

Book Review

Kelly, Mark G.E., *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault*¹

Kristoffer A. Bolaños

Mark G. E. Kelly's *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* delivers a promising exposition of what can possibly be conceived as political philosophy based on Foucault's work that can be made coherent and applicable. Although such a project of producing a theory of power does not appear to be among Foucault's primary objectives apparently because as a philosopher he would have wanted to keep his distance from traditional political theorists and be read "with new eyes," that is, without the unnecessary intellectual baggage, Kelly still believes that it is a project that is attainable and within reach, and from it, a Foucaultian political philosophy can emerge without compromising Foucault's uniqueness and distance from other intellectuals. Kelly hopes, of course, that this does not undermine Foucault's original intentions, but he seeks to benefit readers by clarifying precisely where Foucault situates himself in the history of political thought. Kelly also claims that despite the fact that many have been inspired to give their commentaries on Foucault, especially on the issue of power, only a few authors dared to venture on telling something new, including addressing this issue of a potential coherent theory of power.²

Among the many misconceptions about Foucault, addressed by Kelly in his opening remarks, is the thought of associating him with "academic" and the "traditional" approaches or tendencies, ranging from disguised moral philosophies, to neo-Marxism, to philosophies that deliberately seek to indoctrinate certain anti-state ideologies. What Foucault's work seeks to accomplish, Kelly says, is to "understand politics" by way of re-elaborating the notion of power and to "consciously [undertake] the role of an intervention in the political."³ Although Foucault's work without a doubt has far reaching "political" consequences, it practically revolves around the theme of how individuals may traverse within the given relations of power.

¹ New York: Routledge, 2009. 185 pp.

² *Ibid.*, 33. Kelly states that the works of David Weberman and Thomas Lemke aim for something original to be added to Foucault's analytic of power. However, articulating a theory of power was not addressed by both writers. See David Weberman, "Foucault's Reconception of Power," in *Philosophical Forum*, XXVI, 3:189–217 (1995) and Thomas Lemke, *Eine Kritik der politischen Vernunft: Foucaults Analyse der modernen Gouvernementalität* (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 1997).

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

Kelly did not fail to emphasize in his report the recurrence of themes in the course of Foucault's investigations laid down on a collection of writings that many critics construe to be discontinuous, that is, full of gaps, leaps and sudden changes. Kelly's reading of *The Order of Things* is noteworthy, pointing out Foucault's account of a new modern "episteme" that replaced an old one. This episteme dramatically altered discursive practices in three distinct domains—biology, linguistics, and economics.⁴ Kelly sees an extension of this view in *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault described a shift of modalities of power from traditional monarchy to modern penalty took place in the seventeenth century, from this emerged a new modality that employs a new economics of life by way of troubleshooting the population through disciplinary tactics and surveillance. Kelly suggested that *The Order of Things* marked the formative stages of Foucault's genealogical work on institutions, as he reads, "there exists, below the level of [culture's] spontaneous orders, things that are in themselves capable of being ordered, that belong to a certain unspoken order."⁵ This elaboration is continuous with Foucault's employment of genealogy as a way of unearthing hidden, subterranean historical elements that brought about the politico-economic ordering in modern institutions, ranging from the protection of wealth and property to the necessity to foster life in populations. Kelly suggests a strong connection between *Discipline and Punish*, whose approach is genealogical, and *The Order of Things*.

Kelly's reading of Foucault's re-elaboration of power appears to be sound. He made it clear that Foucault, being aware of the sterility of starting with a "general theory" of power, hopes to make an analysis of power using, as a starting point, concrete human affairs—power that is operational and in practice. This generates a conception of power that is quite distinct from the Marxist model of top-to-bottom mode of governance. The essential characteristics of what Foucault describes as power were addressed, among these is the notion that power is not concentrated on a single individual or class but is defined in terms of a variety of complex and fragile human relations (relations of power) that renders the subject productive and yet mobile. Power is understood, therefore, in the context of relations of power, that is, the "manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production."⁶ Kelly invites the reader to a second look at the possibility of resistance coextensive with power by devoting an entire chapter to the issue.

The seventh chapter of Kelly's book entitled "Ethics" is likewise compelling as it underscores Foucault's investigations on the Greeks' ethics for the concern of the self, a mode of existence that stresses on conducting oneself and having a sense of agency over one's choices. Foucault seems to suggest, according to Kelly, that an effective resistance depends on how one conducts

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.* Quoted from Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 94.

himself,⁷ which means that resistance must be paired with a sense of accountability (as opposed to subservience). Kelly brings up a number of the major concerns of *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, including the study of how the Greeks have carried out their practical exercises on themselves, their *tekhnē tou biou*, in order to shape political lives outside themselves. An observation of *kairos*, or timeliness, for instance, is one of the steps towards mastering one's own desires.

Kelly's study on Foucault will come in handy for any future research work because of its depth and its attention to detail. It makes the necessary clarifications, and I especially appreciate the way it quickly dismisses the notion that Foucault was too "discontinuous" a writer to be given scholarly attention. Although Foucault remains evasive to a "general exposition" or "a completely coherent account" of his political thought, Kelly's account of the links and connections of themes ranging from archeology and genealogy, to power, to resistance and way they recur in Foucault's books proves itself useful for a researcher who seeks to investigate what direction Foucault is taking us and what can further be done based on what is already written. Of course, a reader who has just started reading Foucault might find some chapters a little overwhelming because they are loaded with items that require familiarization, but the reading is definitely not tedious, as Kelly makes an excellent job at arousing curiosity enough to encourage people to do more research on Foucault.

Department of Social Arts and Humanities, Centro Escolar University, Philippines

References

- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).
- _____. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, 1978.
- _____. *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- _____. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Kelly, Mark G.E., *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁷ Kelly, *op cit.*, 151.