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REVIEW

Stuart Elden, *The Early Foucault*. Cambridge: Polity, 2021. Pp. 281. ISBN: 978-1-5095-2595-9 (hardback).

The historiography of Michel Foucault has recently become an embattled area of scholarly interest; a scene for fierce debates about the past and future of progressive politics and academic theory.[1] Against this backdrop, Elden's latest book on the early Foucault feels like a breath of fresh air—somewhat dusty, antiquarian air, perhaps, but refreshing nevertheless. *The Early Foucault* is the latest instalment in Elden's ambitious series of books which aims to provide a detailed intellectual history of the philosopher's entire career. The present volume is the third to appear—after *Foucault's Last Decade* (2016) and *Foucault: The Birth of Power* (2017)—but chronologically the first, covering Foucault's intellectual development from his student days to the publication of *History of Madness* (a fourth and final volume, *The Archaeology of Foucault* is in the making). As Elden puts it, '[w]hile many studies of Foucault begin with the first major book, *History of Madness*, in 1961, that is where this book ends' (p. 5).

The Early Foucault is, first and foremost, a treasure trove of information for any scholar interested in the intellectual history of Michel Foucault. It follows Elden's previous two volumes in providing impressively detailed analysis of the gradual changes in Foucault's scholarly interests and the direction of his work. While the book is mainly structured as a history of *History of Madness*, the many 'other paths explored but not ultimately taken' also form a major theme of the book (6). *The Early Foucault* thus very much continues the approach of *Foucault's Last Decade* and *The Birth of Power* in its impressive attention to detail, in the enormous range of sources, and in highlighting subtle continuities where, superficially, there appear to be ruptures in Foucault's intellectual development. Nevertheless, the fact that this period of Foucault's life has so far been much less explored than his later developments means that Elden relies more on archival sources compared to the previous volumes, and rather than intervening in existing debates about the philosopher's intellectual trajectory, he provides large amounts of new information about periods of Foucault's life that were so far barely discussed. This means that *The Early Foucault*

[1] See, for example, Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (2021); Stephen W. Sawyer and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, eds., *Foucault, Neoliberalism, and Beyond* (2019).

provides an enormous wealth of information, much of which was not hitherto readily accessible to scholars—but, at times, this arguably comes at the expense of deeper analysis or interpretation of the significance of these materials. Given the amount of new information densely packed into *The Early Foucault*, a full overview of everything this book offers is difficult. I will therefore limit myself here to a very general overview, while highlighting, in a very selective fashion, some of the threads of Elden's arguments that I find most interesting (and, in a few places, frustratingly underdeveloped).

The Early Foucault proceeds in strict chronological order beginning, in chapter 1, with Foucault's academic work and interests as a student, and continuing, in chapter 2, with his first teaching posts at Lille and ENS. The most significant theme of these chapters is Foucault's early interest in psychology and psychoanalysis, particularly the work of Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, which provides the main thread running throughout the entire book culminating with the *History of Madness*. Elden furnishes fascinating accounts of Foucault's wide engagement with different strands of psychological thought, as well as his experiences with practical psychiatric research—where he 'was used as both "an experimental subject or as an experimenter," also producing reports on patients and conducting tests' and helping to 'assess the medical and psychological state of prisoners' (47-8). The latter experience quite clearly influenced Foucault's later thought, but one of Elden's main accomplishments is the way he convincingly shows how Foucault's interests in everything from phenomenology to Soviet psychology and existential psychotherapy influenced his intellectual trajectory—even though the traces of these influences were often more or less deliberately erased later. The main takeaway from these chapters is 'that when in subsequent publications, lectures or interviews Foucault discusses Hegel or Husserl, Freud or psychology, it was on the basis of a thorough knowledge of the material' (p. 52).

This early interests in psychology resulted in three publications: Foucault's first book, *Mental Illness and Personality* (1954), as well as two little-known book chapters written around 1953. These are the subject matter of chapter 3, and they all represent Foucault's early attempts to wrestle with the problems of mental illness and his search for an alternative to orthodox positivist psychology. Elden deftly takes us through the French philosopher's flirts with a series of approaches that he would later reject, including phenomenological, existential, and Marxist psychology. This chapter is, perhaps, the best example of Elden's ability to give equal weight to the (not always obvious) continuities in Foucault's thought as well as the breaks. Thus, he convincingly points to the significance for the early Foucault of the Marxist concept of alienation, which would later drop out of his thought entirely; yet, at the same time, this chapter highlights how these very early works do not *only* represent false starts—as much as Foucault's own attempts to later cover his tracks would suggest as much. Already in the 1954 book, for instance, he grapples with questions of how psychology 'make[s] the patient a deviant and seek[s] the origin of the morbid in the abnormal' through 'a projection of cultural norms' (p. 71). Given what

seems to be a recent rise in interest in Foucault's early psychological thought,[2] I have no doubt that this chapter will provide fodder for further interesting work, both in terms of better contextualising Foucault's later work but also in terms of treating these early works as interesting analyses in their own right—which could perhaps even serve to add some nuance to contemporary Foucauldian-inspired work on mental illness, which, arguably, is often marred by a lack of attention to phenomenological and material aspects of mental disorder. Elden does not explore these possible lines of thought himself, but his lucid account of the nuances of Foucault's thinking in this period certainly provides a great starting point.

