original *History of Sexuality* project. Soon after he published the first volume Foucault abandons the project altogether, embarking in a new route in the Lectures, which revolves around the concept of governmental. When the additional volumes of the *History of Sexuality* were finally published, they developed a completely new project, one that Elden claims is coherent with the new direction of studying the state and society through the optics of the forms of ‘conduct of conduct’, of ‘how to conduct the conduct of men’ (Foucault, unpublished interview, 1978, quoted in p. 76). Accordingly, Elden does not see any problems relating questions of governmental characteristic of the mid 70’s period with the question of ‘government of self’ that preoccupied the later Foucault (78).

10. For those readers more interested in Foucault as a conceptual toolbox for their own research than in the history of the ideological struggles of an older generation, Section 6 offers a varied menu. Margo Huxley shows how Foucault’s ideas about governmentality or the ‘conduit of conduct’ -where governmentality is interpreted as the production of political subjectivities and of self-forming subjects, i.e., how ‘appropriate bodily comportments and forms of subjectivity are to be fostered through the ... qualities of
spaces, places and environments' (195) - can be useful to the study of space and environment.

11. Gerry Kearns writes about the history of medical geography after Foucault. Looking at how medical geography engaged the AIDS epidemic, first as a question of location of origins, then in terms of diffusion, he acknowledges that medical geography retained an attachment to the ideas of environment and location long after these lost credence in other areas of human geography (214). The model of origins and of diffusion is seductive because they locate disease outside society. It is only reluctantly that medical geography focused on risk behaviors, although it is not clear how this is different from a struggle about who is to blame in this highly charged subject.

12. Jeremy W. Crampton explores the way in which eugenics and race played a role in shaping the position of the United States government on how to redraw the frontiers of the Balkans after WWI. Crime and health issues were important drives of the development of cartography in the 19th century, and both were infused with ideas about race. The same individuals that played an important role in establishing a restrictive US immigration policy in the late 1920s had an influence on US policy making in the Balkans after WWI. They assumed people could be identified as belonging to specific races and that race was an objective basis for determining and map geographic boundaries. Crampton shows how this was supposed to replace the rival approach of determining boundaries in terms of geopolitical considerations without regard for the aspirations of diverse ethnic groups. However, following Foucault, Crampton admonishes us that maps are not neutral instruments but 'both the product of and intervention in a distributed series of political knowledges' (224).

13. In 'Beyond the Panopticon?', David M. Wood asks about the relevance of Foucault's views for 'surveillance studies', i.e., the study of how information collected about individuals is organized and manipulated to alter, manage, or even control their life chances. Beyond the obvious point of Foucault's interest in the panoptic for this field, Wood shows that there are other models of social regulation in Foucault's work. However, Foucault's lack of interest on the impact of modern technology made his ideas less appealing to practitioners in the field, compared with those of Baudrillard, Deleuze, and Latour. However, Wood concludes his essay reminding readers that not every new technology is necessarily a recreation of the panopticon (257).

14. Stephen Legg looks for the impact of Foucault in postcolonial studies. Postcolonial thinkers assert that the colonial experience is a determining factor in the development of modernity. Foucault came to influence this field through Edward Said's early work, though subsequently Said became critical of Foucault's politics and later turned to a more Gramsci-like type of cultural analysis. This was also Foucault's fate in the subaltern studies group. Significantly, one of the sections in this essay is entitled 'The Spirit of Foucault,' as his work seems to have inspired the works of the postcolonial thinkers in general but not in any precise methodological sense.

