

REVIEW ARTICLE

Eric Paras, *Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge*
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INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault is well known for his opposition to phenomenological humanism. In fact, we might consider “Foucault 1.0” an interpretation that, almost exclusively, relies upon his commitment to the “death of the subject.” In *Foucault 2.0*, Eric Paras provides a compelling interpretation that suggests that when adding the unpublished lectures given at the *Collège de France* to the Foucauldian *corpus*, we find a dramatic turn in the very direction Foucault so vehemently—and famously—opposed.

Dramatic as this turn may be, its description and analysis is carefully crafted from an extensive array of sources framed by intellectual, cultural, political, and personal contexts. And, while the book clearly sets out to defend this radical thesis, at the same time, it is probably best described as an intellectual biography. Using a biographical approach, Paras proceeds chronologically in three main sections after briefly introducing his project and its crucial archive. These three sections, Discourse, Power, and Subjects, each represent separate spacetime views of Foucault that naturally flow into each other historically and theoretically. I will proceed by briefly describing each one, present a possible addition to this view, and conclude with my overall impression of the book.

SECTION SUMMARIES

In the book’s first section, *Discourse*, Paras focuses on Foucault’s adversarial position against Sartrean existentialist phenomenology. Most notable was the unlikely popularity of *The Order of Things* which, according to Paras, “was the *Being and Nothingness* of a new generation, and Foucault was its Jean-Paul Sartre” (p. 20). Here Foucault’s post-humanist gauntlet was most clearly thrown in his assertion that before the 18th century man did not exist and after the modern period he would be erased again. Paras then continues by describing *Archeology of Knowledge* as a continuation of the Foucault vs. Sartre, post-humanist, dispute where he (Foucault) asserts, “The dimension of discourse is all there is.” (p. 37) Paras notes, however, that the autonomy of discourse faded as Foucault moved from archeology to genealogy, which would anticipate his emphasis on power. Here Paras pays special attention to the influence of Deleuze over Foucault that would gradually yield the following section: Power.

Section two describes the deep impact that the Iranian Revolution had on Foucault along with the *nouveaux philosophes*. As the previous period was attempting to move beyond Sartre, in this one Foucault struggles to overcome Marx. This anti-Marxism was, according to Paras, as much a product of Foucault’s interest in the Iranian Revolution and his initial Deleuzian leaning against Marxism’s failure to politically engage the times

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and, ultimately, his distance from Deleuze, opting, instead, for the *nouveaux philosophes*. Paras observes that this dispute, "...placed the two philosophers on opposite sides of a yawning divide. Implicitly or explicitly, Foucault gave his approval to philosophical tactics—the witness-function, journalism-philosophy, the employment of the authorial 'I'—that Deleuze could not accept." (p. 91-92) From these changes Foucault develops his notion of government and bio-politics and, more importantly for Paras' project, (re)kindles his concern for the subject.

In this final section Paras remarks, "Choice, freedom, reflection, experience, agency: these were the undisguised hallmarks of Foucault's last philosophical interventions." (p. 147) Ironically, this period was not a new one altogether, Paras concludes. Using the metaphor of a pendulum, Paras describes Foucault's final years as time spent studying the ancient world, religious practice, and the arts of living, ending in 1984 with the statement, "I believe solidly in human liberty." (p. 147) Paras concludes his book with this moving final summary:

Foucault created the twentieth century's most devastating critique of the free subject—and then, in a voice that by the end trembled from pain and debility, liquidated it. For the notion of the end of subjectivity had offered a kind of cold clarity, as well as an immensely thought-provoking lens through which to view the world. But ultimately, only the notion of strong subjectivity proved *warm* enough to accommodate an overwhelming passion for life and an inextinguishable belief in the primacy of human liberty. (p. 158)

A POSSIBLE ADDITION

Certain reviewers have claimed that Paras' book goes too far and that the subject was never absent to Foucault. I agree with the latter (and think Paras would too) and disagree with the former; in fact, I think it might not go far enough. I hope to show here, briefly, how Foucault's pendulum was swinging in the midst of *The Order of Things*, where Paras notes that Foucault engages in an all-out offensive against phenomenology and its subject.

In his foreword to the English translation Foucault argues that while discourse should remain open to "different methods," there is one method that he rejects outright. This, of course, is phenomenology. He writes:

If there is one approach that I do reject, however, it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent role to act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity – which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness. (*The Order of Things*, p. xiv)

What is important to note here is that Foucault's opposition is, primarily, methodological.

As Paras notes, it is true that underpinning these words was the Parisian struggle between the "old school" of Sartre and the emerging "new schools" of structuralist and post-structuralist thought. It is also indisputable that the brunt of Foucault's attack seems to fall on the "observing subject." This, however, can be misleading. The subject is not the primary victim. It is, rather, a matter of priority. In other words, at issue was the "absolute priority" given to the "observing subject" in phenomenological method. Foucault's contention is not that phenomenology is wrong outright. It is instead that the way (method) by which the phenomenologist approaches things is misguided. Misguided, that is, by the priority of the observing subject—the phenomenologist herself.

A critic might respond citing later passages where there is even greater evidence to bolster an argument that Foucault is directed against the actual "man" or "subject," not philosophical method. For example, Foucault ends *The Order of Things* by writing "...that man would be erased, like a face in the sand." We might observe, however, that if this were the case Foucault would have set himself up, so to speak. If his purpose really were to "erase" the subject, then he would have to begin with himself. But, if his point remains methodological, as it was in the beginning, then the subject can retain its face, albeit differently than before.

Insofar as Foucault has a face and hands—a self—that freely thought and wrote and felt and wondered, it seems that he must offer a much more ironic, and perhaps different erasure altogether of “the face” than one framed by a simple distaste for phenomenology. We can say, perhaps, that Foucault was not necessarily opposed to phenomenology or subjects *in toto*—even while writing *The Order of Things*. Instead, we might simply maintain that he rejected any method that prioritizes the subject as supreme knower, the Godhead, *the face*, leading to notions of transcendental consciousness. In other words, Foucault’s opposition to phenomenology was not, so it seems, in order to destroy “man.”

He only seems to resent the phenomenological, and exclusive, priority given to it. This interpretation suggests that Foucault—even the Foucault of *The Order of Things*, his most abrasive treatise against phenomenology—is not philosophically attacking phenomenology, or even Sartre, outright. From this interpretation I wonder whether Paras’ pendulum interpretation might be extended into a rather messy continuum, albeit with some contentious exegesis.

CONCLUSION

For all the straightforwardness of Paras’ argument, the energy and vitality of his narrative make this book much more than a revisionist reading of Foucault. Whether one finds Paras’ thesis compelling or not, no one can deny that the story is a good one. So, in the end, this book can serve many different purposes. Whether introducing, rethinking, or just telling a neat story about (and all the ones in-between) Foucault, *Foucault 2.0* provides a well-researched argument within a lively intellectual biography that can only prove beneficial to its reader. I highly recommend it.

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