The following two chapters round off the part of the book dealing with Foucault's work prior to writing *History of Madness* with a discussion of his involvement in translating the existential psychologist Binswanger and the medical anthropologist von Weizsäcker (Chapter 4), and his reading of Nietzsche and Heidegger (Chapter 5). These chapters are a mixed bag. Elden subtly, but very convincingly, makes the point that the time leading up to the publication of *History of Madness* was far from a 'period of silence,' which was 'not leading anywhere in particular,' as Macey has described it.[3] Instead, '[w]hat is perhaps most remarkable is how much [Foucault] did before beginning his theses' and even the paths that were ultimately abandoned 'give a different sense of Foucault's breadth and depth' (111-2). Unfortunately, though, these are also the chapters where Elden struggles the most to really convey the importance of the material discussed for our understanding of Foucault because he tends to get lost in excessive detail (though, clearly, Elden's eye for detail is also a major strength). In several places—like the part about Foucault's choices as a translator, some parts about von Weizsäcker's work, and not least the detailed description of a conference Heidegger gave in France but which Foucault never attended—the discussion could have done with slightly less detail but more contextualization and interpretation.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with Foucault's writing of his two theses: the primary thesis, which was published as *History of Madness*, and his secondary thesis, a translation of Kant's *Anthropology* along with a long introduction. This work coincided with Foucault's postings in Uppsala, Warsaw, and Hamburg. As Foucault did not publish during this time, Elden draws on very impressive archival work to discuss his teachings and cultural activities abroad, and of course Foucault's own archival work, especially in the Uppsala library. Elden's work in reconstructing Foucault's activities during this time, especially in Uppsala, through sources such as local newspaper adverts for lectures and talks is truly first-rate. To what extent this information will prove significant for our understanding of Foucault's intellectual development remains to be seen, but for collecting this wealth of information and making it available in an accessible form to other scholars, Elden is certainly to be commended.

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[2] For example: Camille Robcis, *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France* (2021), chap. 4; Hannah Lyn Venable, "The Carnival of the Mad: Foucault's Window into the Origin of Psychology," *Foucault Studies* 30 (2021), 54–79.

[3] David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (1993), 70–71.

The final substantive chapter naturally discusses the defense and publication of Foucault's thesis, *The History of Madness*, but it is the discussion of Foucault's revision of his earlier book, *Mental Illness and Personality*, which serves as a natural conclusion to Elden's story. While *The Early Foucault* is essentially about the developments that led Foucault to write *History of Madness*, it is the story of his *actual* first book, which he tried to disown, that gives Elden a chance to explicitly reflect on the evolution of Foucault throughout this period. As is well known, Foucault unsuccessfully tried to prevent the republication of the 1954 book, and, as a compromise, a heavily revised edition was released in 1962 under the title *Mental Illness and Psychology*. Elden presents what is, to my knowledge, the first detailed and systematic account of the changes Foucault made to this book, and it makes for intriguing reading. In addition to removing an original chapter that discussed Pavlov and materialist approaches to psychology, Foucault did a 'fairly thorough job of removing overtly Marxist language' from the entire text. Elden points out fascinating lexical substitutions, such as 'our culture' for 'capitalism', 'European' for 'bourgeois', and 'system of economic relations' for 'exploitation' (p. 180-1). There is no doubt that the anti-Foucauldian left could have a field day with the way these substitutions seem to mirror general tendencies on the left to replace economic with cultural terms—but it is, of course, old news that the mature Foucault was incredibly wary of Marxist vocabulary. The interesting contribution of *The Early Foucault*, and Elden makes the point with characteristic nuance and subtlety, is to show in detail how these shifts in Foucault's thinking came about in the context of his thinking about psychology and mental illness. The discussion of the changes he made to *Mental Illness and Psychology* function almost perfectly as a narrative device that wraps up and recaps this slow development which Elden has carefully narrated throughout the book.

In sum, *The Early Foucault* represents a fantastic resource for scholars interested in Foucault's intellectual development, and especially his thought on psychology and mental illness. Since mental health seems to be a topic very much in vogue today, the appearance of Elden's book is highly welcome and will no doubt contribute to the growing interest in Foucault's earlier psychological thought as well as post-war French thought on politics and psychiatry more generally.[4] This is not to mention the book's highly interesting discussions of Foucault's more philosophical engagement with Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche and others, which my highly selective review has not done justice to. If there is a critical comment to be made about *The Early Foucault*, it is that Elden is at times *too* attentive to detail to the extent that the reader loses sight of the bigger picture and the significance of the stream of information. Elden generally leaves the task of interpreting the wider ramifications of his detailed analyses to the reader—but to anyone who wishes to undertake this task, *The Early Foucault* provides an incomparable source of information.

[4] See, particularly, Robcis, *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France*.

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