

## KNUT OVE ELIASSEN, *FOUCAULTS BEGREPER*

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Je n'écris pas pour un public, j'écris pour des utilisateurs (I don't write for an audience, I write for users)

Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. II, 524.

I actually consider myself to be under an absolute obligation to tell you roughly what I am doing, what point I've reached, in what direction [...] the work is going; and to that extent, I think that you are completely free to do what you like with what I am saying. These are suggestions for research, ideas, schemata, outlines, instruments; do what you like with them. Ultimately, what you do with them both concerns me and is none of my business. It is none of my business to the extent that it is not up to me to lay down the law about the use you make of it. And it does concern me to the extent that, one way or another, what you do with it is connected, related to what I am doing.

Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 1-2.



Michel Foucault (1926-84) is one of the most read, cited, discussed, and quoted thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his work extends into a number of disciplines such as sociology, social science, political science, art studies, cultural studies, history, philosophy, the history of ideas, and many, many more. In this process Foucault's work has been extended and adapted to a number of fields, and many of his concepts have in many ways come to live a life of their own, seemingly somewhat disconnected from the usage and context Foucault himself developed them in. Foucault (and his work) has been the subject of an immense and vast number of discussions, writings, and books, both concerning himself and his works, but also concerning the application of them in a number of other

fields. Despite the fact that Foucault has been dead for over 30 years, the writings on, of and by him continue to be published. The lecture series he held each year at the Collège de France from his instatement as professor in 1970 until his death in 1984 (only interrupted by a sabbatical year in 1977) – as well as other lectures, interviews, and talks – are still being published in French and subsequently in English as well as a number of other languages, making them accessible to a wide audience and not just the dedicated ones willing to listen to tape recordings at a Parisian library. These publications alone give rise to new interpretations, readings, and applications of Foucault, and gives the opportunity for studying the lectures which in many ways opens to a broader audience the “inner workings” of Foucault’s, not mind perhaps, but at least working process. The lecture series are much more open, experimenting, tentative, and searching than the monographs, which, as Sverre Raffnsøe, Marius Gudmand-Høyer and Morten Thaning in their book *Foucault* admit, can have a “hermetic and monolithic character,”<sup>1</sup> making them not so easily accessible.

The lecture series were, as Foucault also notes in the (second) opening quote above from the lecture series at *Collège de France* from 1975-76, *Society Must Be Defended* – and as he was obligated to do as Professor at the *Collège* – a way to report on the state of his work and research. In the lecture series we therefore get not only new and more works from Foucault, but we also get a closer look at how he worked, how he thought and developed his concepts and analytical tools, just as we get a closer reflection on and over this process than we do in the books.<sup>2</sup> Considering this, it makes sense that works on and about Foucault continue to be published, but on the other hand it can sometimes seem as if he is a never-ending source of publications, and cause the wondering whether each and every one has something new or different to say.

*Foucault’s begreper* (Foucault’s Concepts) is, as the author Knut Ove Eliassen opens the introduction by stating, an attempt to present a bundle or range of Michel Foucault’s most central concepts and to discuss their place, function, and meaning in his work or authorship.<sup>3</sup> Most centrally, Eliassen wants to present some of the topics and aspects of Foucault’s thinking which have not received that much attention in Norway, since they were primarily developed in the lectures at the *Collège de France* which have not been translated into Norwegian, and apparently haven’t been the subject of much thorough study there. This is rather surprising considering that Norway seems to have had quite a rich field of interest in Foucault, but if it is the case, Eliassen’s book would seem to

fill a rather large void in Norwegian Foucauldian scholarship as well as provide an introduction to these concepts and notions to a Norwegian public and readership.

#### WHAT IS A READING?

It is the ambition of Eliassen, as he states on the opening page, that the book is a presentation and exposition (importantly not an *introduction*) to some of Foucault's central concepts – but not all of them. Eliassen emphasizes that he has no ambition of being exhaustive. On the other hand, he also states that it is the ambition that the book can be used, referring to the often-used statement from Foucault also quoted above, as a “toolbox” that can be used as the reader sees fit. Where Eliassen succeeds in the first ambition, it could be discussed how much he does so in the second. It depends, of course, on how one understands a toolbox, which I will return to.

The book is structured around the reading or exposition of the central concepts that Eliassen singles out; concept, discourse, archive, dispositive, the microphysics of power, biopolitics, government, subjectification, experience, technologies of the self, and truth. There is no doubt that these are central concepts to and in Foucault, it is, however, as I will return to later, somewhat unclear what Eliassen's motivation is for choosing exactly the concepts that he has. It is opened by a longer introduction and concluded by a short epilogue mainly centering on the reading, selection of texts and secondary literature.

