

From Infamous Men to Men of the Forest

What if, after his interest in “infamous men,” Foucault had turned his attention to the history of ecological marginalities, examining hermits, noble savages and other men of the forest? Philippe Artières writes a counter-factual fiction using real archives.

A review of: Philippe Artières, *Le dossier sauvage* (The Wild File), Paris, Gallimard, 2019, 159 pages, €16.50.

In the conclusion to *The Shock of the Anthropocene*,¹ Jean-Baptiste Fressoz and Christophe Bonneuil called for the writing of counter-stories and alternative histories of modernity, to show that environmental concerns were already present in the early days of industrial society, and that the past might offer critical approaches and possibilities for existence that could still inspire us today. Philippe Artières' latest book, *Le dossier sauvage* (The Wild File), is devoted to just such a counter-history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The author has two aims. The first is to reflect on the fictional dimension of history by giving prominence to the historian himself throughout the book. The second is to write the history of several forgotten individuals who found different ways of relating to the environment and managed to problematize the relationship with nature that underpins our societies. This book combines a methodological reflection on the place of fiction within history with an unearthing of a few marginal lives from the past.

¹ J.-B. Fressoz, C. Bonneuil, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, London & New York, Verso, 2016. Translated from J.-B. Fressoz, C. Bonneuil, *L'événement Anthropocène*, Paris, Seuil, 2013.

It seeks to connect Michel Foucault's interest in the lives of infamous men and in ethical practices with the contemporary issue of the environmental crisis.

The fiction within history

Philippe Artières himself classifies his project as "counter-factual history" (p. 155). However, his method is unusual, because he exhibits his own work as a historian, in an entirely unique approach. The book opens with an anecdote. It describes how, when Philippe Artières left for the French Academy in Rome (the Villa Medici, where he was a boarder in 2011 and 2012), Daniel Defert gave him an unpublished file supposedly compiled by Michel Foucault in the 1970s. This file, entitled *Lives in the Wild*, was evidently never used by Foucault, and Philippe Artières engages in a detailed exposure of the archival documents it contains, one by one. The texts concern the lives of a few "infamous men" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who lived as hermits or "noble savages", withdrawing from civilisation to take refuge in the woods, in isolated and remote places. However, at the end of the book, we learn that Foucault himself never compiled this file, and that Daniel Defert never gave it to Philippe Artières.

The author made this up, and the historical exploitation of the archives takes on a striking fictional character intended as a questioning of the historian's practice itself. Each document existed, each archive is real, but they were never gathered in a single file: their unity and the connections between the texts are products of Philippe Artières' own fictional mechanism. The meaning generated by assembling the materials, which arises out of the constellation created when the different sources interact, relies on the authority of Michel Foucault's work. However, this authority figure collapses in the final pages. Particularly worthy of appreciation here is the distancing of the tutelary figure that is Foucault, by a Foucauldian. By misleading his reader, Philippe Artières draws their attention to their automatic trust in the great philosopher and his historical studies. He forces them to confront their tendency to treat this great author as sacred, which sometimes prevents them applying his concepts and certainties in the light of new issues arising in the present, not explored by Foucault: in this case, the environmental crisis.

By using this literary and rhetorical process to trick his reader, the author breaks the pact of a scientific writing of history, mixing lies into a historical narrative

presented as true. Ingrained within the writing of history is an element of fiction, which is revealed here. It resides not in the invention of the sources (all of which are genuine), but in the selection, combined resonance, organisation and presentation of the documents. *Le dossier sauvage* thus arrives at the idea of maximum proximity between truth and fiction, with the truth coming from the authenticity of the materials, while the fiction is created by the way of giving them meaning in terms of the current context. We might speak of an “archival fiction” (p. 156), which, without denying the value of the historian’s discourse, reminds him of his role in the present and that he is inventing a discourse influenced by contemporary issues.

