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Unfinished Business, Continuous Growth and Persisting Interests. Making Sense of Foucault's Last Years

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Abstract:

In *Foucault's Last Decade* Stuart Elden portrays the intellectual history of the last ten years of Michel Foucault's life. By referring to published and unpublished sources (some only newly available to the public) as well as the testimonies of friends and colleagues, he convincingly reconstructs the development from *Discipline and Punish* via biopolitics and governmentality to Foucault's interest in sexuality and antique ethics. Centering on Foucault's main works and courses at the Collège de France from 1974 to 1984, Elden brilliantly discusses key concepts at their first emergence and concisely traces their development in regard to the entirety of Foucault's work. He also promptly discusses various issues that shaped Foucault's work, intellectually and institutionally.

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Elden, Stuart: Foucault's Last Decade. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016. 272 pages, 26.95 USD. ISBN: 978-0-745-68392-8.

Abstract:

In *Foucault's Last Decade* Stuart Elden portrays the intellectual history of the last ten years of Michel Foucault's life. By referring to published and unpublished sources (some only newly available to the public) as well as the testimonies of friends and colleagues, he convincingly reconstructs the development from *Discipline and Punish* via biopolitics and governmentality to Foucault's interest in sexuality and antique ethics. Centering on Foucault's main works and courses at the Collège de France from 1974 to 1984, Elden brilliantly discusses key concepts at their first emergence and concisely traces their development in regard to the entirety of Foucault's work. He also promptly discusses various issues that shaped Foucault's work, intellectually and institutionally.

On the 25th of June 1984 Michel Foucault died. During his last ten years he authored four, co-authored one and edited two volumes, apart from numerous lectures, interviews, and articles, not to mention his courses at the Collège de France. But he also pursued several detours and left multiple projects unfinished, some on the brink of completion.

Almost ten years after *Discipline and Punish*, his study of penal institutions and reformatories up to the 19th century, Foucault presents himself as genuine philosopher, discussing Socrates and Plato, subjectivity and freedom. He himself repeatedly tried to explain this shift as a continuous development, and many publications continued this task in various regards. Amidst all these publications, *Foucault's Last Decade* shines out. Stuart Elden, Professor of Political Theory and Geography at the University of Warwick, combines an overwhelming knowledge of Foucault's published works with a clear focus. He considers the statements of friends, confidants, and colleagues and takes into account newly available documents at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Bancroft Library at Berkeley, and the

Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine. Elden takes his readers on a journey, reading Foucault's work as many-layered and diverse, but not as disparate. Centered on his books and especially on his courses, Elden also sheds light on how Foucault researched and worked, individually as well as collaboratively.

Foucault's Last Decade begins on the 26th of August 1974: Immediately after *Discipline and Punish* Foucault started work on *The Will to Know*, the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, the polymorphous spine of Elden's book. Before directly addressing this theme, in the first two chapters the author focuses on Foucault's courses on *The Abnormals*, *Defending Society* and *Security, Territory, Population*. Elden highlights aspects and arguments of Foucault's courses that at the time seemed marginal but which turned out to be focal points and became central, like the *dispositif* and governance.

Elden shows how Foucault's interest in sexuality is rooted in his study of bio-power and presents the theme of governmentality as an almost omnipresent strain in Foucault's thought. These first chapters also pave the way for the central theme, situating the *History of Sexuality* in the entirety of Foucault's intellectual biography: "In *The Order of Things*, a decade previously, Foucault had aimed to show how general grammar, natural history, and the analysis of wealth became linguistics, biology and political economy: in '*Society Must Be Defended*' there is a politicizing of this argument." (p. 40). What Foucault already found in hospitals, clinics, and prisons is now and again found in public health: "selection, normalization, hierarchisation and centralization" (p. 40). Therefore, and retrospectively, population can be seen as the key transition, leading Foucault to sexuality, which then appears as the crossroads of body and population, discipline and regulation.

