

BOOK REVIEW

Review of Torben Bech Dyrberg, *Foucault on the Politics of Parrhesia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), i-vi, 1-141, electronic £36.99 (UK), ISBN: 978-1-137-36835-5

There has been a resurgence of interest, in the past few years and across many disciplinary areas, in the interactions between truth, sincerity, and politics. While it is, of course, possible to argue that this has been a pervasive discourse for some time, even going back to Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* and beyond, the marked rise of so-called post-ironic fiction, embodied in the works of David Foster Wallace, has triggered some interest in the field of English Literature. Likewise, in the area of Classics, Elizabeth Markovitz's 2008 book, *The Politics of Sincerity: Plato, Frank Speech, and Democratic Judgment* has extended this aspect back into contemporary politics via a focus on the ancients.

It is amid this context that, naturally, one would expect to see new work arising that considers Foucault's notion of parrhesia; truth-telling and its enmeshment amid systems of power. Many of the studies that contribute to this renewed interest in truth and sincerity, after all, make passing references to this aspect of Foucault's thought. How could they not? To-date, though, no other study has so intensely juxtaposed political theory with the aspects of parrhesia in the lectures that Foucault gave at the University of California at Berkeley. In a mid-form Palgrave Pivot volume, Torben Bech Dyrberg works to remedy this situation and produces a fresh approach to understanding the interaction between parrhesia and politics. Although frequently insightful, and certainly clear in its liberal use of diagrams throughout, readers should be forewarned that *Foucault on the Politics of Parrhesia* yields a very specific disciplinary take on the matter, and that the Foucault that emerges is more of a political philosopher of the present than a philosopher-historian.

Indeed, arguing for a Foucauldian identity that has taken a "political turn" (24), the core line that Dyrberg promotes is that "*parrhesia* is vital for Foucault's sustained efforts over the years to expose and criticize the various forms of obedience [...] which go hand in hand with elite rule, hierarchical structures and states of domination", an aspect that he places at the very "centre of Foucault's many histories" (3). This perspectivized view is, of course, not a new strategy. Foucault's discourse was itself one that perpetually and retroactively inscribed his later work at the heart of its antecedents, an aspect that has contributed to his broad uptake in many areas. One of his favourite phrases was the claim that he had "always been interested

in" this or that problem.¹

Dyrberg's effort to politicise Foucault's parrhesia is split across an introduction and seven chapters, covering productive power; political (rather than epistemic) critique; political concepts of freedom and law; the relationship of parrhesia to politics; the place of parrhesia in democracy; the leader/community divide; and the role of authority. The argument throughout the book is patient and works from first principles. This has the advantage that, when Dyrberg comes to his new material on parrhesia, it is solidly grounded. Concurrently, though, this creates the problem that, while *Foucault on the Politics of Parrhesia* is not a text for beginners (dealing as it does with complex syntheses of remarks over Foucault's entire career), some of the areas covered are familiar and overly remarked upon in the extant literature. For instance, while Dyrberg is articulate and adeptly re-formulates Foucault's concepts of power in chapter two, the idea of a Foucauldian productive power that is constituted by the effects of practices is well known and re-iterated throughout the text (13, *passim*).

Likewise, a specifically weighted genealogy of Foucault's notion of critique is posited. Here, Kant is not, for the most part, the primal figure against whose work Foucault's historical, instead of epistemological, critique is set. Rather, for Dyrberg, Foucault's critique is counterposed against the liberal bourgeois "System" and Marxism, and defined as "political" instead of "historical" (44). Although Dyrberg cites the famous proposition that a critical ontology of the self is a "a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond" (34-35), it is the political side of Foucault's project that Dyrberg brings to the fore.

When, however, Dyrberg turns to the object of his book's title, a little over halfway through the work, the specific view of parrhesia under discussion is finally explained. For Dyrberg, parrhesia is "a political concept, which is intertwined with the attitudes and decisions of individuals based on an assessment of their trustworthiness as well as their boldness and courage when it comes to deciding and acting". It is also, in Dyrberg's reading, "related to government in general and democratic government in particular" (67), an assertion that is extrapolated from *The Government of Self and Others, Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*. The particular angle that Dyrberg adopts here is useful as it allows him to open up comparative readings to Rawls and Arendt in chapter six; an aspect that should prove fruitful for those working in the political disciplines who might wish to follow on from this thinking.

Overall, though, there are to my mind some core problems that remain in this work. Firstly, there was a degree of a-historicity in the reading that does disservice to otherwise persuasive arguments. Only two pages give any substantial attention to the fact that Foucault's analysis is drawn from a particular focus on antiquity, while the remainder of the book treats parrhesia as an a-temporal phenomenon with clear applications to contemporary governance from "Plato onwards" (99-100, 103). This might be considered as shaky ground. After all, Todd May concurs with Deleuze that Foucault never intended his epistemes to stand in historical perpetuity or for his analyses to be treated as universal.² That said, one could take Luxon's

¹ See Lynne Huffer, "Foucault's Eros," in Christopher Falzon, Timothy O'Leary, and Jana Sawicki (eds.), *A Companion to Foucault* (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013), 445. Available online at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/doi/10.1002/9781118324905.ch22/summary>.

² Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (Chesham: Acumen, 2006), 134; Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October*, vol. 59 (Winter 1992), 3.

suggestion that “Foucault turns to the ancients to overcome a blind spot in contemporary practices”.³ This, though, is not broached in Dyrberg's work.

Secondly, I was also struck, to some degree, by the literature in this volume that went uncited. Although, naturally, it is not mandatory to cite all preceding work when taking a particular stance, it was surprising, for instance, to see no references in this book to Judith Butler, Alison Ross, Zacharia Simpson or Nancy Luxon, all of whom have written on this aspect of Foucault's late thought.⁴ “How come”, the author asks, “there are so few who have studied Foucault’s lectures on parrhesia” (69)? How come, one might retort, those who have are not featured here?

Overall, Dyrberg's book will prove valuable to those in political disciplines looking to begin work on Foucault's concept of parrhesia and its implications for contemporary democracy. Foremost among its articulations are an often clear approach to complex topics and a serious attempt to integrate late-Foucault's work into contemporary thought on politics. If I were to wholeheartedly agree with everything in Dyrberg's book, though, I would not, myself, be speaking truthfully.

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³ Nancy Luxon, *Crisis of Authority: Politics, Trust, and Truth-Telling in Freud and Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 150.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Alison Ross, “Why Is ‘Speaking the Truth’ Fearless? ‘Danger’ and ‘Truth’ in Foucault’s Discussion of Parrhesia,” *Parrhesia*, no. 4 (2008), 62–75; Zacharia Simpson, “The Truths We Tell Ourselves: Foucault on Parrhesia,” *Foucault Studies*, no. 13 (26 March 2012), 99–115; Nancy Luxon, “Truthfulness, Risk, and Trust in the Late Lectures of Michel Foucault,” *Inquiry* vol. 47, no. 5 (1 October 2004), 464–89.