

Philosophy in Review



Elisabetta Basso, "Young Foucault: The Lille Manuscripts on Psychopathology, Phenomenology, and Anthropology, 1952-1955" Foreword by Bernard E. Harcourt. Translated by Marie Satya McDonough

Michael Maidan

Volume 43, numéro 1, février 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098270ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098270ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Maidan, M. (2023). Compte rendu de [Elisabetta Basso, "Young Foucault: The Lille Manuscripts on Psychopathology, Phenomenology, and Anthropology, 1952-1955" Foreword by Bernard E. Harcourt. Translated by Marie Satya McDonough]. *Philosophy in Review*, 43(1), 7–10.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1098270ar>

Copyright © Michael Maidan, 2023



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Elisabetta Basso. *Young Foucault: The Lille Manuscripts on Psychopathology, Phenomenology and Anthropology, 1952-1955.* Foreword by Bernard E. Harcourt. Translated by Marie Satya McDonough. Columbia University Press 2022. 352 pp. \$1200.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780231205849); \$30.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780231205856).

As formulated appropriately by Bernard Harcourt in his foreword—even if he is not using Foucault's strict technical sense for this term—Elisabetta Basso's book is a 'genealogy of Archaeology' (x). From that point of view, the title does not give full credit to this work. Indeed, Basso's book develops a strong interpretation of the development of Foucault's archaeology, which considers not only Foucault's works of the 1960s but also his earlier published and non-published work of the first half of the 1950s.

Elisabetta Basso is both a beneficiary of the mother lode (lecture drafts, book drafts, reading notes, philosophical diaries, etc.) yielded by the recent opening of Foucault archives and an active participant in the collective enterprise to classify, transcribe, edit, and publish Foucault's early texts. Basso was the editor of Foucault's essay on the existential psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger (2021). She also co-edited, together with Jean-François Bert, the volume *Foucault à Münsterlingen: À l'origine de l'Histoire de la folie, Avec des photographies de Jacqueline Verdeaux* (2015). This book presents archival findings regarding Foucault's visit to the Münsterlingen psychiatric hospital in 1954. In Münsterlingen, Foucault attended a carnival organized by the hospital and the patients, following a tradition dating over hundreds of years, and met with psychiatrists developing an existential- and phenomenological-influenced psychiatric approach, such as Roland Kuhn and Ludwig Binswanger. Basso stresses the importance of this visit for the future development of Foucault's interest in madness and its representation.

Young Foucault expands on Basso's previously published work, particularly on her paper 'On Historicity and Transcendentality Again. Foucault's Trajectory from Existential Psychiatry to Historical Epistemology' (*Foucault Studies*, No. 14, 154-178, September 2012).

The interest of the young Foucault in the teachings of Binswanger is well known to the specialist, and Foucault's introduction to the French translation of Binswanger's *Dream and Existence* has been available to the reader since the publication of the *Dits et écrits* collection. But this material was generally understood as being either a transitory stage in Foucault's intellectual development or just a work of opportunity. Basso shows that, on the contrary, the introductory essay is an emerging part of Foucault's deep involvement with existential psychiatry. Furthermore, Basso shows that the work of Binswanger was well known to psychiatrists and philosophers in France, who read his and his colleague's work with great interest and tried to integrate the *Daseinspsychologie* into their own practices.

The book is divided into an introduction, three chapters, and a concluding section. The introduction presents the case for a new look at Foucault's earliest work (4). Basso bases her interpretation on three pillars. First, the rich archival material from Foucault in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, which Basso describes briefly (5; 9-13). Second, Foucault's correspondence with Ludwig Binswanger and Roland Kuhn recently discovered by Basso and others. Third, her own research of



the reception of Existential Psychiatry in France.

The first chapter, entitled ‘Archives and intellectual networks,’ reconstructs the background for Foucault’s forays into psychology and psychiatry. Alongside his philosophy studies at the *École normale supérieure* (ENS), Foucault also pursued a license in psychology and a second one in psychopathology. After passing his *agrégation*, Foucault was recruited as an assistant lecturer of psychology at the University of Lille and the ENS. He was also involved in experiments with EEG and with the Rorschach test. Foucault was also interested in psychoanalysis, and many notes in the archive reflect this interest.

Basso devotes a section in this chapter to Foucault’s first book, *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (MMP), published in 1954. The book’s first part consists of a review of the principal approaches to mental illness. The second concentrates on a materialist explanation of mental illness as an expression of societal crisis and concludes with an exposition of the ideas of Pavlov. These theses align with the Marxist line associated with Henri Wallon and the journal *La Raison*. A second edition, published in 1962 after the publication of *History of Madness*, excised the references to Pavlov.

Contrary to general opinion, Basso considers that the mature Foucault agrees with some aspects of his early book, in particular, Foucault’s rejection of an overly theoretical approach to mental illness (25-6). Another feature of MMP is a positive evaluation of attempts to criticize and find alternatives to conventional psychiatric practice (view more on this pp. 25-26). Basso quotes from a comment found in a manuscript of the Lille period, where Foucault reflects on the shortcomings of psychology and of phenomenology: ‘Psychology, under the pretext of analyzing the concrete—phenomenology, under the pretext of returning to things—both converge towards the most abstract thing: toward an essence of man valid only in the realm of anthropologic speculation’ (26). Basso explains that the reference to ‘concrete’ refers to the work of Georges Politzer, a thinker well-received in French psychological and psychiatric circles.

