Paul Veyne
Foucault: His Thought, His Character.
Translated by Janet Lloyd.
Cambridge: Polity Press 2010.
216 pages
US$64.95 (cloth ISBN 978-0-7456-4641-1)

Paul Veyne's book is neither an introduction nor a specialized monograph on the work of Michel Foucault. It is rather a very personal interpretation of the main aspects of his work, written by somebody who was well acquainted with Foucault from his student years at the École Normale, who kept in touch with him over their careers, who read his books as they were published, and who witnessed and in some cases participated in the discussions and polemics that Foucault generated. And while undoubtedly partisan and to some extent biased in his attempt to rehabilitate Foucault for the historical profession, his is an important perspective on Foucault's work, one that few others could offer.

In this book Veyne amplifies an interpretation of Foucault already laid out in his short essays '*Foucault* Revolutionizes *History*' and 'A Skeptical Archaeologist'. As in prior works, Veyne's main concern is to clear the misunderstandings that prevented the historians of his generation to acknowledge and engage with Foucault's work. These obstacles range from plain misunderstandings, e.g., that Foucault denied the existence of madness, or that he affirmed the truism that what is true changed over time, to competing interests, as in the case of the 'Annals School' that, under the influence of Marx and Durkheim, was mainly interested in reducing history to society. He observes that Foucault was to a certain extent closer to the 'History of Mentalities School', but that in general historians were hostile to what they saw as a philosopher's attempt to encroach into their consecrated territory.

Veyne characterizes Foucault's approach as an historical nominalism, one that rejects universals and emphasizes singularities and difference, and renounces any teleology be it of the immanent kind (e.g., Marxism), while it may accept sociological or economical explanations. Veyne explains Foucault's methodology as follows: instead of starting out with universals as a grid of intelligibility for 'concrete practices…one takes as one's starting point those very practices and the singular and bizarre 'discourse' that they presuppose…one then discovers the real truth of the past and 'that universals do not exist' (17).

Another of Veyne's objectives is to purge Foucault's concepts, and in particular the concepts of '*dispositif*' (translated here as 'set up') and 'discourse' of any suspicion of association with structuralism. He prefers to explain 'set up' as a concept similar to Max Weber's 'ideal type' (34), even if Foucault himself did not appreciate Weber's approach (36). Veyne also uses Jean Claude Passeron's notion of 'semi-proper nouns' (78) to clarify the ontological status of Foucault's concepts.

Ultimately, Veyne's Foucault is a skeptic, but one whose skepticism did not extend to historical facts. Unfortunately, Veyne does not elaborate on this difference. He claims, e.g., that the fact of Dreyfus' innocence is beyond any debate, whereas the explanations that historians give to the Dreyfus affair are open to discussion and to revision. Veyne's task is complicated here by the fact that in general Foucault does not deal with brute historical facts, and the singularities he studies are complex ideas and cultural trends.

Veyne also prefers to draw on examples from his own historical research, probably on the assumption that those will be more palatable to his historians' readership. In Chapter 5, he applies his interpretation of Foucault to the question of the development of Christianity. According to the conventional interpretation, the passage from ancient Judaism to Christianity is the passage from a particularistic faith to one which is truly universal. However, the presumed universalism of Christianity did not include the notion of human rights, and Christians accepted and at different periods practiced slavery, etc. More important still, the universality of Christianity was an accidental byproduct, not part of the original creed. The uniqueness of Christianity was rather the idea of a man-God and an ethics of interiority. These two features allowed it to eventually become a proselytizing faith, but the first conversions were accepted only as exceptions to the rule to preach to the Jews, not as the ethos of the new faith. It was only after the fact that the 'pagan market' was targeted. It is difficult to translate this example into Foucault's vocabulary, and not only because he himself did not study the question. In Veyne's defense, let us remember that he is an historian of the Roman Empire, and that he helped Foucault in his studies of late antiquity and early Christian spirituality.

Veyne defends Foucault not only against structuralism, but also against the charge that he was markedly influenced by Heidegger. Veyne dismisses Heidegger's influence, by claiming first that Foucault little Heidegger, and then that he was not inclined as Heidegger was **toward** mysticism. However, this dismissal of Heidegger as an influence on Foucault seems to me, sometimes at least, a little stretched. For as Veyne notes, at one point Foucault pens an 'almost word-for-word transfer from Heidegger's *The Essence of Truth'* (72-3); and even though Foucault uses the passage from Heidegger for an end that is exactly opposite from Heidegger's, at least some engagement by Foucault with Heidegger is surely suggested, however disparate the philosophical outcomes are for each philosopher.

Other familiar charges against Foucault are his presumed relativism, his determinism, and anti-subjectivism. For Veyne, relativism is not the same as historicism. Relativism is a totalizing approach, whereas Foucault's historicism sticks to discontinuities and singularities (86-7). Regarding determinism, Foucault's approach is that the 'set up' is an obstacle but not a boundary. Foucault's position regarding the subject is more nuanced, and some of his formulations, e.g., the notion of the 'death of man', are prone to being misunderstood. Foucault's subject is the result of a process of subjectivation or socialization, one in which discourse has an important role. However, in his latest writings, he speaks of 'aestheticization', an initiative of transformation of oneself by oneself (104), that is different from if not the opposite of the former.

Veyne also asserts that Foucault was neither the corruptor of the youth nor the despair of the workers' movement, as claimed by critics from right or left. Politically he was in general in favor of progressive causes, but did not elaborate or subscribe to a encompassing political ideology. Veyne dedicates a few pages to deal with Foucault's most controversial political engagement, his early support of the Iranian revolution. On this issue, Veyne is vaguely apologetic of Foucault. He quotes a conversation in which Foucault said about Khomeini: 'He spoke to me of his program of government; if he took power, the stupidity of it would make one weep' (127). Veyne does not add any comments to this remark, made by Foucault after meeting Khomeini in his exile in France, before his triumphal return to Iran. Nor does he mention the fact that, in spite of his negative impression, Foucault continued to support publicly the Iranian revolution and to mobilize public support in the West in its favor.

The last chapter of Veyne's book, entitled 'Portrait of a Samurai', is more impressionistic and reads as a eulogy of his old classmate and friend. Veyne concludes that Foucault was neither of the conventional left nor of the right, but a nonconformist. The anecdotes that populate this chapter are intended to show his character, bravery, open mindedness, and originality.

This short and enjoyable book is a tribute to a friend and colleague, and a very personal interpretation of Foucault's work.

Michael Maidan