Foucault, Askesis And The Practice Of Critique In Management Studies

Stream 16: Management and Goodness 2 – Hidden Goodness, Marginal Goods

Edward Barratt

University of Newcastle – upon - Tyne

Business School,
University of Newcastle – upon - Tyne
Newcastle, NE1 7AU
Edward. Barratt@Newcastle.ac.uk
0191 – 222 – 7585
Introduction

In management studies we have used Foucault mainly as a resource for reframing our analyses of organization. Foucault has enabled a perspective on the complex microphysical circuitry of power relations which underpins organisational life, the practices of power which shape our lives and selves at work as well as the broader rationalities or regimes of truth – as in discipline (Foucault, 1977) or pastoral (Foucault, 1982) – which are constituted through the operation of power. Foucauldian work has drawn mainly on his so-called middle period but Foucauldians relationship to Foucault has nonetheless been an inventive one. Typically when we use Foucault we seem to add something to the minimal frameworks of theory that he (deliberately) provides, to inflect his thought in certain ways. The argument of this paper is that we might take this inventive relationship a stage further, ‘stylising’, to use a term important to much of his later writing, a relationship to his engaged practice of critical truth telling.

Foucault, the Ethos and Parrhesia

Foucault’s project is both an historical analysis and critique of contemporary configurations of power and knowledge and an experiment with the possibility of their transcendence. In the later writings on pagan antiquity Foucault (1986) explores the practice of self cultivation or self stylisation that characterised the daily existence of the elites. It is the principle of fashioning all the elements of one’s life and existence – political, moral and otherwise – of imposing a personal style or taste on one’s life, as an expression of liberty that Foucault fastens onto. ‘Ethos was the deportment and the way to behave. It was the subject's mode of being and a certain manner of acting visible to others. This ethos was seen by his dress, by his bearing, by his gait, by the poise with which he reacts to events etc. For them, that is the concrete expression of liberty, the way they “problematised” their freedom’ (Foucault, 1996, p.436). The point of Foucault’s analysis of pagan antiquity is evidently not that we might ‘return to the Greeks’ but rather to stimulate fresh thinking about the possibilities of the present time, the way in which another culture might help us to think through and envisage the possibility for a more autonomous form of existence.

Foucault is not only inviting us to consider a culture other than our own as a way of stimulating new thought, he is also seeking to constitute himself and his own life in the act of writing. What he says of the concept of the ethos thus evokes features of his own project, an expression of
liberty. Foucault’s public commitment to freedom and autonomy is cued in a number of Foucault's later writings - his conception of the role of philosophical enquiry in keeping watch ‘over the excessive powers of political rationality’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 210). His late reflections on the concept of parrhesia (Foucault, 2001) are relevant in this respect. In classical thought, parrhesia implied a form of frank truth telling practised in the public domain and involving an element of risk or sometimes actual physical danger to the speaker. The parrhesiast always spoke what he genuinely believed to be the truth, harmonising his words and actions. According to Miller (1993), in the as yet unpublished final lectures in the United States, Socrates in particular becomes an exemplary figure, though clearly not in relation to his search for principles of univeral justice. Foucault foregrounds the way in which Socrates lived a life of ‘unrelenting struggle against misleading opinions and false authorities’ (Miller, 1993, p.359), continually putting others to the question and embodying a balance of ‘logos and bios’ in his practice. The Cynics – especially Diogenes – are treated in a similarly sympathetic way. What Foucault appears to value is a particular style or relationship to the truth embodied in their practice: diatribes aiming to provoke others to action, forms of behaviour designed to provoke public controversy.

Foucault’s later reflections on Kant are similarly self constitutive. Foucault’s relationship to Kant is ambivalent. On the one hand, he sees Kant as at the heart of a tradition of thought in philosophy and ethics which has sought to legislate the limits of knowledge and ethics and which has proved both unworkable and dangerous. Yet in other respects Foucault seeks to work within a Kantian problematic. He shares a concern for the extent of human maturity – a form of life that allows for the exercise of autonomous reason without direction from another and a concern that philosophical work or criticism should be directed to the present moment, the issues of the day. Foucault's concern is thus to diagnose the problem of the present time (Foucault, 1984), where the concern for the present implies a keen attentiveness to the specific events and circumstances of a given historical moment.