Basso qualifies Foucault’s embrace of Existential Psychiatry. According to Basso, rather than embracing the phenomenological trend and making it his own, Foucault remains in a position of exteriority to it. His conclusions led him to a point of view that is methodologically consistent with what would be the archaeological approach (8). In other words, Basso claims that it is ‘possible to identify, through Binswanger, a certain Foucauldian reading of or approach to phenomenology’ (9). But Basso is also careful not to impose a rigid continuity between the phenomenological and the archaeological stage, something that Foucault would have disavowed (10).

Chapter One lays the foundations for Basso’s analysis, situating Foucault’s immersion into psychology and psychopathology in the context of the debates in Germany and France about the nature of mental illness. She sets the stage by focusing not only on the cultural history of psychiatry in the 1940s and 1950s but also on how Foucault situated himself with respect to this movement, as reflected in his reading notes and manuscripts.

Basso explains that Foucault was not an armchair philosopher of psychiatry. He had theoretical and practical knowledge of the field through internships. At some point, he even considered becoming a psychiatrist but was dissuaded by his former teacher Daniel Lagache. Lagache was one of the pioneers in introducing psychology into the university curriculum and the founder of the first

diploma in psychology at the Sorbonne in 1947. Psychology and psychopathology were at that time in France in a paradoxical situation, where medical, scientific, or even philosophical training was considered appropriate for the recruitment of researchers doing experimental psychology. Psychologists, in general, did not have a high status in the academic hierarchy. As an example of that, Basso quotes Merleau-Ponty's remarks in his *Human Sciences and Phenomenology* lectures, according to which psychology would ultimately converge with phenomenology. Foucault was aware of the situation and knew the work of Merleau-Ponty, whose classes he audited and to which, according to Basso, he dedicated a manuscript titled 'The psychological Themes in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology' (19). Indeed, Foucault's own early academic career can illustrate the inferior status of psychology in the academic field. Recruited after he passed the aggregation exam to teach psychology at the ENS and later at the University of Lille, he had the freedom to teach a variety of the classes, such as experimental psychology, the Rorschach test, and even psychoanalysis. But, according to the notes preserved (some of which have been in the meantime published), his interest seems to have been primarily philosophical. Basso rounds the point as follows: 'the archives from this period are extremely dense and show us a young Foucault active on many fronts' (22). Some of these fronts are strictly psychological (social psychology, animal psychology, cybernetics, reflexology), while others are more traditionally philosophical (reading notes of Scheler, Ricoeur, and Tran Duc Thao). Foucault also started reading in earnest Heidegger and Nietzsche in this period.

Quoting from a manuscript of the Lille period, Basso writes that Foucault criticizes the anthropological and phenomenological approach for its refusal to engage in a scientific and accurate analysis of human behavior, with the consequence of discovering an essence of man that uncovers itself only in a negative modality. Unfortunately, Basso does not describe what Foucault had in mind as an alternative to this reduction of concrete individuals to an essence. Was it psychoanalysis or an organically oriented diagnosis? As she shows elsewhere, Foucault was aware of the first experiments to treat some mental illnesses pharmacologically, but this awareness did not translate into his general outlook.

Basso describes the few publications of Foucault in this period: two papers on the history of psychology, the introduction to Binswanger's essay, and the book *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (MMP) to which we already referred. Louis Althusser was the intermediary for the publication of this book, and Basso expands on the political dimension of this work. Though Foucault was only for a brief period a member of the Communist party, which he had joined under the influence of Althusser, MMP sits well within the party line.

Ultimately, what Foucault preserved from his exploration of existential psychiatry was, according to Basso, a broader inspiration, which spills over to Foucault's mature work: 'According to Foucault, the historical *a priori* is not the *a priori* of history, but just a methodological tool whose historicity consists in its concurrence with the form of the phenomena that it aims at explaining, while simultaneously describing them' (158). Foucault's work is consistent with how phenomenology is adopted in France in the first half of the 20th century. Foucault leaves phenomenology, but the spirit of phenomenology does not leave him, writes Basso.

Basso's thesis is strong and goes well beyond the study of formative influences to be eventually

discarded or retained in a more refined way. From a methodological point of view, Foucault's archaeology would correspond to the concerns of phenomenological research. But, different from purely philosophical phenomenology, Foucault expands his concerns beyond the theory of knowledge (*connaissance*)—an approach working at the level of '*dire vrai*'—to study the historical emergence of knowledge as '*savoir*' (*être dans le vrai*). As Foucault explains in his *Birth of the Clinic*, archaeology presents itself as an epistemology that 'defines not the mode of knowledge, but the world of objects to be known' (175).

Basso has made a crucial contribution to our understanding of Foucault's oeuvre with this book. Her strong thesis, how she connects Binswanger's approach to mental illness with Foucault's 'historical a priori,' is the point in her argument which may be more open to polemics. It has the advantage of providing an immanent pathway for Foucault's thought. But in the archive, there are references to other lines of force, which may have also steered Foucault's interests and curiosity. The forthcoming publication of Foucault's thesis on Hegel, the re-issue of the lectures in the *Collège de France* with an updated critical apparatus, and additional materials awaiting their chance to meet the public light may or may not confirm what I called Basso's 'strong thesis'. In the meantime, this is a delightful book, rich in documentary evidence and well crafted. It will keep us company until the next episode of Foucault's adventures.

Michael Maidan, Independent Scholar