Eliassen emphasizes that it is a *reading*, it is his reading and his selection of the concepts. It is a reading which puts an emphasis on the lecture series and reads Foucault in the light of the last half of the authorship (p. 20). Every chapter is introduced by a long quote and centered on a reading of the quote and the themes touched upon in the quote. It is thereby a “reading” in the sense of, as Eliassen explains (p. 24), the French “*explication du texte*,” a laying down, exposition, or thorough reading of the text – or here, of central concepts in the text(s). It is not a *critical* study, Eliassen emphasizes, but rather an invitation or call to read Foucault and the texts of Foucault.

The book offers a thorough reading and explication of some central concepts in Foucault and remains on the level of “*explication du texte*.” In this sense, it could be argued that it remains so close to the text of Foucault that it gives very few decisive readings or statements on how Foucault could be read or understood (and used). There is no doubt that Foucault is a very multifaceted and

complex thinker whose concepts and notions change throughout the authorship, some disappear, others emerge, and his analyses are often very hard to summarize or reduce to simple formulas, sentences, and principles. One understands and sympathizes with Eliassen's ambition to present and show this multifaceted and complex development, use, and interrelation of the central concepts of Foucault. However, the complexity and ambition to show so many of the sides to Foucault's concepts at times leaves the reader (or at least this reader) a little confused as to what it is, exactly, Eliassen wants to bring forth in it – how it is to be used.

Foucault often revolves around the same object, concept or notion for long passages, even works at the time, chipping at it from different angles, making mostly negative definitions of the concepts he uses. And in this lie both the allure, the attractiveness, the richness, and complexity of Foucault, but in it also lies the difficulty of determining precisely the status and meaning of the concepts. And this tension characterizes Eliassen's exposition as well, which in this sense remains close to the text(s) and concepts, and it feels that we are sometimes perhaps a little too close to Foucault's texts and that we could use the distance of the reader in providing explanation and overview, a reading in another sense of "explication du texte."

The introduction is a good example: Much of it revolves around the question of whether Foucault's *oeuvre* should be read as one work, as a continual exposition of some central interests and ambitions, which during the authorship takes different forms and undergoes (substantial) developments, or whether it should be read discontinually as a series of works, texts, and analyses which are not bound together by one (or a few) central interests (or author). This is undoubtedly a very central, but also extremely complex discussion, and Eliassen is very thorough in approaching the question from a series of angles. And this no doubt reflects the complexity of the matter, but it leaves the reader a bit unsure of Eliassen's own position. Eliassen's work could be compared with two recent books about Foucault which have been published in Danish in the last decade, Anders Fogh Jensen's *Mellem Ting* (Between things, 2005) and Sverre Raffnsøe, Marius Gudmand-Høyer and Morten Thaning's *Foucault* (2008), which are both excellent books on Foucault serving both as introductions and as readings. They both explicate their reading, or their take on Foucault, clearly in the beginning, which makes the argument and their explication – their reading – easier and clearer to follow. Generally, both books read Foucault as a coherent thinker whose

authorship undergoes significant changes and developments, but which in many ways can be seen to be motivated or interested in the same things. In contrast, besides presenting and reading, it becomes a bit unclear what it is Eliassen wants with his book and his readings. To grab a hold of Foucault, this many faceted and in many ways confusing figure and thinker, to make a reading, it could be helpful for the reader with a more distanced reading that steps back and takes more command of the concepts and notions, and shows what he or she wants to do with them – what it is the toolbox should be used for.

#### WHAT IS A TOOLBOX?

In distinction to *Foucault* and *Mellem ting*, *Foucaults begreper* is – as the title already clearly indicates – centered around Foucault's *concepts*. *Foucault* focuses on the different works providing a thorough introduction to Foucault's works and thoughts in the different periods and developments of the authorship, and *Mellem ting* is centered on a number of themes, which also reflect periods and themes at different points in the authorship. In this way, Eliassen's book provides a new approach in the Scandinavian Foucauldian scholarship. And this in many ways makes a lot of sense. Because we know from Foucault and we know Foucault from the many different concepts which have come to be associated with his works such as power-knowledge, biopolitics, governmentality, etc., and which have come to live a life on their own after the life of their creator.

