

Reflecting on Foucault: taking what's required

Ian Goodwin-Smith

Abstract

Twenty-five years after his death, reflecting on Foucault is an enormous task. Foucault's legacy muddies theoretical waters, forcing strange synergies and theoretical configurations such as the antifoundational humanist. Growing from the murky ferment of French colonial history, the father of post-structuralism's story is as complex as that encounter, and his legacy is as mutating, unsettling and transformative. A reflection on Foucault needs to accommodate not only a consideration of the enormity of the shadow that such a legacy casts over continuing intellectual production, but also an engagement with the inevitability of inconsistencies and complexities that such a shadow subsumes.

Twenty-five years after his death, reflecting on Foucault is an enormous task. His influence permeates disparate and innumerable fields and informs so much of our thinking, along with that of many great theorists who have followed him. Foucault's influence is one of ramifying and far-reaching interdisciplinary complexity. Foucault's legacy muddies the theoretical waters, forcing strange synergies and theoretical configurations such as the antifoundational humanist. Growing from the murky ferment of French colonial history, the father of post-structuralism's story is as complex as that encounter, and his legacy is as mutating, unsettling and transformative. This paper considers the process of reflecting on that legacy twenty-five years on, and on the theoretical mutations that underpin the transformativity of Foucault's influence.

Amidst the murkiness, of all the mutants that Foucault's legacy contains, the antifoundational humanist is just one, but one that is important. The term 'antifoundational humanism' invokes the spirit of Edward Said and his famous half embrace of Michel Foucault, which he allied with an enduring commitment to humanism which out-survived him in the posthumous publication *Humanism and democratic criticism* (Said 2003). That half embrace is central to Said's work, and it locates Foucault as a pivotal figure in the work of Said. But, far from being derivative, Said has in fact been strongly criticised for his theoretical impurity and his partial use of Foucault.

The genealogy is far from straightforward, especially in light of the fact that Said was a contemporary of Foucault and was amongst the absolute first people in the English-speaking academy to engage with Foucault. You could argue that Said is central to Foucault too: he is, in important and historical ways, the conduit – the beginning – through which many of us in the English-speaking academy discovered Foucault.

It is through Said that Foucault finds himself at the centre of postcolonial studies. But he finds himself there inadvertently. Reading Said was pivotal in the development of postcolonial studies, and it is that reading that puts Foucault at the heart of postcolonial thinking, or that contributes to the embedding of the post-structural in the postcolonial. But there is an alternative counter-reading, which again unsettles any fixed genealogy and which claims a postcolonial beginning for post-structuralism, and that is something that Pal Ahluwalia teases out in his examination of post-structuralism's postcolonial roots. Ahluwalia

makes the observation that post-structuralism required a contorted postcolonial experience – a postcolonial transcendence, or twisting, turning and interweaving of positions – as a precondition. Ahluwalia (2005) casts the inflections, the transformations, that the postcolonial produces as the prerequisite for the other posts.

There is also the point that this embedding was quite a strange and, as suggested, inadvertent slippage, and that is something to explore, but first, two things emerge straight away when considering the relationship between Said and Foucault. The first is the notion of the inadvertent arrival of Foucault at unexpected intellectual locations. The second is this notion of an unfixable genealogy and the notion of theoretical impurity. Both of these points are more or less the same thing – they are certainly interconnected, but it is worth teasing them out in turn, starting with this issue of inadvertent arrivals.

Foucault influences so much intellectual production and informs or infects so many fields of inquiry. But one of the most paradoxical ramifications of the Foucauldian legacy is in the area of postcolonial theorising. It is paradoxical because of the enormous and multidirectional intersection between Foucault and postcolonialism on the one hand and because, on the other, Foucault's analysis of race and racism in *The will to knowledge* (1998) and *Society must be defended* (2003) occurs in the absence of *any* consideration of the colonial context of discipline and biopolitics. Ann Laura Stoler puts it this way:

Foucault traces the biopolitics that emerged in the early 1700s and flourished in nineteenth-century Europe along axes that are sui generis to Europe ... His genealogies of nineteenth-century bourgeois identity are not only deeply rooted in a self-referential western culture but bounded by Europe's geographic parameters. (Stoler 1995, p. 14)

This was something Said had previously noted. After such a seminal use of Foucault in his book *Orientalism* (Said 1978), and after bringing Foucault into the postcolonial fold, Said observed in his later publication *Culture and imperialism* that, for Foucault, 'the imperial experience is quite irrelevant' (Said 1993, p. 41). And this phenomenon is noted by numerous other commentators too, including Robert Young, in his piece 'Foucault on race and colonialism' (Young 1995), and by Gayatri Spivak in her famous work 'Can the subaltern

‘speak?’ where she speaks about Foucault ‘foreclosing’ a reading of imperialism (Spivak 1988, p. 291).

There is this inadvertent arrival of Foucault in unexpected and *unconsidered* places – in places or positions such as the postcolonial. That gives us a context in which to understand Said’s partial use of Foucault. It gives us an understanding of the pull towards theoretical impurity that Foucault invites and the pull towards an unfixable genealogy. Indeed, if Said had made a full embrace of Foucault and anchored himself in a self-referential western cultural framework, Said could not have existed. To use Said’s own terms, he approaches Foucault as an amateur rather than a professional or an expert (Said 1994).

