

## Compare the way in which Foucault and Derrida urge us to rethink social formation and governance

By Christopher Evans

I shall compare the way in which Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida urge us to rethink social formation and governance. I shall look not only at their ideas, but at the methods they deploy. I shall argue that, whilst their approaches differ, they both encourage critical analysis of political assumptions, in particular championing the possibility of individual freedom and diversity in the face of social and political control.

### Foucault

Foucault seeks to show, through theoretical argument and historical examples, the different systems of thought or “epistemes” underlying beliefs, discourse and social practice in different periods. This focus on systems reflects the distinction made by the linguist Saussure, and adopted by structuralism, between *langue* (the set of rules governing language at any one time) and *parole* (instances of language in use). Foucault prefers, however, not to rely solely on the analogy with language, but to emphasise relations of power, conflict and control. “The history which bears us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning”, he writes<sup>1</sup>, though it is not clear if the two approaches are mutually exclusive.

For Foucault, a key feature of such power relations in modern (in this case, post-Renaissance) society is surveillance: “The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly”<sup>2</sup>. As Gutting explains:

“At the core of Foucault's picture of modern “disciplinary” society are three primary techniques of control: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and the examination. To a great extent, control over people (power) can be achieved merely by observing them.”<sup>3</sup>

Foucault illustrates this with the example of Jeremy Bentham’s “panopticon” - a look-out post allowing all-round supervision of prisoners. But in general the “gaze” is more subtle, widespread and pervasive than this: he refers to the “infinitely minute web of panoptic techniques”<sup>4</sup>. He discusses the “disciplines” such as “hierarchical surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment and classification” introduced for efficient control of a growing population in an industrialising society<sup>5</sup>. Foucault argues (even if he does not demonstrate) that such arrangements, whilst they may take the form of workplace contracts, indicate an imbalance of power between the parties to the arrangement.

Foucault also notes, as Gutting points out, that “the objects of disciplinary control could themselves internalize the norms whereby they were controlled...”<sup>6</sup> In other words, they can turn the gaze of others - or of the system - upon themselves. Whereas for Sartre, awareness of others’ view of us can be a disorienting or distressing denial of one’s autonomy (“The Other is the being for whom I am an object”<sup>7</sup>), for Foucault the gaze of which we may not even be aware may help to shape the way we are.

This brings us to the heart of Foucault’s encouragement of a rethink of social and political structures and processes. He uses detailed historical records, such as Pinel’s early nineteenth-century account of an asylum near Paris<sup>8</sup>, to show how individuals (in this case, people with mental illness) began to be treated in society at that time. And in illustrating such “epistemic” changes, he begins to develop

a “history of the present”<sup>9</sup> which challenges assumptions we may hold now about the universal nature of concepts such as insanity, delinquency or normality.

## Derrida

Derrida also invites his readers to rethink, but his main subject areas and methodology differ from Foucault's. In terms of subject matter, there is less focus on historical and political detail - more on the nature of language, meaning and being. He also turns to literature as well as other philosophers - reflecting Bannet's point that Derrida is working in the French tradition of the creative *écrivain*<sup>10</sup>, not the academic specialist. Even in a work such as *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, on political sovereignty, the reader soon encounters a D.H.Lawrence poem about a snake and discussion of “the ipseity [selfhood] of the One” and of Aristotle's Prime Mover<sup>11</sup>.

Derrida's typical method is restless, playful, and challenging. *Rogues*, for example, opens with plays on the French word “*tour*” (both “tower” and “turn”)<sup>12</sup>. His puns and etymological digressions can be exasperating. He can be difficult to follow (more so than Foucault). But he is not obscure, or frivolous, just for the sake of it. Rather, by approaching concepts from different angles he is prompting readers to rethink them for themselves (rather than simply to “follow” some assertion of the truth). This echoes a libertarian approach to interpretation of writing by contemporaries of Derrida such as Barthes<sup>13</sup>. So, as Solomon observes, it is unfair of Derrida's critics to accuse him of ignoring political and social issues - rather, Derrida is challenging, by “deconstruction”, some of the certainties of traditional philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

In particular, Derrida challenges the concept of “presence” underlying much Western philosophical, and indeed every day, thinking. Schroeder summarizes his position as follows: “...nothing can ever be fully present to anything else (even itself) and hence...self-identity...is impossible”<sup>15</sup>. Derrida develops this claim in his essay *Différance*, which opens with the line “The verb ‘to differ’ [différer] seems to differ from itself”, and proceeds in characteristic fashion to dissect the meanings of the word (differ and defer) so as both to assert and exemplify the open-ended nature of meaning<sup>16</sup>.

Application of this approach to questions of social formation and governance favours, broadly speaking, individual freedom and diversity over collective homogeneity and authority. It also leads to a constant questioning. In *Rogues*, Derrida teases away at the meaning of “democracy” through verbal analysis - which “demos” [people]? Exercising what kind of “kratos” [power]? - and specific examples such as the suspension of elections in Algeria, to argue that democracy contains a fundamental “indecidability”<sup>17</sup>. The “democracy to come” discussed in *Rogues* is not, for Derrida, some future happy state which we can ever hope fully to attain. Rather, the concept is invoked in part at least to encourage continual challenge of governance, in the name of democracy. In that spirit he queries globalisation as currently manifested; writes broadly supportively of international human rights law which may override national sovereignty (and in doing so seeks to turn the term “rogue states” used by the United States, among others, to describe transgressors of international law, back on the USA itself); and at the same time recognises that a categorical rejection of the concept of sovereignty would threaten “the classical principles of freedom and self-determination”<sup>18</sup>. Similarly, he argues that justice - which has regard to “the incalculable singularity of the other” - cannot be reduced to law; justice and law each need the other.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Foucault and Derrida differ, then, in their style and to an extent in the subjects they cover. And where they do cover similar ground they do not always agree: for instance, Derrida challenges Foucault's apparent wish to step entirely outside the language of reason in writing a history of madness<sup>20</sup>. But they share a distrust of polemics based on universal theories. Their focus is, rather, on critical analysis of society - what Foucault refers to as "problemization". He could be speaking for both of them when he defines this as "not...an arrangement of representations...but a work of thought."<sup>21</sup>

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