As mentioned, Eliassen wants his book to be a “toolbox of concepts” (p. 7), which can be used by the reader. This is in line with Foucault's statement quoted above that he did not write for an audience, but for users. In this sense, Foucault has truly succeeded, even to the point that a number of the many ‘foucauldian’ analyses being made seem to have little to do with Foucault himself. In this way, Eliassen points to an interesting paradoxality in the reading and use of Foucault; his concepts having become so widespread and so widely used in so many fields, that this use sometimes seems so far from the use and context they were developed in, that it can be hard to recognize Foucault in them. But is this a problem if all he really wanted to do was to write to users? Then it would seem perfectly fine to just use the concepts freely. Foucault in a way addresses this paradoxality in the quote above from *Society Must be Defended* when he says “do what you like with them,” the “suggestions for research, ideas, schemata, outlines, instruments.” “Ultimately,” he says, “what you do with them both concerns me

and is none of my business.” He should not control what people want to do with the work he is doing, people are welcome to use it, but on the other hand, “it does concern me to the extent that, one way or another, what you do with it is connected, related to what I am doing.”<sup>4</sup> It is connected, if not otherwise, by the credibility that the Foucauldian name – the author, the authority – lends to it, a position that Foucault wanted to avoid. As the legal historian Paolo Napoli has stated, Foucault is not a thinker who should be treated exegetically, his work simply does not lend itself to it, is not made for it.<sup>5</sup> And he was not himself interested in it. He wanted his works – his ‘suggestions for research, ideas, schemata, outlines, instruments’ – to be *used*.

But what does it mean to use something, and what does it mean to use Foucault’s concepts as a ‘toolbox’. First of all it means that Foucault was not interested in, nor saw his work as being something to be studied in itself. He was not interested in developing theoretical concepts. He himself used theoretical concepts in order to analyze historical developments (which had profound consequences in the present, he was always interested in doing a “history of the present”). To Foucault, concepts are tools, and as Eliasson states in his book, concepts to Foucault are “analytical categories” linked to “theoretical environments” (p. 9). These environments were mostly historical to Foucault, who developed his thinking in a constant debate and discussion with historical sources. Foucault’s concepts are therefore both developed *through* and *from* the material he is investigating as well as developed *to* analyze the material he is investigating. In our editorial introduction to the special issue of *Slagmark – tidsskrift for idéhistorie* (Danish Journal on The History of Ideas) on Michel Foucault from 2013, Nicolai von Eggers and I highlighted that one of the specificities of Foucault’s approach was that it was characterized by a long series of “methodological experiments.”<sup>6</sup> For instance, in the last lecture of the lecture-series *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault states, “All I wanted to do this year was a little experiment of method”.<sup>7</sup> An experiment of method which resulted in the concept(s) of *government*, *governmentality* and *biopolitics* – incidentally some of the concepts which have been written and discussed a lot with and about since. These concepts are telling of how Foucault works, and works with his concepts (and which I also take up here because these are some of the concepts in Foucault that I myself have worked extensively with.)<sup>8</sup> Government, governmentality and biopolitics are developed both as analytical categories which can characterize different ways of governing people throughout

history, and they mark a clear break in the government of people and a new way of governing, especially and particularly in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this way these categories categorize historical and epistemological changes, and are categories, which are developed through readings of historical material. At the same time, they are analytical categories and concepts which mark a radically different way of studying the history of political and economic thought, the history of ideas, history, and the development of political rationalities.<sup>9</sup> The point is that Foucault's concepts are not concepts which can unproblematically be lifted out of the context in which they were developed and freely applied to other fields and disciplines. Foucault is not interested in the concepts themselves, but in what they *do*, how they can be *used*. And in this sense they are developed through and via the concrete contexts they are meant to both categorize and analyze. Therefore, any exposition of Foucault's concepts should have this in mind and explicate what these concepts can be used for, or at least how and what Foucault used them for. And this is hard to do without a general idea or aim of what it is that Foucault is doing, or what it is one wants to do with Foucault, how one wants to use him. To Anders Fogh Jensen in *Mellem ting* this is linked to a history of problematization; Foucault's investigation of how different things were possible to know at different times and periods in history and which questions it was possible to ask, that is, to a history of "conditions of possibility and disappearance"<sup>10</sup> – and to the ambition of Raffnsøe et al. to present the authorship as a coherent philosophical authorship concerned with actual normative diagnoses of the present. In comparison, it remains somewhat unclear what it is that Eliassen wants to do with Foucault, use him for, except presenting and reading him. And thereby the book lacks an overarching structure that binds the readings together and guides the reader.

This might have strengthened the book as a whole and the exposition of the individual concepts, which, thorough and informative as they are, come to stand somewhat alone and the question is how much sense this makes with a thinker such as Foucault.

