Book Review: *Foucault: The Birth of Power.* Stuart Elden

Foucault: The Birth of Power.   Stuart Elden, Cambridge: Polity Press (2017). 232pp £16.99 ISBN 978-1- 5095- 0726-9

Six months before his death, Foucault declared in a letter that there should be: 'No posthumous publications' (cited in Elden, 2016: 2). As the subsequent flow of Foucault books demonstrates, this wish was not granted. Although the author may be dead, the text not only lives on, but continues to be born as fragments from the archive are transcribed, edited, translated and published. This material, particularly the publication of the Collège de France Lectures delivered between 1970 and 1984, has provided considerable access and new insights to Foucault's ideas. But despite this wealth of new material, we are still left with fragmented and incomplete glimpses which often raise as many questions as they provide answers. Stuart Elden's *Foucault: The Birth of Power* is a scholarly triumph that provides a detailed commentary and analysis of the writing of Foucault's most read book, *Discipline and Power,* drawing on not only the published lectures and talks Foucault delivered as he was writing it, but also unpublished archival material, including Foucault's detailed research notes.

Foucault: The Birth of Power is part of a wider project. Already published is *Foucault's Last Decade* (Elden 2016) and Elden is currently working on *The Early Foucault* covering the decade up until 1961. *Foucault: The Birth of Power* focuses on the five years from 1969 to 1974, the period between the publication of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and Foucault's completion of *Discipline and Punish.* Whilst at first glance, the period chosen may appear potentially unproductive – five years in which no books were published – it was a critical period in Foucault's life and the development of his thinking.

This is not a biography (a number of those exist: I would particularly recommend David Macey's (1993) *The Lives of Michel Foucault*), but an intellectual history. It is grounded in an impressive engagement with both the published material and archival sources. This enables Elden to expose a much fuller picture of Foucault the political activist and Foucault the scholar, than was previously apparent to this reviewer. By exploring Foucault's notes, Elden identifies the extensive reading he undertook and which grounds his published works. Those who have questioned the extent of Foucault's research will now, Elden hopes, 'grudgingly recognise that the works cited in the published book were but a fraction of those read in its preparation' (p. 80).

Whilst Foucault's involvement with the *Groupe d'Information sur les prisons* (GIP) is relatively well-known, and its influence on his writing of *Discipline and Punish* generally recognised, Elden also documents his involvement in several

other groups and campaigns. These include the *Groupe Information Asiles* (GIA) and in the *Groupe Information Santé* (GIS). Elden not only highlights the significance of this activism to Foucault's developing thought but also how his scholarship influenced his activism. Whilst Foucault's historical work sought to identify the linkage, in the eighteenth century, of morals, capitalism and the state, Elden identifies how Foucault's activism, and the agendas of the groups he was involved with were aimed at severing these links. Both were revolutionary.

Foucault's 1971/2 lectures at the Collège de France, *Théories et Institutions Pénales* (Penal Theories and Institutions), awaits its English publication. The title and timing of the course have long suggested their potential close relationship with *Discipline and Punish.* In chapter two Elden confirms this and establishes the importance of these lectures to wider Foucauldian studies. Indeed, Elden cites Ewald and Harcourt's claim in their introduction to *Théories et Institutions Pénales* that it is a 'first version' of *Discipline and Punish* (p. 71). But they go further, suggesting the lectures provide some of Foucault's 'deepest engagements … with multiple topics, including … Marxism, with the Middle Ages, with popular revolt, but also with the question of law' (p. 72).

The following year's course, *The Punitive Society*, can, Elden argues, also be considered as a draft of *Discipline and Punish.* Indeed, Foucault completed the lecture series in March 1973 and a full draft of *Discipline and Punish* the following month. As well as highlighting the links between these two courses and the book, Elden also identifies key differences, noting that the two projects had distinct aims. What *Discipline and Punish* and the previous years' Collège de France courses have in common is their grounding in Foucault's extensive research. Elden's chronological approach to the various, parallel, scholarly and activist projects Foucault was engaged in allowed this reviewer insights into some of the misunderstandings that have developed over Foucault's work. For example, despite Foucault (1979: 309) making clear (in a footnote to the first chapter of the English edition) that in *Discipline and Punish* his intention was to 'study the birth of the prison only in the French penal system', his work has been read as having a wider application. In part, this reading has been reinforced by Foucault's regular references to English thinkers and their texts throughout the book. Elden shows the confusion to be simply the result of Foucault, who having researched the literature on England so extensively for the *Punitive Society* lectures – which were based on a comparative approach – was unable to resist citing them in *Discipline and Punish*, despite his declared intention that the book's focus was on France

Like other English speakers whose lack of French means I must access Foucault through translations, my reading of his texts is inevitably skewed. Elden's reading of *Discipline and Punish* highlighted the problems this presents. Elden's access to Foucault is with the original French and it is clear his reading of *Discipline and Punish* is different from that of Alan Sheridan, whose translations English readers are familiar with. Inevitably such differences are subtle as translation is an art not a science; a process of co-production, but the implications are significant. Elden's reading (and translation) of the text provided me with new insights into an influential and key book in my intellectual development.

With the forthcoming publication in English of the 1971-2 Lectures, it will undoubtedly be time to revisit our reading of *Discipline and Punish* and apply fresh eyes and thoughts to this seminal text. Elden's book provides an essential companion to those of us engaged in this project.

References

Elden, S., (2016), *Foucault's Last Decade,* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Foucault, M., (1972), *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* (Translated by Alan Sheridan), New York: Barnes and Noble.

Foucault, M., (1979), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* (Translated by Alan Sheridan), London: Penguin.

Foucault, M., (2015), *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collége de France 1972-3,* London: Palgrave

Foucault, M., (2015), *Théories et Institutions Pénales: Cours au* Coll*ége de France (1971-2),* Paris: Gallimard/Seuil. (English translation forthcoming)

Macy, D., (1993), *The Lives of Michel Foucault,* London: Hutchinson

J.M. MOORE
Newman University, Birmingham