

Foucault Studies

© Samuel Talcott 2016

ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No. 21, pp. 267-271, June 2016

REVIEW

Antonella Cutro, *Technique et vie: biopolitique et philosophie du bios dans la pensée de Michel Foucault* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), ISBN: 978-2-296-54085-9.

Much has been published since Cutro's *Tecnica e vita* (2004) first appeared. Her book, however, has enduring merits that make the French translation reviewed here quite valuable. Drawing on English, French, and Italian scholarship, it offers a thoroughgoing reading of Foucault's translations, interviews, and writings, in terms of the concept of life that he encountered in the "biological philosophy" of the 1950s. And it will be especially interesting to anyone concerned with his relation to three of its proponents: Georges Canguilhem, Raymond Ruyer, and Viktor von Weizsäcker.

Life and technique are intimately connected. For Cutro, Foucault was always interested in political life and its conditions of possibility, matters of technical manipulation and assembly that make certain forms of political life possible while simultaneously defining them in their governability. Technique, in Cutro's reading, is, therefore, "the key to how one elaborates the history of the present [*actuel*], to how one is governed via the truth, to how one can structure a constitutive relation with oneself" (7). Thus she aims to elucidate the articulation of technique and life in his work in order, "to clarify the way in which Foucault had the intuition that biological life had become a present [*actuel*] political problem" (8). She thereby offers a novel and convincing way to read Foucault's oeuvre. Though it sometimes moves a bit quickly—something that cannot be helped given the range of works discussed—her book is closely argued, well researched, stimulating, and offers many insights into the emergence, context, and implications of Foucault's works. In situating his works in relation to the problems of biological philosophy, Cutro not only gives a convincing reading of the unity of Foucault's writings, but also subtly moves attention away from Foucault himself and towards the shared objects, methods, and problems that he contributed to formulating and questioning.

Cutro's book goes quite far in explaining the methods, concerns, and problems shared with Canguilhem that enabled Foucault to develop his own archeological and genealogical inquiries. And her presentation of their intellectual relation as an osmosis dependent upon shared membranes seems to offer a fruitful way into a philosophical history of their writings. But these membranes were not shared by them alone. There was a range of works in biological philosophy popular among students including Foucault in the 1950s, but Cutro restricts herself to discussing

Canguilhem, Weizsäcker, and Ruyer, perhaps because they share the closest connections to him. The book also finds space to offer illuminating discussions of various historical authors, such as Jeremy Bentham, and explain important connections to Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Cutro's study is so dense that I am not able to discuss all of its claims. Before discussing a few in particular, an overview of the book's basic moves might be helpful. It has three main parts: the first, "Form of Life," explains archaeology in its relation to Canguilhem, Weizsäcker, and Ruyer; the second, "Bio-politics," is devoted to the genealogical analyses, especially in relation to Canguilhem's work, and how these led from disciplinary power to analyses of biopolitics, governmentality, neoliberalism, and, eventually, Foucault's interest in ethics; and the third, "Philosophy of *Bios*," charts Foucault's turn to ethics in Greek and Roman antiquity out of his interest in revolutionary political spirituality and Lacan's ethics. Intriguingly, the turn to antiquity is portrayed as a return to the themes of biological philosophy.

In "Form of Life" Cutro shows the close connection between life and technique by introducing Canguilhem's epistemological history as a form of Kantian critique, a revolutionary technique of thought [*Denkart*] that measures the possibilities and limits of reason. Of course, for Kant, critical thought's revolution is modeled on the physical sciences. Canguilhem's *Denkart* also aims to repeat the work of rationality in the sciences so as to grasp its possibilities and limits, but proceeds by writing histories that treat sciences as singular, veridical discourses marked by crises and obstacles, each thus having its own historical viscosity. The epistemological historian's task is not to produce chronologies according to the standards of general history, but to bring forth the latent history of a science and its present [*actuel*] truth by "miming the scientist's practice, the gestures that produce knowledge and the instruments that permit it to exist" (16). Cutro suggests, thereby, that Canguilhem is an epistemological historian, as opposed to a historical epistemologist, because he is interested in the life of the sciences and grasps this through the events that punctuate and make their history. The sciences are forms of life that need to be understood on their own terms. And Canguilhem's scientific histories pursue a non-scientific understanding that contributes to the vitality of thought by questioning received scientific categories. As Cutro makes clear, one of the primary obstacles to the history of science for Canguilhem is the idea of the precursor, since the sciences are endeavors that undergo radical, historical revolutions such that no sovereign consciousness could persist in or direct them. This *Denkart* vitalizes thought, at least in part, by exorcising such consciousness from the history of science.