#### WHAT CAN FOUCAULT BE USED FOR?

Foucault continues to be a highly relevant thinker today. Not only as a developer of concepts, which we can use in a variety of fields, but as a highly original thinker whose approach and engagement we can continue to learn from in our own way of doing research. Foucault was always concerned with doing a "history of the present," in investigating the emergence of ways of thinking and doing

which continue to structure our world today and which seem to us as given and necessary, and which we therefore cannot operate freely in. To Foucault it was about showing how our (highly contingent) way of being became sedimented through history in our discursive and material practices and thereby making us understand the (power) structures, which we necessarily must exist within, and act and speak according to (given that power is not a thing, but a relation). In this way he shows that the things with which we surround ourselves and which structure our lives are exactly not given entities, but are constructed and fixated as things which then come to stand outside us and which appear as something we cannot change (such as power (structures), the state, the subject). But the point is that they are highly contingent and that they can therefore also be changed, or at least it is a precondition of operating (somewhat) freely in these structures that one knows what they are and can take an (somewhat) active decision as to how to relate to them and operate within them. Foucault's inspiration from Nietzsche's genealogy as a method and "philosophizing with a hammer" is not meant as a smashing of all that is given, but as a knocking on concepts and things to see whether they are hollow, and to investigate which can be used and which must be discarded.

A defining feature of Foucault's work was that he was constantly engaged with actual events, with political engagements and with normatively engaged diagnoses of the present.<sup>11</sup> Foucault was not interested in developing theory or concepts for their own sake, but his concepts were tools, analytical instruments to approach subjects, just as they at the same time were developed through and via his engagement with the (historical) material he investigated. Foucault in this way represents a combination of a number of different fields and approaches – again because the delineation of academic disciplines and identities did not interest him, the subject at hand did – which gives the Foucauldian approach (if one such exists) its unique combination of philosophy and history, discourse and materiality.

Therefore it does not make sense to treat Foucault's concepts as tools, which can be applied to any field, and in any which way one wants. They are developed in specific contexts to open up specific material and in questioning different sources in different ways – and they are developed as tools, not tools that are readymade for any use and can be unproblematically applied to other areas, but tools that are developed both *from* and *for* the material they were meant to open up. A Foucauldian approach would therefore be not to treat Foucault and his tools as a master-discourse or as given



and finished tools, but to engage with them, work with them, and develop them in new contexts.

In this way *Foucaults begreper* could be a good way to start. It gives a thorough exposition of some of Foucault's central concepts – but it also encourages to go beyond the book itself and read Foucault. And if these concepts, and the concepts and notions of the *Collège de France* lecture series have not been the subject of thorough scholarship in Norway, it undoubtedly has its place here. The book is no introduction to Foucault for those not very familiar with him, neither is it a piece of scholarship or reading for those well versed in the thought of Foucault. But for those who have read some Foucault and want to expand on their knowledge of him, it provides a pathway to the complexity of the Foucauldian world. And I can only sympathize with Eliassen's call for an encouragement to read Foucault – and *use* him!

## NOTES

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1. Sverre Raffnsøe, Morten S. Thaning, and Marius Gudmand-Høyer, *Foucault* (Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur, 2008), 36.
2. Mathias Hein Jessen and Nicolai von Eggers, "Kongen Hersker, Men Regerer Ikke – Guvernementalitet, Statificering Og Statspraksis Hos Michel Foucault," *Slagmark – Tidsskrift for Idéhistorie* Michel Foucault, 66 (2013): 8.
3. All the following page references to the book appear in parentheses.
4. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, 1<sup>st</sup> Picador pbk. ed. (New York: Picador, 2003), 1-2.
5. Mathias Hein Jessen and Paolo Napoli, "De Retslige. Administrative Og Normative Dispositivers Autonomi - Interview Med Paolo Napoli," *Slagmark - Tidsskrift for Idéhistorie* Michel Foucault, 66 (2013): 120–21.
6. Mathias Hein Jessen and Nicolai von Eggers, "Redaktionelt forord," *Slagmark - Tidsskrift for Idéhistorie* Michel Foucault, 66 (2013): 11–12.
7. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78*. Lectures at the Collège de France. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 358.
8. See Mathias Hein Jessen and Nicolai von Eggers, *op.cit.*; and Mathias Hein Jessen, "Forvaltningen af det bestående - Guvernementalitet, regering og økonomi hos Giorgio Agamben," *Slagmark - Tidsskrift for idéhistorie* Giorgio Agamben, 72 (2015).
9. Mathias Hein Jessen and Nicolai von Eggers, *op.cit.*; Martin Saar, "Relocating the Modern State: Governmentality and the History of Political Ideas," *Governmentality: Current Issues and Future Challenges* (2011); Thomas Lemke, "An Indigestible Meal? Foucault, Governmentality and State Theory," *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 8 (2) (2007).
10. Anders Fogh Jensen, *Mellem Ting* (Frederiksberg: Det lille Forlag, 2005), 10.
11. Mathias Hein Jessen and Nicolai von Eggers, "Redaktionelt forord," *Slagmark - Tidsskrift for Idéhistorie* Michel Foucault, 66 (2013); Sverre Raffnsøe, Morten S. Thaning, and Marius Gudmand-Høyer, *op.cit.*