Unlike Kant Foucault explores reason as a variable historical and cultural form. His interest is in the rationalities and truths that we live by, as these are enacted in the organization of such institutions as the prison or the asylum. Conceived as a ‘patient labour of investigation giving form to our impatience for liberty’ (Foucault, 1984a, p. 50) - the historical method of genealogy which Foucault adopts from Nietzsche seeks to expose mechanisms of power and relations of force but also to highlight the contingency and fragility of the circumstances that have shaped present practices. Genealogy is concerned to highlight limits (Foucault,1984a) that have been imposed on us and to show that these limits have a history, are not natural or inevitable but have been shaped by particular contingencies, circumstances and struggles. Several commentators both unsympathetic (Habermas, 1987) and sympathetic (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986) have drawn attention to the tension between passionate engagement and disciplined scholarship which characterises Foucault's genealogies. His approach, as one set of commentators put it, is ‘neither as subjective nor as objective as it might seem’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986, p. 115). The practice of writing genealogies for Foucault implies a disciplined, empirical labour of enquiry. At the same time, Foucault's preferences can be directly inferred from various features of his writing. As Dreyfus and Rabinow put it ‘Foucault uses language to shift what we see in our social environment as a means of moving us to concerted action ... using his rhetorical skills to reflect and increase shared uneasiness in the face of the ubiquitous danger as he extrapolated it’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986, p.115). Genealogies have a political motive: to encourage a reflective indocility in their readership, to call into question the extent of our freedom and to reveal the historical construction or fabrication of our present. The aim thereby is to encourage forms of questioning, resistance and the development of alternative organizational
forms or ethical practices. As Foucault defines the goals of his project in the later writings, genealogy is connected to the cause of our freedom

Paul Veyne (1998), a close collaborator in Foucault’s later work, describes him as a warrior in the trenches. The warrior experiences anger at a predicament he can discern in the present situation. He seeks to elaborate a strategic map, to define possible lines of attack that others might pursue. The warrior pursues his convictions without orthodox philosophical support, knowing that philosophical justification serves little purpose. The cause of freedom is best served by the concrete activity of social actors rather than elaborate philosophical schemes.

In much of his life Foucault thus assumed the role of the citizen intellectual. His efforts to transcend the limits of scholarly polemics, to make his thought a publicly observable practice in the manner of the Greek meaning of the ethos can be inferred in various ways from his project. Most obviously, his specific genealogical studies of the prison, the asylum or sexuality can be understood as tactical interventions, correlating with concrete struggles against subjection in these arenas, providing analysis and interpretation that might be deployed by or be of use to those who struggle. Foucault is traditionally associated with the advocacy of local, micro political struggle, but it is clear that particularly during the early 1980’s he sought to engage in dialogue with the newly elected socialist government (Gordon, 1996), establishing connections with Government ministers, thereby making use of the opportunities afforded by a particular political conjuncture. For a time, Foucault looked forward to the possibility of a different style of government based less on subservience and more on open dialogue between those who govern and are governed. As Eribon (1991) describes, Foucault’s engaged practice then shifts again reflecting his disappointment with the socialists. At another level, his attempt to communicate beyond the academy is implied in his roles as a speaking subject, particularly in his public interviews, television and radio appearances. In these interviews Foucault's analysis and arguments transmute into another distinct form, become something other than scholarly texts, adjusted to the demands of a particular medium. In this respect, Dean characterises Foucault as achieving a level of lucidity and creativity which would mark a kind of ‘art form at the end of his life’ (Dean, 1994, p. 3).

**Foucault, Ethos and the Practice of Critical Management Scholarship**

What might the implications of those features of Foucault's project that we have sought to recover in the present section be for contemporary debates? Foucault’s turn to the Greeks in his later writing has been subject to significant criticism (McNay, 1994; Newton, 1998). There is indeed something oddly utopian in the ideal of a world in which all are engaged in a practice of self stylization, a seeming disregard for the limitations on human capacities imposed by prevailing configurations of power in a form of engaged scholarship which in other respects, as we have seen, is so pragmatic and lacking in political romanticism. It is possible in this connection (Hindess, 1998) to draw the distinction between the romantic Foucault, urging his audience to ground themselves in liberty and the Foucault who turns his back on global and utopian projects of change in favour of viable, specific transformations to particular configurations of power (Foucault, 1984).

In one attempt to engage with the implications of Foucault's later work, Starkey and McKinlay draw attention to the way in which Foucault came to define the goals of his project in
explicitly political terms (Starkey and McKinlay, 1998, p.239). These writers identify a transition in Foucault's interests from the role of external authorities in 'managing the mind' (Starkey and McKinlay, 1998, p. 231), to the role of practices of self management not only in constituting identities but also in constituting personal liberty and freedom. For these writers the implication of the later work is that greater attention now needs to be paid to the ways in which individuals and groups define themselves and seek to assert their autonomy in the workplace. Others have in a similar way (eg Gabriel, 1999) called for further exploration of the voices and practices of marginalised, resistant subjects.

