

Book Reviews

Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: lectures at the Collège de France 1974–1975*, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell, London and New York, Verso, 2004, pp. xxvi, 374, 25.00 (hardback 1-85984-539-8).

Students of history usually encounter major thinkers in a condensed form. They may associate the name of Michel Foucault with the term medicalization or remember having learnt that sexual discourses are sites of power. The book under review here is to be recommended as an antidote to such summaries of Foucault's oeuvre. Instead, the volume allows us to observe Foucault in the laboratory, at the threshold of a major re-orientation in his thinking.

Abnormal features transcripts of a course Foucault taught at the Collège de France in Paris between January and March 1975. Wedged between the writing of two groundbreaking books, his *Discipline and punish* (*Surveiller et punir*, 1975) and *The history of sexuality* (*La volonté de savoir*, 1976), these eleven lectures show the author once again grappling with the nature of power, the theme of *Discipline and punish*, while moving towards understanding sexuality epistemologically, namely as the effect of a particular form of knowledge.

Between 1970 and 1984, Foucault's public courses evolved in a series of interconnected themes: in 1972–73, he presented lectures on "the punitive society"; he explored "psychiatric power" in 1973–74, a course from which the theme of the "abnormal" emerged; he then moved on to topics such as bio-power, governmentality, and self-fashioning. Course by course, tapes of Foucault's lectures are currently being edited and translated into English, complete with markers of oral delivery. As do other volumes in this series, the book contains Foucault's own course synthesis, an expert introduction by Arnold Davidson, a competent afterword by the editors, and an excellent index. A critical apparatus provides

relevant bibliographical citations and cross-references to Foucault's other writings. The volume is eminently readable. Occasionally, its readability comes at the expense of philological rigour. Its title is somewhat emblematic in that regard. What designates a group of people in French, *les anormaux*, has been translated as "abnormal", with its accent on the conceptual. To be sure, this solution is much in tune with Foucault's theoretical vision. Such a rendering de-emphasizes, however, the project's contradictions. It may even misrepresent its academic and political impetus. After all, "*les anormaux*" signals a focus different from normalization as a subject of philosophical inquiry in the work of Foucault's teacher Georges Canguilhem (see Foucault's discussion of his thought on pp. 49–50).

Abnormal explores a clearly delineated problem, how psychiatry "came to function as a medical science responsible for public hygiene" (p. 119). Covering the vast terrain between roughly the Middle Ages and the emergence of psychoanalysis in fin-de-siècle Europe, the core of the argument wrestles with forensic psychiatry as a modern "technique of power". The motiveless crime served, so Foucault argues, as a motor for the development of early criminal psychiatry. The case of a mother eating her own child, for example, required the expert to explain how an individual could have behaved so inexplicably; he alone came to command the expertise to detect in a person what remained hidden to non-experts. Intriguingly, as Foucault points out, such a gaze shifts attention away from the deed itself or the question of a person's culpability at the time of the crime to aspects of an existence that were not themselves criminal, a person's body and biography. Foucault thus unearths a somewhat circulatory logic within the judiciary in which since the early nineteenth century psychiatry posed as the legal system's "double". By authoring what Foucault aptly calls "administrative grotesque"

(p. 12), many psychiatrists in fact helped to legitimize the enforcement of societal norms in the courtroom. Yet psychiatry's development did not stop here. It proceeded to morph into a discipline concerned not only with the abnormal but with all humans. Slippery concepts such as "instinct" (pp. 129–34, 138–9, 282–7), "condition" (pp. 311–13), and "heredity" (pp. 167–8, 313–16) were stepping stones on the path of this transformation. Yet if psychiatry came to wield a position of scientific, social, and cultural prominence, this emergence was in large part due to its profound entanglement with the theme of human sexuality, especially the ever-present dangers of abnormal sexual behaviour: "Sexuality enables everything that is otherwise inexplicable to be explained" (p. 241). The eighteenth-century anti-masturbation campaign served as both a precursor and a model for nineteenth-century psychiatry. It set a fundamental anxiety into motion that revolved around the sexuality of children, a danger so persistent and elusive that it has stayed with us ever since.

The strengths of the genealogical approach to the writing of history are clearly in evidence on almost every page of this volume: historical time appears as remarkably multi-layered. Foucault, the "historian of the present" (J G Merquior), moves imaginatively between different periods, ever mining the past in order to probe its later sediments, incrustations, and erosions. Thereby, historical practice à la Foucault differs markedly from historicism with its focus on historical origins and its obfuscation of the researcher's own subject position. By sidestepping conventional understandings of historical agency and narrative sequence, Foucault the genealogist carves out historically situated, interconnected configurations. In fact, genealogy is at its best in capturing the internal logics of certain constellations or "domains", to use Foucault's own terminology, such as the confessional (lecture seven), possession (lecture eight), or psychoanalysis (pp. 266–8).

It is fair to say that Foucault's own expertise varies greatly within the expansive reach of this argument. While his command

of nineteenth-century forensic literature is impressive, his familiarity with medieval predecessors to the early modern phenomena he describes at some length is spotty. Surprisingly, eighteenth-century physiognomy makes no appearance, to pick only one of many omissions. Even so, reading these thought experiments and historical sketches remains tremendously inspiring, not least because Foucault's musings continue to spur critical engagement and dissent.

From the vantage point of this volume, some of Foucault's grand formulations in his better known book publications qualify as condensations of arguments he developed more extensively in lectures like the ones published in *Abnormal*. This is why this text is indispensable reading for anybody interested in the history of medicine, psychiatry, sexuality, or the fluctuations of Foucault's thinking. If only we knew more about the original audience's responses, their mumbling or their laughter.

Helmut Puff,
University of Michigan

Sydney A Halpern. *Lesser harms: the morality of risk in medical research*, University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. xii, 233, \$37.50, £26.50 (hardback 0-226-31451-0).

Medical research has always been a risky enterprise. The management of risks produced by doctors' actions is especially difficult when the goal of a medical intervention is not curative. Sick persons may be willing to take many chances to get well, but healthy people tend to reject risk, however slight. It is not surprising that the first well known public debate about the dangers of medical intervention dealt with the risk/benefit ratio of smallpox inoculation. In this debate, conducted at the Académie des Sciences in Paris in 1760, the opposing speakers were the Swiss mathematician Daniel Bernoulli and the French philosopher Jean D'Alembert. Bernoulli compared the risk of dying from inoculation with the lifetime risk of death from smallpox, and concluded that inoculated persons gained on average three years of life expectancy.