

Abstract

In this review I described Paul Veyne's book *Foucault: His Thought, His Character*, Polity Press, Cambridge, London, 2010. I tried to forecast what Veyne has thought about Foucault, his personal opinions about a still controversial figure of Western academia, after three decades (1984-2014) from Foucault's abrupt death. Paul Veyne understood Foucault well, but in the same time constructive criticized him, especially in 1971. I am sympathetic with Veyne points of view about Foucault whose 'positivism' and 'Structuralism' remain of his own. Why these many labels putted on Foucault's head separately taken did not represent something, but taken together they represent a lot? Why Western scholars and politicians of Foucault's epoch were so reluctant and hostile to his ideas? We can find a partial answer, of course, a problematic answer in Veyne's brilliant book. Foucault remains a problematic puzzle for Humanities, and I do not think that he could be labelled and categorized in an authentic mode of thinking. In a world of marketing and brands this aspect could be very frustrating.

Review

Paul Veyne, *Foucault: His Thought, His Character*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010 translated by Janet Lloyd

(Original title: *Foucault: sa pensée, sa personne*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2008)

Keywords: Paul Veyne, Michel Foucault, Post-Structuralism, Historiography, Criticism, Epistemology, Intellectual Identity, Philosophy of Understanding, Creative Writing

In my previous years (2003-2007), I wondered if Paul Veyne will start to write again on Foucault. They worked together more than a decade at College de France, and Foucault referenced Veyne in his books. His colleague and friend Gilles Deleuze, already did it, after one year of Foucault's death. And this happy intellectual event happened in the late of the year 2008. This "ancient star", as Paul Veyne is called by mainstream historical media, offers us a pleasant book, not only on Foucault's ideas and personality, but also about *the singular Foucault*, his intellectual 'political attitude', the *man who he was*, who he is, always, mystified, suppressed by himself and repressed by Others (the

intellectuals who contested him, attacked him, denigrated him). Foucault remains Foucault like a classic of the (post)Structuralist thinking.

The book *Foucault: His Thought, His Character* is structured in 11 chapters like *an excursus* in Foucault's subjects, personality, misunderstandings about his public figure (or "myths" about Foucault), and the universal ancient history, his love for Greek-Roman civilization. We can read this book like a short and concise novel. Paul Veyne's well-recognizable style – not so critic as he was in *Foucault révolutionne l'histoire* (1971) – has the same rhetorical formulations and the same accustomed quite bizarre linguistic expressions. Its Veyne's style – a Latin and French style for sure – which cannot be proper understood in the same linguistic utterances in English language...

It seems to me that this book has passed unnoticed instead of Veyne's international public figure, and instead of the fact that Paul Veyne is one of the leading historians of our time and of the 20th century. And this book cannot be regarded as a "small event", as Foucault used to say when a book appeared, because it has a different light about a suffering and alone Foucault. This condition made Foucault to have an authentic dialogue rather with past figures than with his contemporaries. From top to bottom this little masterpiece can be read in a pleasant mood. It is not an abstract academic book.

I have to say that when Paul Veyne wrote the two couple of statements on Foucault in the *Introduction*, and in the last chapter (*Portrait of a Samurai*), he did not surprise me at all about Foucault's intellectual identity:

"No, Foucault was not a structuralist thinker; nor was he the product of the certain line of '1968 thinking'. Nor was he a relativist or a historicist; nor was he bent on sniffing out ideology everywhere. He was something that, in this day and age, is rare, a *sceptic* [Veyne's italics] thinker [endnote 1] who believed only in the truth of facts, the countless historical facts that fill the pages of his books, never in the truth of ideas"¹.

"This so-called leftist was neither a Freudian nor a Marxist; not a sociologist, not a progressivist, not a third-worldist, not a Heideggerian. He read neither Bourdieu, nor Le Figaro and was a Nietzschean neither 'on the left' (as some were), nor on the right. He was untimely (to use a Nietzschean term) outsider of his epoch"².

What stroke me most in Paul Veyne's book is the abundance of endnotes and auxiliary explanations from *Introduction* to the last chapter like a *scientific* or academic study as if the ancient specialist or 'star' wasn't one of Foucault's friend and he trying to convince the audience (a 'global'

¹ Paul Veyne, *Foucault: His Thought, His Character*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

credulous-sceptical one!) on the truthfulness of his sayings! Probably, Veyne put these *scientific* and explanatory endnotes in order to give us much more insights and delightedness of Foucault's life, work, personality and idiosyncrasies. This tyranny of references has something serious to do with the academic historiography of 20th century. Certainly this is not a book of memory... And also this book is not a religious one, in which the author is not an absolute authority and his statements which are provocative or quite bizarre are not for *scientific minds*, based on arguments and counter-arguments. It is not a philosophical treatise, but it is a very intelligent book.

