CFP: Historicising Foucault: What does this Mean? - Zurich 11/14

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foucaultblog (Research Unit for Social and Economic History, History Department, University of Zurich, Competence Center »History of Knowledge«, Prof. Dr. Philipp Sarasin)

6-8 November 2014, Zurich, University of Zurich

Deadline: 30 June 2014

Michel Foucault figures among the icons of today’s cultural and social sciences. The French philosopher and historian is productively read, quoted, discussed, refuted, and recycled in virtually every cultural and social scientific discipline. Voiced in 1975, Foucault’s invitation that people should help themselves to his works and concepts as if using a ‘toolbox’ (‘make of it what you will’) was so widely taken up that the toolbox has since become standard equipment above all for the work of the cultural sciences. Indeed, the ‘toolbox’ contains an extraordinarily dazzling inventory of concepts, methods, models, sketches, and instruments, and last but not least still proves to be a treasure chest.

But today, thirty years after Foucault’s death, we—the group of editors of the foucaultblog—also face questions regarding the historicisation of this tool box with its instruments whose applicability seems independent of the context of their origins. How did this toolbox that we use actually come about? What does it mean for us today that it originated in the Cold War era in opposition to the ‘hyper-Marxism’ of the New Left, in a certain proximity to structuralism, in the struggle against the French prison system, that it was possibly shaped by commitments to Soviet dissidents, Spanish anarchists, Shiite revolutionaries, or Polish workers and undoubtedly by a fascination with the American counterculture and the Zen culture of Japan, but maybe even influenced by the New Age...? Do all of these ‘contexts’, ‘backgrounds’, and genealogies belong to the Foucauldian toolbox? It can be no other way: Foucault’s thought always and explicitly referred to his present and the political context of his time. But does this not imbue his own concepts and analytical models with an ineluctable historicity? Undoubtedly, and today we should therefore set about writing the genealogy of the Foucauldian toolbox in order to understand it better, to be able to keep using it, but also to bring it up to date and adapt it to today’s scholarly and political situation. And perhaps also to discard some of it.

With such a project in mind, the foucaultblog invites all interested scholars to attend a workshop at the University of Zurich on 6-8 November 2014 to discuss the question ‘historicising Foucault: what does this mean?’ The initial objective will be to locate within a genuine historical context not only the life and work of the author Michel Foucault (1925-1984) but also ‘Foucault’ in his iconic nature and almost ubiquitous presence as a body of interrelated statements that for thirty years has been virulent in the cultural sciences throughout the world. This means interrogating this body of interrelated statements with regard to its specific conditions of possibility, theory formation processes, discursive strategies, and resonance chambers. But it also means taking the claim of historicisation seriously and filling this catchword with life, making the historicisation of Foucault (and ‘Foucault’) the object of one’s own research. We hold the view that such a venture does not by any means require an exclusively historiographical orientation but rather should proceed from all disciplines that work or deal with Foucault. For the new perspective that this can open up is always contemporary in nature: we believe that the historicisation of Foucault’s toolbox opens up new opportunities to think about how this intellectual tool kit can still be used today – or explains why it must perhaps be partially rejected. Work about Foucault is work on Foucault.

Organizational information: The workshop will take place on 6-8 November 2014 at the University of Zurich. All interested scholars are invited to send their proposals for papers (abstracts no longer than 500 words) by 30 June 2014 to foucaultblog@fsw.uzh.ch.

The costs of travel and accommodations will be covered for contributors.

The plan is to publish and comment on the workshop contributions on the foucaultblog. The contributors are therefore requested to post brief preliminary versions of their papers on the foucaultblog in advance of the workshops. These will then be provided with commentary, which the contributors can or should address during the workshops. After the conference, the presented papers can be published in full length on the foucaultblog.

Contact: foucaultblog@fsw.uzh.ch

Conference languages: German and English