



**B=atrice Han.** *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. xiii + 241 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-3709-8; \$62.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-3708-1.



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## Foucault's Critical Project

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“Although he always desired to break away from it, and multiplied historicizing statements, Foucault was finally confronted again with the transcendental perspective, in the form of the idea of a free and autonomous self-constitution of the subject,” concludes B=atrice Han in her challenging study of the work of Michel Foucault (p. 196). While Foucault has often been criticized for his radical social constructionism, his penchant for anthropomorphizing anonymous structures, or removing agency from human beings, Han reads Foucault in a novel way. She sees in his *oeuvre* a recurring struggle with the universal and the ontological. The scholar who made it his mission to undermine essentialisms and absolutes, Han contends, constantly fell prey to lapses in transcendentalism, unable or unwilling to press his critical philosophy to its logical ends. In examining and explaining this tension in Foucault's writings and interviews, Han provides a picture of this important figure in twentieth-century thought that will, in many ways, be unfamiliar to many readers, especially in the United States.

Han's book was first published in France in 1998, and

Edward Pile's fine translation goes a long way in helping the reader through what is often dense, philosophical prose. What makes Han's study different from most other analyses of Foucault's work is that she wishes to recover the philosophical Foucault, a figure she believes has been largely lost in the eagerness of social scientists and theorists to appropriate his ideas. By attending to the philosophical sources of and echoes in Foucault's writings and interviews, Han shows us a different aspect of his thinking. Surprisingly, Han's Foucault comes out looking far more German than one would ever expect. While mention is made of the connections to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and structuralism, the philosophers who appear to have had the greatest influence on Foucault were all German: Kant, Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Nietzsche, Heidegger. Nietzsche, in particular, figured prominently in Foucault's turn to the genealogical approach, which Han rightly considers “one of the most fertile elements in Foucault's work” (p. 144).

And indeed, scholars of Foucault frequently focus on this moment marked by *Discipline and Punish*, when he turned away from an archaeological method to embrace

a genealogical approach. Han, by contrast, is interested in continuities. What she finds is that Foucault from the start was moved by Kant, leading him to a life-long search for a non-originary historical a priori. As he defined it in *Birth of the Clinic*, the historical a priori was “that which systematizes [men’s thoughts] from the outset,” or as he put it again in *The Order of Things*, it is the “fundamental network which defines the implicit but unavoidable unity of knowledge” (p. 41). Knowledge, thus, became *the* phenomenon to explain, and over time, Foucault came to believe the way to make sense of it rested in conducting a social (or more accurately, historical) epistemology of the western will to truth. The historical a priori came to have many names in his works—fundamental codes, epistemes, discourses, regimes of truth, games of truth—but Han leads us to recognize that, at its heart, Foucault’s critical project was always conceived as an attempt to transform Kant’s a priori into an empirically accessible and assessable phenomenon.

Historicizing the a priori, Han demonstrates, quickly led Foucault to see the interrelationships between what is seen, what is said about what is seen, and what is done about what is seen. Language would always remain a central trope in Foucault’s analyses, since language mediates between human beings and the structures that orient them. But Foucault was not satisfied with going over the familiar territory of Wittgenstein. Aiming to divorce truth-making from internal arguments, Foucault related the will to truth in concrete social practices, norms, values, and interests. The development of humanity thus needs to be seen, according to Foucault, as “a series of interpretations,” with morality, science, and metaphysics all serving as historically distinctive forms of interpretation. As Han rightly points out, this rather hermeneutical understanding of history is subversive on at least two counts. For one thing, it does not take metaphysics at face value, but rather sees it as a socially constructed venture, its notions of truth “only defined by its therapeutic and subjecting function” (p. 126). For another, it is intended to be a direct challenge to scientific argument and its claim of universal validity.

Foucault’s famous claim that power and truth-making are interdependent, then, was no great leap. And, as Han notes, it is a position Foucault shared with the Frankfurt School. Still, Han points out, Foucault parted ways with Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas in insisting on the polyvocality of rationalities and strategies of power, the overwhelming creative nature of that power, and the absence of any escape routes in modern rationalities. Nonetheless, as gloomy as Foucault’s understanding

of modern Power is, it did lead him to a new (and his final) line of investigation, one he discussed in a far less pessimistic tone: the history of subjectivity. In an inspired analysis, Han details how Foucault got from his notion of monolithic power to the idea of a self-constituting individual. The key, she points out, lies in seeing “disciplines” as techniques for both subjecting and objectifying human beings. The normative and normalizing nature of disciplinary techniques in the modern world is what brought Foucault to study “problematization”—the ways in which matters become “an object of concern, an element for reflection, and a material for stylisation” (pp. 164-165)—as well as the importance of how individuals related themselves to the regimes of truth that tried to discipline them.

The turn to the constitution of the self in Foucault’s history of sexuality and later lectures is therefore not as surprising as it first would seem. His interests now led him to something for which he had often been criticized earlier for neglecting: experience. At the beginning of *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault describes this new effort: “It was a matter of seeing how an ‘experience’ came to be constituted in modern Western societies, an experience that caused individuals to recognize themselves as subjects of a ‘sexuality,’ which opened onto very diverse forms of knowledge and was linked to a system of rules and constraints. What I planned, therefore, was a history of sexuality as an experience, where experience is understood as the correlation, in a culture, between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity” (p. 153). Subjectivity, for Foucault, was therefore something quite different from the notions floated by phenomenologists, psychoanalysts, and Marxists. To him, Han contends, self-constitution was a type of feedback relationship of individuals to themselves in the form of ways of recognizing oneself as a subject (though it is worth noting that phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and Marxism, too, made room for notions of reciprocity in the constitution of subjectivity). In this, Han points out, Foucault once again attempted to upset conventional philosophical distinctions, this time between act-centered morality on the one hand and agent-centered ethics on the other, by showing that even Kant’s notions of moral conduct presupposed a self-constitution by the subject.

Here again, Han draws an interesting parallel, this time with Sartre’s notion of the self. What Foucault shared with Sartre was a rejection of essentialism, of the idea that the self is “something given to us.” Both, instead, emphasized self-creation in human subjectivity. In Han’s view, however, this emphasis was particularly

problematic for Foucault, since he understood subjects as not only authors of themselves, but also as objects of relations of power. This comes out especially in his understanding of modern Man in *The Use of Pleasure*, where he expressly identifies disciplinary practices such as psychology, medicine, prisons, and educational systems as instrumental in shaping the norms and models of modern human thinking and behavior. Foucault, Han concludes, never did find a way to resolve the tension.

Han does a commendable job, then, of providing a sympathetic, yet critical, reading of Foucault's philosophical projects. And in the end, this is the particular value and charm of her book: an analysis that never flinches from identifying shortcomings, vagueness, and contradictions in Foucault's arguments, yet shows a reasoned appreciation for the ambitions, insights, and invaluable contributions of his work.

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