Foucault, The Conference Subject:

by Mike Gane and Nicholas Gane

The London "Foucault Conference" was widely advertised as an opportunity to "engage with, review, debate and develop the Foucault Legacy." It attracted an unexpectedly large audience: instead of the anticipated 250, over twice that number attended, some 25 from overseas. Anticipatory leaflets everywhere talked of the importance of "the Foucault spirit." It was soon evident that a central question was going to be the possession of the spirit of Foucault. The many Foucault clones already had the body.

What can one say about the first speaker, Francis Ewald? Immaculately dressed and groomed and "Director of the Foucault Centre in Paris," he presented Foucault as admirer of Gandhi. We listened in astonishment at the new image of Foucault unlooked for: Foucault interrupted the vast spaces of time through the disruptive word, the word which fused past and present.

James Miller, author of a widely read intellectual biography of Foucault, next read a long paper on the "problems of the philosophical life." The audience, expecting fireworks, was astonished to learn that "to be a philosopher entails living one's life in a certain way." Foucault was important because he wanted to reorient the ancient project, "know thyself." Instead of talking about Foucault, Miller argued at length against Rorty's "intelligent rejection of this idea." Why, Miller, did Diogenes Laertius think it important to know that Zeno liked green figs and sun bathing? Clearly it shows that Zeno lived the contemplative life. When we look at Foucault we can draw on Jean Starobinski, said Miller, for here we have a life which is a "continuous melody." At the end of his life Foucault had arrived at the hope that all of us could live the philosophical life: it will be the day we all become "continuous melodies." He cited Foucault: "Why should the lamp in the house be an art object, but not our life?" While Rorty would regard this as absurd, said Miller, it is certainly in line with Ralph Waldo Emerson's "never mind the Nicole, never mind the defect: up again, old head." Were the audible groans from the audience expressions of disappointment or collective gasping for oxygen in the claustrophobic lecture hall?

Colin Gordon, looking uncomfortable in smart suit and tie, spoke haltingly from his brief notes - seemingly taken from his own recent publications. At least some discussion of Foucault; yet the effect was amazingly bland, even bloodless. How wise Foucault was! And how balanced Gordon's assessment! The microphone was not passed to Kate Soper. Had it been turned down before? Her voice was of one possessed. It was vaguely loud. Foucault's work is simply devoid of reference to women's feelings. His conception of the subject is an unrelentingly masculine one. His later work is abstract and offers no solution to the question of power and resistance. Perhaps we have expected some attempt to relate Foucault's work to those questions in feminism: was Foucault too much? The main speakers, Ewald, Miller, Gordon and Soper, presented such long papers, they effectively usurp the time planned for questions from the floor. Resistance? None here. Only assent. "Yes"! "Wait!" "Refinement!" The urge to get out and to get some liquid was accompanied by disgruntled murmurs of dissent. Stuart Hall was there as non-speaker, and was heard to mutter "strange, strange, bizarre!" But the want was perhaps yet to come, the meeting rooms for the sunrise sessions after lunch were full to over-flowing, well beyond any fire or health regulations. Opening the windows was not possible since the London traffic simply drowned all communication inside; but keeping the windows closed meant the temperature soared well beyond 100 kilos. The sessions we attended (a modest selection from those on offer) were extremely mixed in interest and quality. John Rajchman asked whether Foucault had been buried by liberalism. Michelle Barrett outlined the difference between Foucault and Marx. Foucault criticized materialism, class interest, progress, ideology. She then discussed the problems faced by feminism in dealing with Foucault's notion of power, especially his refusal to describe the emotional content of experience.

Then what of the conference? Mark Perryman, the main organizer, boasted, "The bald old man would have been proud of us. An indication of the interest provoked by this conference was that one bookstall sold more than eight thousand dollars' worth of books.

"Postmodernisms," for this conference effectively refounded Foucault's old bones: RIP.

Mike Gane teaches in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire (UK). Nicholas Gane is taking his MA in sociology at Warwick University.