Without seeking to deny the relevance of such a research agenda, the suggestion here is that there could be other ways of developing the implications of Foucault's later scholarship. It is nonetheless taken as axiomatic that our relationship to Foucault needs always to be creative, 'loose' and critical. The argument therefore is that we might consider adopting a 'stylised' relationship to Foucault's own practice as an engaged intellectual, as we seek to constitute ourselves as engaged actors (Fournier and Grey, 2000), a particular form of work on the self implying a flexible, critical linkage to Foucault. Adopting a loose relationship to Foucault implies that we should not think in terms of seeking to copy his practical work - we can in no way replicate the distinctive relationship between intellectual life and the public and political domains that characterise the French context. His notoriety is denied to us. The point is not to try to 'be Foucault', but to make him useful, adapt him, to try to work imaginatively with his practice. A stylised relationship could allow a certain latitude in relation to say Foucault’s method or his values. The suggestion here is that there is more that can be done with Foucault, other uses for his thought not only for Foucauldians but perhaps others working in the contested field of critical studies of HRM. If we engage with Foucault in this way part of what might open up is a distinctive orientation to scholarship. Not only a method or a conceptual architecture (Starkey and McKinlay, 1998), Foucauldianism could equally mean a certain way of living a scholarly life. After Foucault, it is in the realm of thought that the critical scholar makes his or her primary contribution - seeking to stimulate the political imagination and to warn as to the costs and dangers of the present. As Paul Veyne puts it the critic is 'someone who facing each new present circumstance makes a diagnosis of the new danger' (Veyne, 1997, p.231). At the same time he or she seeks practical engagement or to connect the intellectual and practical domains. Once we begin to think in these terms, amongst other things, the value which many Foucauldians place on the exploration of ‘resistance’ might require some rethinking. The challenge is perhaps not only to document resistances but 'to make use of this knowledge tactically today' (Foucault, 1980a, p.85) - in other words to ensure that the forms and effects of acts of resistance, faults and cracks in the organisation of the contemporary workplace are made known and enter into the political domain.

The preceding discussion has suggested that Foucault's positioning as an engaged intellectual is a flexible one. The studies of discipline have a precise strategic function - to provide possible targets for political action and invention by particular groups - but Foucault is also engaged in other forms of dialogue as the political moment changes, seeking to engage in wider public debates. We might therefore see Foucault as guiding us towards a distinctive form of reflexivity in scholarly practice, whereby the scholar constantly returns to a set of questions in the course of his or her work. In the context of prevailing conditions in the workplace, about what topics is it important to write, to tell the truth? How can I best make my analyses heard in the
public. Foucault's project therefore might be best considered from the point of view of the practical questions it raises, of how we might insinuate the types of critiques that Foucauldian scholars have developed in the domain of serious processes, the question of who we write for. In part what is at issue here is an element of political calculation implied which seems lacking when, for example, critical management scholars suggest that we seek to transcend scholarly polemic by focusing our energies on enlightening managers in a new critical vocabulary (cf. Fournier and Gray, 2000). The politics of change is elided. Another contrast here is with the idea of privileging a particular agency as a target for dialogue say ‘workers’ organizations (Jaros, 2001) – a notion which surely bears the mark of leftist political romanticism. The challenge is to be flexible, to calculate in a political sense, to consider a particular balance of forces and circumstances, what types of interventions are possible and might be most effective in these circumstances. The critic on our reading is partly a tactician, engaging in the practical field but in ways that can change according to circumstance and on the basis of his or her own experience. Eschewing orthodox left romanticism, the tactician is concerned with such practical issues as avoiding political ghettoisation (Foucault, 1980b, p.131) or the dangers of being manipulated by the actors with whom he or she is seeking to engage (ibid.) in the political field. He or she will engage in local struggles in the immediate workplace, trying to find an effective place for critique in the lecture theatre – recognizing that interventions have to be skilful, that for example reliance on inflecting the language of dominant discourses in subversive ways or exposing contradictions are often effective forms of critique (Jacques, 1999).

Developing a broadly comparable reading of Foucault, Graham Burchell (1996) identifies a double edged `concern for the truth' and a `concern for existence' as defining qualities of Foucault's thought. The `concern for the truth' picks up on Foucault's sense of his own practice as an attempt continually to test, problematise and transform his own thought. It has been argued more fully elsewhere (Barratt, 2002) that genealogy is at once an empirical, experimental and perspectival practice - markedly different from the post-modern stereotype with which the critics have taken issue. With regard to the `concern for existence', Foucault's 'method' is understood to have diagnostic value to the extent that it makes possible an evaluation of the costs of present modes of thought and action, but also other possibilities for existence that are presently excluded, condemned and constrained. Such a reading plays up the sense in which Foucault presents us with an experiment with the possibility of going beyond prevailing configurations of power relations, suggesting a more contentious way of interpreting Foucault - given his strictures against the pretensions of the 'universal intellectual' (Foucault, 1980a). If we permit this form of interpretation of his thought, any attempt to expand the political imagination, to imagine alternative futures should as a minimum requirement take the form of an intimation rather than a definitive solution, an intimation within the limits of present possibility. It should not be a matter of specifying detailed programmes of action or reform but at least of raising questions of political agency, of the institutional and political conditions for change. To do otherwise would surely be to exceed the limits of the role of the critic, to run the risk of constraining a broader process of social invention and imagination.

