

Michel Foucault's Political Philosophy

Written by Mark Kelly

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MARK KELLY, MAR 31 2009

I recently wrote a book about the thought of Michel Foucault. It was published last year under the title *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault*. The book begins with a justification of the use of the term 'political philosophy' in relation to Foucault. The reason for caution about this term is precisely the reason why I think it is justified to use it in the title of the book. That is, the term 'political philosophy' has come to be associated with a form of thought that consists on producing prescriptive views about the ways politics ought to work, as an adjunct to reflection about morality. This form of thinking is anchored primarily in Kant, for whom morals and politics are indissociable, but is of course much older than that, while finding a more recent anchor-point in the work of John Rawls. Foucault fundamentally rejects this form of thought; that is, Foucault rejects prescriptive and normative philosophy *tout court*.

Foucault represents a completely different tradition in philosophy, but one that is no less political. Indeed, one might argue that Foucault's philosophy is much more political – certainly I would. While normative political philosophy, as it has been done in recent decades by the scions of Ivy League philosophy departments, has consisted in articulating abstract models of how the world should be, Foucault's political philosophy consists of non-normative descriptions of reality that nevertheless have considerable critical force. Foucault's political philosophy is a philosophy that undertakes the project that the young Karl Marx described as the 'ruthless criticism of all that exists'[i]. The purpose of this critical philosophy of Foucault's is precisely to 'shut the mouths' of all those who would prescribe anything – including, perhaps most prominently, Marxists.

Foucault's political philosophy begins in a Nietzschean epistemology in which knowledge is formulated as a strategy of a battle between forces. This is the basis for an analysis of specific knowledges as precisely the effects of power relations, to show the 'genealogy' behind institutions of knowledge. Power relations moreover provide a general grid of analysis for society, through the strategies that emerge from the interplay of power relations. Foucault describes these strategies as intentional, yet non-subjective[ii]:

Against the strategies of power is arrayed our resistance. This is a resistance that is today however badly undermined by the emergence of a form of power that seizes us in the core of our being, *subjection*, the investment by power of the formation of our subjectivity itself. Nevertheless, for Foucault, resistance is not merely a permanent possibility, but an inevitable corollary of power. Resistance is presupposed by power: to induce someone to do something implies that they otherwise would have done something else. This means that power can only occur where there is already an inclination that runs contrary to it. As Foucault puts it, 'Resistance comes first'.[iii] Still, power is ubiquitous, as is resistance – animal activity inevitably implies the existence of both, as a matter of some animals trying to get others to conform to their will, and the inevitable excess of the will of the victim over that of the wielder of power.

Such considerations inform Foucault's late thought, in which he is concerned with ancient ethics and practices of the self. While new practices of the self are putatively suggested as a corrective for subjection, this is not proposed as an immediate solution. It is unclear for Foucault to what extent ethical practices are possible today. Rather, an orientation towards the self is advised as a way of dealing with the inevitable frustrations of political praxis, though certainly not as an alternative to organised political activity. That said, for Foucault political activity must limit itself. Firstly, a division must be observed between the critical activity of the intellectual and the actions of the masses. Intellectuals like Foucault have a particular responsibility to advise the masses, which means that they should neither

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attempt to lead the masses or tell them what to do, nor even to join them, but to stand to one side advising them as to the situation through analysis of it, and indeed to criticise the actions of the masses if need be. Note that there is no proper role here for politicians qua leaders – Foucault has no advice for such people, but for him the point of mass political activity is to achieve liberation, hence ultimately it is oriented against leadership. However, Foucault is not an anarchist. The central political role of the intellectual is to advise as to the *possibilities* of political action, though an analysis of the strategies of power. Thus, there must be a decision, made by those who resist but informed by a critical analysis, of what can be achieved and where we should attack. That is, Foucault does not valorise all resistance per se, or condemn all power out of hand: both things are too ubiquitous for such anarchist fantasies to make sense. Rather, anarchism qua opposition to power per se suggests a futile attack on all power simultaneously. While Foucault does not want us ever to accept any power uncritically, we can never be free of power. Thus, we must always question and challenge power, with new problems and new priorities continually emerging in response to our probing resistance.

i. Karl Marx, 'Briefe Aus Den „Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher“', p. 344

ii. Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 194

iii. Michel Foucault, 'Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity', p. 167

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Mark Kelly is Lecturer in Philosophy at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Middlesex University. He is the author of *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* (Routledge, 2008).