“Archives generate fictions of the present. Inheriting unavoidably means inventing” (p. 154). This reminder to the historian of the fictional and literary processes of his practice, used as an anchor to the problems of his time, echoes the work of Hayden White in *Tropics of Discourse*² and that of Jacques Rancière in *The Names of History*³. Both emphasise that history is a writing practice, and that its rhetoric prevents it adhering purely to the truth, like mathematics and the natural sciences. Michel Foucault himself asserted that he had written only fictions, reminding us that any historiographical text is constructed.⁴ Philippe Artières follows on from these reflections that problematize the link between historical discourse and the discourse of truth, but with a shift into the truly contemporary domain of political ecology.

A genealogy of ecological ethics

This work’s strength lies in bringing Foucault’s interest in the lives of infamous men and in technologies of the self into dialogue with the ecological question. Looking back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Philippe Artières exhumes “lives in the wild”: people in the past who abandoned urban existence to live on the fringes of society. Through these ecological marginalities, a new relationship with the self is invented, which is also a new relationship with the world and with nature, with others and with the environment. The author combines the search for forgotten past

² H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

³ J. Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994. Translated from J. Rancière, *Les noms de l’histoire. Essai de poétique du savoir*, Paris, Seuil, 1992.

⁴ M. Foucault, “Foucault étudie la raison d’État” (1980), in *Dits et écrits II*, Paris, Gallimard, “Quarto” coll., 2001, n° 280, p. 859.

existences with one of Foucault's favoured themes: care of the self and the aestheticization of existence. On an 1865 article concerning the "savage of Var," Artières writes:

Laurent had willingly gone to live in the Maures Forest. He chose to live in the wild, in a kind of voluntary asceticism. The two volumes of *The History of Sexuality* published in 1984 address this theme, but with a focus on the exercises of the self in antiquity. They therefore relate to the production of an aesthetics of existence. I was not aware of Foucault having such an interest in equivalent practices in the modern or contemporary period. (p. 36)

The current environmental issue therefore transposes Foucault's analyses, relating them to our "present political context" (p. 147). In particular, Philippe Artières refers to Zones to Defend (ZADs) and autonomous movements (p. 151-152), sketching a kind of genealogy of these. The aim is to apply Foucault's concepts and methods in an unexpected field (our relationship with nature), in order to propose a "resistance to the contemporary world" so that we are "not accomplices to the great collapse" (p. 147).

Writing the history of ecological marginalities and exploring past attempts to define an ethics that involves the relationship with the self, the relationship with others and the relationship with nature in an inseparable manner: for Philippe Artières, this is a form of activism in the present. Of course, he is not presenting these hermits unearthed from the past as models and ideal "noble savages." Instead, they are used to problematize our current situation, raising questions about our everyday habits and our entire social structure. It is the unprecedented possibility of inventing other modes of existence that is played out in this genealogy, rather than the desire to return to some state of nature rediscovered by a few forgotten individuals.

Philippe Artières' interest is not in holding up these lives in the wild as models, but in the power dynamics that surrounded them in their time. His Foucauldian exploration of the subject emphasizes the medicalization and psychiatrization of these ecological marginalities. The author traces "the pathologization of a way of life" (p. 89), going back to the nineteenth century, when doctors and psychiatrists took an interest in the pathological problems of these marginal men of the forest. In the twentieth century, these existences were not only pathologized, but also criminalized. This was associated with certain terrorist and violent trends in radical environmentalism, from which Philippe Artières distances himself. This intertwining of power relations and of the practices of freedom reminds us that today, the environmental question is also a question of resistance.

Le dossier sauvage offers a remarkable updating of Michel Foucault's most fundamental ideas. Its fragmented nature and the fictitious framing of its discourse, used to call the historian back to present-day issues, indicate that the author is presenting us with a task and a project to pursue: that of a genealogy of political ecology. In this thought-provoking book, marked by a sense of urgency, Philippe Artières invites us to continue with this project.

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