

# Foucault, The Conference Subject: regulated, defined and quartered

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, Francois Ewald? Immaculately dressed and groomed and "Director of the Foucault Centre in Paris," he presented Foucault as admirer of Gandhi. We listened in astonishment as the new image of Foucault unfolded: 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 entailed living one's life in a certain way." Foucault was important because he wanted to restore the ancient project, "know thyself." Instead of talking about Foucault, Miller argued at length against Rorty's intelligent rejection of this idea. Why, asked 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 ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart." 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 brief notes - seemingly taken from his own recent publications. At last 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 next passed to Kate Soper. Had it been turned down before? Her voice was of one possessed. It was raspingly loud. Foucault's work is simply devoid of reference to women's feelings. His conception of the subject is an unquestioningly masculine one. His later work is abstract and offers no solution to the question of power and resistance. Perhaps to have expected some attempt to relate Foucault's work to these questions in feminism was expecting too much. The main speakers, Ewald, Miller, Gordon and Soper, presented such long papers, they effectively used up the time planned for questions from the floor. Resistance? None here. Only ressentiment.

Air! Water! Refreshment! The crush to get out and to get some liquid was accompanied by disgruntled murmurings of disbelief. Stuart Hall was there as non-speaker, and was heard to mutter "strange! strange! bizarre!" But the worst was perhaps yet to come: the meeting rooms for the seminar sessions after lunch were full to overflowing, 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 40 celsius. 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. Michele Barrett outlined the difference between Foucault and Marx: Foucault critiqued materialism, class interest, progress, ideology. She then discussed the problems faced by feminism in dealing with Foucault's notion of bio-power, especially his refusal to describe the emotional content of experience.

Thus 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 the conference was that one bookstall sold more than eight thousand dollars worth of books." On the evidence of the conference, one could ask just how many people ever really understood Foucault, or what he was doing. The "Foucault Conference" staged what might be called the Resurrection of the Subject known as "Foucault." Had Foucault been there of course he would certainly have wanted to talk about something else, but who raised this, the dangerous legacy? Perhaps Mark Perryman is right to think of organizing a new conference for 1995 on "Postmodernisms," for this conference effectively reinterred 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.*

"exsited/cited/sighted" from "Bound by Contradiction,"  
Shelagh Keeley and Andy Fabo. Design by Andy Fabo  
and Victoria Scott. Text by Annette Hurtig.

sited

cited

sig

Two tapes  
from the  
conference  
are  
available  
from

Mark  
Perryman,  
28 Wargrave  
Avenue,  
London  
N 15 6UD