Said’s amateurism is about judicious and purposeful or located pragmatism and appropriation. It is precisely about rejecting pure genealogical heritage and purebred theory. Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia capture the logic of Said’s methodology with profound simplicity. Referring to Said’s engagement with Foucault they say, with a clarity that is almost resonant of a child-like innocence, ‘he took from Foucault only what he required’ (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia 1999, p. 23). In such simple terms, the utility of that approach is inarguably compelling and, of course, it mirrors the logic of a conversation between Foucault and Gilles Deleuze published under the title *Intellectuals and power* (Foucault 1977), and Foucault advocated it himself with a reference to his books as ‘little tool boxes’ in his 1975 interview with Roger Pol Droit (Foucault 1975, p. 16).

But this approach received some well known criticism. In what must be one of the better known book reviews of the last century, James Clifford criticised Said’s partial use – or half embrace – of Foucault as being theoretically confused. At its simplest, Clifford’s critique is that ‘Said’s methodological catholicity repeatedly blurs his analysis’ (Clifford 1980, p. 219). Against this though, it seems fair to say that, certainly, Said’s methodological catholicity blurs any search for methodological purity or self-referential genealogy, but that kind of *pedigree* is precisely what both Said and Foucault sought to disrupt. Said puts a claim on this position or disruption well. He says: ‘I am inevitably criticized by younger post-colonialists ... for being inconsistent and untheoretical, and I find that I like that – who wants to be consistent?’ (Said, cited in Ashcroft 1996, p. 8).

That is Said's position. A critique of that position is nothing more than a tautological reinscription of a modern obsession with purity, and Ashcroft and Ahluwalia capture the self-serving and tautological nature of that kind of critique for critique's sake. They say: 'criticisms that insist upon [Said's] inadequate or incomplete use of Foucault are criticisms more interested in Foucault than in Said' (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia 1999, p. 28). This is an excellent point. Said's work *is* highly impure, but to suggest that such an impurity constitutes a kind of intellectual incoherence is to miss the point, or to make an entirely irrelevant point about something else.

To bring this back around, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Michel Foucault, it seems appropriate to reflect on theoretical and intellectual production in a way that *is* more interested in Foucault than in Said. That reflection necessarily shares an obsession with Clifford, and is one that Said brings into focus. The obsession relates to how Foucault has been applied. But there is good reason to embark on that in the enduring and formative spirit of Said, without the shackles of a will to a system, or of Clifford's search for a purity of theory or, indeed, for a meaningful genealogy. That, of course, is precisely what the antifoundationalism of Foucault would have us avoid in the first place. Following that logic, a reflection on Foucault's legacy would do well to focus more interest on how amateurs apply Foucault rather than in what Foucauldian experts have to say. Foucault's legacy is both enabling and complicating. His influence is unsettling and transformative. To reflect on the work of Foucault in an organic and dynamic way, or in a way which is not simply historical, involves exploring the continuing arrival of his influence and his legacy in inadvertent and unexpected places.

Ian Goodwin-Smith is a lecturer in social theory and social policy at the University of South Australia. His research interests orbit around an intersection of postcolonial theory and social policy. He has a particular interest in new theoretical directions for progressive politics with a focus on culture, social identity, subjectivity and social democratic citizenship, as well as an interest in critiques of expertise and professionalism.

References

- Ahluwalia, P 2005, 'Out of Africa: post-structuralism's colonial roots', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 137–154.
- Ashcroft, B 1996, 'Conversation with Edward Said – interview by Bill Ashcroft', *New Literatures Review*, vol. 32, pp. 3–21.
- Ashcroft, B & Ahluwalia, P 1999, *Edward Said: the paradox of identity*, Routledge, New York.
- Clifford, J 1980, 'Review', *History and Theory*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 204–223.
- Foucault, M 2003, '*Society must be defended*': lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76, trans. D Macey, Penguin, London.
- Foucault, M 1998 [1976], *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, Penguin, London.
- Foucault, M 1977, 'Intellectuals and power: a conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze', in *Language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews*, ed D Bouchard, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, pp. 205–217.
- Foucault, M 1975, 'Des supplices aux cellules (entretien avec R.-P. Droit)', trans. Mirko M. Hall. *Le Monde*, 9363 (February 21).
- Said, E 2003, *Humanism and democratic criticism*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Said, E 1994, *Representations of the intellectual: the 1993 Reith lectures*, Vintage, London.
- Said, E 1993, *Culture and imperialism*, Chatto & Windus, London.
- Said, E 1978, *Orientalism*, Vintage, New York.
- Spivak, G 1988, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, eds C Nelson & L Grossberg, Macmillan, London, pp. 271–313.
- Stoler, A 1995, *Race and the education of desire: Foucault's history of sexuality and the colonial order of things*, Duke University Press, Durham.
- Young, R 1995, 'Foucault on race and colonialism', *New Formations*, vol. 25, pp. 57–65.