The attitude in scholarship suggested here would allow a place for the values or ethics of the scholar to play a central role in his or her enquiries. As we have seen, the theme which underpins the major studies of the ‘middle period’ is, in essence, that in different fields of
social life, the capacity to determine our own existence is in jeopardy. In terms of contemporary debates, Foucault might be read for the way in which he suggests a way of practising an ethically engaged scholarship, but in ways that differ markedly from for example the recently fashionable genre of ethical critique in management studies (cf Winstanley et al, 1996) – the turn to enlightenment or pre modern philosophy as a means of furnishing dispassionate evaluations of the current state of the employment relationship. After Foucault we are compelled to question the philosophical pretensions, the attitude of certainty that an ‘ethical’ sensibility typically implies - but emphatically not deprived of a way of articulating our values or preferences in intellectual practice. The variability of the ethico-political positions to which Foucault’s own thought and practice can be connected is de facto illustrated by existing debate. Foucauldians have already made use of different ethical vocabularies – writing for example as feminists with communitarian and socialist leanings (Townley, 1994) or as advocates of radical pluralism (Du Gay, 1996). We are not obliged to share Foucault’s telos to find ways of making use of the theoretical architecture of his project, his ‘methodological’ orientation toward the defamiliarisation of common sense, the enumeration of the costs of a certain ways of life or an attitude of practical engagement. What we might think of, say as a kind of minimum specification, is the importance of a continuous questioning of values and commitments, a preparedness for self criticism, a willingness to change.

Above all perhaps it is the sense of a preparedness for endless and fundamental questioning which is crucial here. Foucault’s tendency to change position is sometimes considered a weakness – here it is interpreted as a strength. In a sense this is an attitude that Foucault shares with Max Weber and again, a way in which he may be helpful to some of our present concerns – the attempt to redefine forms of academic work. At the heart of the attitude which we are suggesting might be derived from Foucault is a way of practising scholarship that would seek to relegate scholarly polemics in the order of priorities for generating issues for research and critical reflection. To use Dreyfus and Rabinow’s (1986) term this could be conceived as a different kind of ‘seriousness’, one that seeks to maintain a tension between disciplined, self critical enquiry on the one hand and passionate engagement on the other. If can never claim to speak ‘the truth’ and truth telling must always be a reflexive activity practised with humility. A painstaking concern for the empirical, conceptual inventiveness, coherence and other orthodox standards of truth telling are implicit in our attitude as much as they are in Foucault’s project. As we try to imagine new roles for the critic there are many ways in which, worked with in a critical, creative way Foucault might be of help.

Conclusion
The preceding discussion has been concerned to defend Foucauldian studies and at the same time to suggest that there is more that could be done with Foucault’s practice, that he can provide more than a conceptual architecture and a ‘method' (McKinlay and Starkey, 1998) for exploring and problematising management. I have suggested in particular that there is much
that we could learn from his scholarly ethos - and not only if we write as Foucauldians. In different ways the suggestion has been that all engaged in the practice of critical truth telling could take at least something from Foucault's engaged scholarly practice. We should never seek to try to be or copy Foucault but part of what Foucault offers us is a style of practising intellectual work, a possible way out from the conventional terms of reference of scholarly debate - academic polemic. What is at stake here is perhaps best illustrated by Roy Jacques' (1999) recent argument that academic debate about HRM is currently dominated by two primary competing modes of scholarly writing and enquiry 'Managerialist and critical evaluative positions in binary opposition to each other constitute the main sites from which we can speak academically about HRM ' (Jacques,1999, p.200). Evidently all manner of different manoeuvres are possible within the space mapped out by Jacques, within the space of 'managerialism' and as we have been seeing in the alternative critical space. What Jacques is alluding to are the limitations of the self referential tendencies in current debates. The irony is that as Foucault comes to figure in this debate, as his project is subject to sympathetic reconstruction, as its relevance is contested, problematised, refined and so forth is that, as we have seen, Foucault is continually trying to do more than engage in scholarly polemics. It is Foucault's practical and engaged scholarship, his attempt to engage with `serious processes' that we have been particularly concerned to recover in the present discussion. There may be much that we can learn from him in this regard.
Bibliography