Foucault's own archeological works, Cutro shows, draw on Canguilhem's mimetic approach even while deploying it at the level of, and for the sake of, transforming general history. Archaeology, thus, repeats the statements of diverse epochs in order to identify the limits and possibilities for thought, that is, the *episteme*, and understand how diverse and divergent epistemological figures, sciences, and formalisms emerge from a common *savoir*. And these repetitions not only make the author of the archaeology withdraw as statements appear in their own relations, they also exorcise sovereign consciousness from the history of ideas. Archaeology too is, then, a *Denkart* that plots out different discursive regimes so as to better destabilize present

regimes. For Cutro, the point here is not to show how much of Canguilhem was in Foucault, or vice versa, but to identify the membranes that allowed for the sharing of ideas, methods, and problems. As she explains it, epistemological history and archaeology are both techniques of thought developed around the problem of biological philosophy, namely, how to promote the freedom of the living in the face of scientific determinism.

This is also the context within which Cutro first discusses Weizsäcker, whose *Gestaltkreis* Foucault translated, and Ruyer, featured by Canguilhem in his “Note on the Situation of Biological Philosophy in France.”¹ Canguilhem’s article offers a defense of biological philosophy, understood as “an exercise of thought that is concerned with the philosophical reach of the phenomena of life,” contrasting this with the philosophy of biology, which seeks only to clarify contemporary biological theories (46). His article calls, thus, for a new metaphysics and critical rationalism, in which, as Cutro writes, “the refusal of a complete resolution of life in the concept thus becomes a reclamation of the impossibility of objectifying the living” (47). Cutro finds a similar project in Weizsäcker’s biological anthropology, which treats the organism as a totality that structures the human in all its relations to the world. For him the organism precedes scientific understanding of cause and effect and is characterized by a kind of anti-mechanism and anti-logic that is not amenable to the physical sciences (49). Ruyer’s own variant of biological philosophy is discussed for its appeal to causal indeterminism in thinking individuality as a form of becoming.

But Cutro’s argument is not that Foucault is the inheritor of these intellectual ancestors. Rather, “during his formative years, these figures had a decisive importance, each in his fashion and in a precise domain” (54). Canguilhem offered his conceptualization of normality, Weizsäcker his *Gestaltkreis*, and Ruyer morphogenesis. Drawing on *The Order of Things*, she claims that they form the “positive unconscious” of Foucault’s own writings. It is worth recalling that Foucault described this as the set of rules for forming statements, shared across disciplines, but which exists at a level that eludes the consciousness of individual scientists.² His archaeologies of the human sciences unconsciously undertake, Cutro can then claim, a parallel endeavor to biological philosophy, one that seeks to undo the epistemic order that treats man as a thoroughly determined subject (55).

Her account of Foucault’s genealogical works, and the genesis of his account of biopower, is fascinating, illuminating, and convincing. But perhaps Cutro’s best case for the biological philosophy as Foucault’s positive unconscious is made in her discussion of his last works. Canguilhem figures importantly in the account given here. First, his discussion of health as a spontaneous activity of the individual is compared to Foucault’s own early gestures in this direction and his return to this theme in *The Use of Pleasures* and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Thus, Foucault’s discussion of philosophical therapeutics is presented as a continuation of a

¹ Canguilhem, “Note sur la situation faite en France à la philosophie biologique,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, vol. 52, no. 3/4 (July-October, 1947), 322–332.

² Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage 1994), xi.

biomedical theme, though with this difference: whereas Canguilhem presented health as the truth of the body, Foucault's exploration of Stoicism allows him to understand health as an activity by which subjectivity is created. Yet, following Cutro, Canguilhem is not abandoned at this point, since Foucault's later writings deploy his claim that life is always a form or mode of life. For Canguilhem, life is always a mode of life since living takes the form of an individuality that shapes its own milieu and is, in turn, shaped by its milieu. Indeed, this is a central theme in Foucault's discussions of the Stoics, though, as Cutro has it, he pushes this double relation beyond that of the living individual and its milieu to focus on the subject and its world, expanding beyond a primarily natural relation to include a political one in which humans are recognized as sharing a world with each other (194).

Ruyer is invoked here again for his thoughts about morphogenesis and the liberty emerging in the open links of a biological indeterminism. Weizsäcker's work appears perhaps even more important for Foucault's discussion of Stoicism, since he portrays every biological act as the genesis of a present through a kind of revolution, that is, a transformative return to the self through otherness. For him, "the space of the [organism's] decision becomes the meeting place between organism and milieu, whereas the time of the decision becomes a genesis of the present" (197). For Cutro, Foucault does not merely mimic Weizsäcker's biological philosophy, but imports its very conceptuality into his analyses of Stoic ethics (198). She uses an image from astronomy to gloss Foucault's account of the Stoic subject: a rotation of the self around itself, like a planet on its axis, even as the self revolves around the world, like the planet around its star. It is this movement that produces ethical form, which as a result is never a universal form, but always emergent in relation to its content. Subjectivity then is inherently fragile, involving the possible emergence of new forms, but never in a predictable manner. Rather, it is in the turn to the world that a present [*actualité*] is engendered with its own ethical demands. Thus, following Cutro, Foucault's interest in *l'actualité* originates, not only in Kantian philosophy, but also in biological philosophy. Moreover, this philosophy shapes Foucault's account of freedom, which is neither autonomy, the choice of a lifestyle, nor a technique. Rather, freedom is found in the choice to live, the decision to embrace the unpredictable but opportune moment and become subject to it (199).

Not the least of its merits, *Technique et vie* provokes a number of questions. First, I wonder if we can really maintain that the biological philosophy was part of Foucault's positive unconscious. After all, he was well aware of its role in contemporary debates and attempted to distance himself from it. Following François Jacob, for example, Foucault suggested that the time for discussing life was over, that a vitalist metaphysics was no longer possible.³ The book also raises questions about what Foucault was doing in his late discussions of antiquity. Foucault had, at various moments, been inclined to contest a foundational role for biological philosophy in the formation of modern subjectivities. Could his last inquiries be, in part, yet another way to contest

³ Foucault, "Croître et Multiplier," *Le Monde*, No. 8037 (November 15–16, 1970), reprinted in Foucault, *Dits et Écrits I* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 967–972.

the biological philosophy by showing the extent to which its own positive unconscious was formed in late antiquity?

I must also remark that the differences between Canguilhem and Foucault seem, at times, overly stated. If health is the truth of the body, for Canguilhem, he also described dissatisfaction, which includes awareness of health's absence, in the face of biological errancy as the basis of subjectivity.⁴ It should also be remembered that the human sciences were not of interest to Foucault alone, that Canguilhem was, for instance, famous for his lecture, "What is Psychology?" in the 1950s. Finally, Canguilhem conceived of life as always going beyond itself, thus humans have a biological milieu, but also a world.⁵ Despite these concerns, Cutro's *Technique et Vie* is a valuable addition to the literature, for both its reading of Foucault and the questions that it provokes.

Samuel Talcott, Ph.D
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
University of the Sciences in Philadelphia
s.talcott@uscience.edu

⁴ Canguilhem, *Études d'histoire et de philosophie des sciences* (Paris: Vrin, 2002), 365.

⁵ Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life* (New York: Fordham, 2008), 118–120.