If the book is easy to read then it is *not so* easy to understand all the Veyne's sayings probably left for the specialists and Foucault's exegetes. The entire book can be regarded as a "code", as to emphasize a 'structuralist manner' of viewing the things and words, without *a mythology* which in many situations is unavoidable from the moment that in every hermeneutical process, either semiotic or interpretative, things go to some *clichés* or preconceived understandings about a *certain knowledge* (authors, subjects, problems). It is a book easy to read but not so easy to understand it in its profoundness! This *is* the dilemma... So we can reflect in silence on his "understandable sayings". It's a tricky book!

And why should we read it, after all?

One of the reasons is because Paul Veyne has understood the Man and the scholar Foucault better than anyone of his exegetes and contemporary commentators. This book is for understanding, not for knowledge in itself! It is not a book for those young academics "who dream to write as Foucault" instead of Veyne's declared intention in this matter. I do not think that Foucault can be imitated. It is quite impossible to think and write as Foucault did. But it is worth to read carefully this book in order to understand both Foucault and Veyne. It is a book about the commonality of lectures and of academic experiences between Foucault and Veyne.

Foucault was *a rare sceptic* because he had never been *the grand grandchild* of Descartes, or *the grandchild* of Nietzsche, displacing the intolerance and the dogmatism of the Cult of Ideas, and that of the intellectual religiosity of the opinions of the so-called 'Specialists' or 'Authorities'. This attitude joins Foucault to Hayden White who also rejected preconceived authorities and a politicized way of being historian in the proximity of political structures which are interested in controlling and manipulating public mind and the possibilities of thinking outside political conditions.

Foucault was the "outsider of his epoch" because he was *a rare sceptic* in a Credulous Age. He was the "outsider of his epoch" because he was the Icon of the Western intellectual world at a fragile age for a scholar (35 up to 55), especially after Sartre's polemics around his masterpiece *Words and Things* (1966). For sure, Foucault remains the most wrongly labelled and the most demonised

contemporary intellectual, harshly attacked because of his courage of thinking different in a period (1970-85) when Western societies including Academic Left turned to conformity, hypocrisy, and political obedience. For those who not stand him, he was a Leftist. For those orthodox Marxists, he was an agent of Gaullisme. These many labels are not something to do with Foucault!

Themes and problematic approaches are on the first plan of this book. After the chapter 8 (*A Sociological History of the Truths: Knowledge, Power, the Set-up*) follow the last three chapters, which are 'biographical' and 'political'. I was pleased to read the chapter 6 (*Notwithstanding Heidegger, Man is an Intelligent Animal*) where Veyne with a brilliant but 'not so philosophical' dexterity, dispersed the myth of "Heideggerian-ism" of Foucault's intellectual identity; a myth which was inferred by important scholars, such as Georg Steiner (b. 1929) and others.

If in his masterpiece *Comment on écrit l'histoire suivi de Foucault révolutionne l'histoire* (1971), Foucault is regarded by Veyne as "a supreme positivist", in *Foucault: His Thought, His Character*, Veyne keeps the same view: "this unexpected positivist"³. But this 'positivism' is entirely different from other positivisms of English, of American or of everywhere historians. This 'unexpected' positivist gave a tremendous hit to Linguistic Turn and to Empirical Histories of a Political Type, for their irresponsible maintaining of An Ultimately and Ambiguous Relativist or Absolutist Truth, for their hegemonic features of *their Own Amazed Faces* in the Mirror of Human Knowledge. Foucault is deeply responsible for his writings which changed the Western episteme, and he forced scholars around the world to think problematic either they write structural analyses or narratives... Foucault really revolutionized historical studies at the level of problematic methods, of new ideas, and projects of research, of erudite and aesthetic way of writing.

In short, Paul Veyne's book is one of the happiest events of the last decade of Western academic publishing industry – an increasing one! –, and this "little book" with great ideas and views offer us different lights on Foucault life, person, and thought and in the same time is like a manual about Paul Veyne's thinking and written style...

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³ Ibid. 46.