15. Phillip Howel asks about the contribution of Foucault's ideas to the development of a geography of sexuality. Though acknowledging that so far much of what Foucault wrote on the subject has barely influenced geographers, he expects that the publication and translation of the College lectures will correct this situation. Basing himself in the 'Introduction' to the History of Sexuality, Howel stresses that for Foucault sexuality is not a natural fact but an historical product through which a new form of power assumes a locus in the body. Power in modern societies does not work by repressing certain drives but by producing 'multiple sexualities' and by classifying, distributing and morally rating the individuals practicing them (294). Foucault claims that modern sexuality is spatialized, particularly in the bourgeois married couple. Sexuality is also an object of government interest in the form of biopolitics. Nevertheless, Howel is keenly aware of Foucault's blind spots in the analysis of sexuality, particularly in the context of the discussion of disciplinary power in Discipline and Punish. This missing dimension is partly addressed in the Lectures, but Howel still find Foucault's account incomplete. According to Howel, The English workhouse case shows how a disciplinary/epistemic institution functions simultaneously as an attempt to control sexuality along Malthusian lines -- forced separation of men and women to prevent further procreation -- and an imaginary space of sexual excesses and perversity. Foucault also fails to address the disciplining of prostitution, both in its moral and public health dimensions, addressing it only as a subclass of the regulation of illegitimates and of indirect taxation (303), something that may reflect the different strategies adopted by the French and the British administrations. Regarding the position of geography vis-à-vis Foucault, Howell reviews some attacks on Foucault's 'Victorian hypothesis' and suggests that his most important contribution to sexual geography may lie in his discussion of sexual identity and sexual subjectivity, which while presenting sexual identities as social products also leaves room for a space in which 'individuals and communities could explore alternative kinds of sexual subjectivity' (307). Howel sees affinities between these insights and works in the geography of the closet, queer theory, and the work of Judith Butler, though he himself avows that recent literature on sexual geography and queer theory avoids references to Foucault's ideas.
16. Finally, Mathew Coleman and John A. Agnew confront Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's *Empire*, a book that draws heavily on, but also parts ways with Foucault in many important points. One of the main innovative claims that Empire makes is that political geography is no longer a determinant for the exercise of power. Coleman and Agnew reject this argument, insofar as it contradicts the view that the US is a (neo) imperial power with identifiable territorial and/or strategic ambitions' (317), something for which there is 'widespread agreement in the literature.' Furthermore, Hardt and Negri's based their thesis about the periodization of the forms of governmentality and subjectivation on Foucault's published work, a reading that needs to be revised in view of Foucault's recently published lectures (332).

17. This book is an important contribution to the study of the work of Foucault and of its reception in the field of human and political geography. Readers coming from other areas would have appreciated an introduction to the history of Anglo-Saxon human geography, something that is hinted at in several of the essays but not dealt with in a systematic way. For those more interested in the development of Foucault's ideas, they will miss, besides the few texts that have been omitted and a discussion of the exchange with the board of Hérodote, its historical and ideological background. Finally, the parochial focus on the Anglo-Saxon perspective – postcolonial thinking included – could have been broadened to include a discussion of Foucault's influence in Latin American progressive social science and possibly in other latitudes as well.

Michael Maiden studied philosophy in Argentina, Israel and France, where he received a doctoral degree under Paul Ricoeur. After teaching a few years in the University of Haifa, he moved to Florida. He published several papers on Hegel, Marx, and on modern and contemporary European philosophy. He is currently working on a book on the philosophy of Michael Foucault.

**Bibliography**


© borderlands ejournal 2008
Leon Foucault was a famous French scientist who explained rotation of earth about its own axis using a pendulum. To know more about his childhood, career, profile and timeline read on. In the year 1939, at the age of 20, he entered the medical college in Paris but quit the course midway since he could not withstand the sight of blood. After quitting he decided to study physics instead, since he was still deeply interested in the sciences. After quitting medical school in 1939, Foucault worked as an assistant for his medical school professor Alfred Donne who was a physicist and the editor of a scientific journal. Continue Reading Below. You May Like. PDF | Michel Foucault's work is rich with implications and insights concerning spatiality, and has inspired many geographers and social scientists to find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. The Early Foucault (Polity 2021) looks at his work from the 1940s until History of Madness in 1961; this volume at his work in the 1960s. The previously published Foucault: the Birth of Power (Polity 2017) explores his political activism, lectures and writing of the first half of the 1970s, and Foucault's Last Decade (Polity 2016) at the various detours of the History of Sexuality project and related work. The philosopher Michel Foucault, a beacon of today's "woke" ideology, has become the latest prominent French figure to face a retrospective reckoning for sexually abusing children. A fellow intellectual, Guy Sorman, has unleashed a storm among Parisian "intellos" with his claim that Foucault, who died in 1984 aged 57, was a paedophile rapist who had sex with Arab children while living in Tunisia in the late 1960s. Sorman says he regrets not having reported Foucault to police at the time or denounced him in the press, calling his behaviour "ignoble" and "extremely morally ugly". But, he added, the French media already knew about Foucault's behaviour. "There were journalists present on that trip, there were many witnesses, but nobody did stories like that in those days. The Foucault Pendulum would settle the debate about whether the Earth span on its axis once and for all. They are also very beautiful and enchanting pieces of kit. Pendula based on Foucault’s calculations began appearing worldwide and are still iconic features of many science museums in the U.S. and other countries. When was the Foucault pendulum invented? Who invented the pendulum?