The following chapters explicitly deal with the arrhythmic pace in which the *History of Sexuality* was carried out, originally in 1976 announced as a series of six volumes. One year later a break occurred: Foucault gave his famous lectures on biopolitics and governmentality and called the "art of government" (p. 92) his new focus of interest. But the way in which this alleged rupture can be explained as a well-reasoned detour leading Foucault further into history, to Greek and Roman antiquity, is one of the most outstanding parts of Elden's book. Not only does Elden consider Foucault's work on governmentality as crucial, he also argues convincingly that Foucault's reading of ancient texts is a continuation of his earlier work. All the aspects and instruments of power Foucault analyzed over decades are reassembled in the notion of governing self and others: knowledge and discipline, regulation and observing, analyzing and interpreting (p. 121).

Foucault's excavation of antique texts and concepts isn't a one-way street: in resonance with the discourse on sexuality and the governing of one's self, Foucault's own concepts grow. Echoing these

motions, his original focus changed significantly and a crucial shift occurs: from the “question of power, and the way specialized medical, psychiatric and criminological discourses had shaped the sexual status of individuals and populations, here the focus is more on the subject and relation self to self” (p. 135).

In 1983 and after various rearrangements, Foucault felt close to finally finishing his project. In August 1983, again changes are made. The by now three remaining volumes are structured anew. Foucault was, as Elden puts it, “torn between two parallel projects[...]. One is a history of ancient ways of thinking about what we now call sexuality [...] in relation to various techniques of the self; and the other is the history of those techniques themselves, many of which are not concerned with sexuality” (p. 169).

Elden’s vast research on territory and interest in progressive and critical geography gives his view on Foucault a unique twist. He not only plausibly summarizes Foucault’s arguments but also carefully outlines the historical material to which Foucault refers. In so doing he creates a well readable text and finds an appropriate way to deal with Foucault’s peculiar way of thinking as a ‘philosopher in the archives’ (Petra Gehring), as a thinker of normalization, and as a political activist. Unlike Didier Eribon, whose biography on Foucault follows the hypothesis of an intellectual crisis in Foucault’s last years, taking into account especially the public debate around his work in the late 1970s, Elden’s examination is focused on a stricter intellectual explanation, does away with several popular but often inadequate judgements on this period, and reveals connections where others could only see discontinuity.

Despite his sober and distanced approach, Elden manages to evoke the tension of the ‘road not taken’ and the potential of all those envisaged but never realized options one can feel when dealing with late Foucault. His book is detailed, well written, and brilliantly constructed. It gives insights into core concepts of Foucault’s last works, demonstrates his way and navigation of thinking, and addresses experts and ambitious students alike.

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On the 8th of February 2018, *Les aveaux de la chair* (edited by Frédéric Gros), the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*, was published posthumously by Gallimard in Paris. In 2013 a manuscript as well as a typoscript, which Foucault had already started to correct, had been given to the Bibliothèque National and was therefore already accessible to researchers. According to a New York Times article from the 8th of February by Peter Libbey, Foucault’s family as well as his partner Daniel Defert decided

that this material should be accessible to a wider audience. Obviously, *Foucault's Last Decade* could not take *Les aveaux de la chair* into account, but Elden considers it to be “the key to the whole History of Sexuality series” (as stated in The Guardian on Feb. 12, 2018). Whether it will have an impact on Elden's investigation remains to be seen.

German Abstract:

Offene Enden und Kontinuitäten. Die Jahre 1974-1984 in Michel Foucaults Denken

In *Foucault's Last Decade* porträtiert Stuart Elden das letzte Jahrzehnt des intellektuellen Lebens Michel Foucaults. Basierend auf veröffentlichten wie unveröffentlichten Texten, aber auch anhand der Aussagen von Freund_innen und Kolleg_innen, rekonstruiert er überzeugend die Entwicklung von *Überwachen und Strafen* über Biopolitik und Gouvernementalität hin zu Foucaults Interesse an Sexualität und antiker Ethik. Mit Fokus auf Foucaults Hauptwerken und Vorlesungen am Collège de France in den Jahren 1974 bis 1984 diskutiert Elden Schlüsselkonzepte, verfolgt deren Entwicklung und erläutert sie in Bezug auf Foucaults Gesamtwerk. Präzise und überzeugend behandelt er zudem unterschiedliche Themen und Schwierigkeiten, die Foucaults Arbeit, intellektuell wie institutionell, geprägt haben.

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