a developmental program oriented towards job creation may still be a potentially progressive policy. Indeed, it is not always easy to square Barchiesi’s views with the fact that a third of his respondents saw job creation as a political priority; other surveys of black workers found that 90 per cent prefer jobs to an expanded welfare state. It is unclear if the “radical community politics” pursued by the unwaged in South Africa’s new social movements (service delivery protests, anti-privatization mobilizations, rent strikes, and so on) can pose a viable alternative to traditional labour politics; many of the workers interviewed by Barchiesi remain indifferent or hostile to these movements in any case. How can one, in fact, “place the precariousness of employment, rather than its idealized celebration, at the core of a new grammar of politics?” Despite its provocative analysis, Barchiesi’s book does not really offer an answer to this conundrum.

Alex Lichtenstein
Indiana University

Paul Veyne, *Foucault: His Thought, His Character*, trans. Janet Lloyd
(Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 2010)

Reading Veyne, now age 82 and Honorary Professor at the Collège de France, is a bit like listening to an elder patriarch hold forth on his favourite subjects. It’s not without its charm and much can be learned, if one is prepared to put up with the other things that often accompany such a performance.

The digressions. In a book about Foucault, there is an entire chapter on “the beginnings of Christianity.” This is one of Veyne’s own areas of expertise, and one that certainly interested Foucault. While Veyne’s detour can be read as a demonstration of how the genealogical method effectively deflates the universalist pretensions of Christianity, Foucault’s name isn’t mentioned even once in the chapter. This is followed by a long aside on Heidegger. Again, connections could be made, but instead they remain implicit, forcing Veyne, as if suddenly remembering the actual subject of his book, to make the rather awkward transition, “So let us now return to Foucault, our hero.”

The dizzying degree of disparate detail. Veyne tells us Foucault was not a relativist, a structuralist, or a nihilist. But he was a nominalist, perhaps a positivist, and a one-time Communist. He was also, in Veyne’s estimation, a warrior and Samurai. But above all, Foucault was “a sceptic thinker.” (1) Here Veyne is at his best, although it is impossible not to read Veyne’s privileging of skepticism in Foucault’s thought against Foucault’s own arguably greater interest in elaborating a politically useful version of Cynicism in *The Courage of Truth*, his last lectures at the Collège de France. There is also a goldfish in a bowl, Veyne’s recurring metaphor for how we are all trapped within discourse (Foucault’s “ill-chosen word” [6]), and a cat that shows up at Foucault’s apartment and upon which Veyne bestows philosophical significance. Readers will likely identify with Veyne when he declares, “My head is spinning,” and this only halfway through the text. (66)

The distinct sense of having heard it all before. *Foucault* is an elaboration of an essay with a long history, one that goes oddly unacknowledged. It first appeared in 1986 in the French periodical *Critique*, although its conclusion – Veyne’s recreation of the conversation he had with Foucault about AIDS a few months before the philosopher’s death – was edited out. That intimate exchange later appeared with Veyne’s permission in Didier Eribon’s biography of Foucault, and in 1993 the complete *Critique* piece was
translated into English for the journal *Critical Inquiry*. Veyne cuts and pastes into *Foucault* the conversation with his dying friend, almost as if he’s telling it for the first time, which has the effect, at least for this reader, of draining it of the sincerity that made the original so moving.

It’s really only in the last chapter that Veyne takes “the risk of being too anecdotal” (140) to offer some of his more personal memories, which is another way of saying that anyone hoping to find a full memoir of Veyne’s friendship with Foucault will be disappointed. Veyne remains too committed to elucidating “his thought.” And this may not be such a bad thing. A number of Veyne’s reflections on Foucault’s “character,” particularly in relation to sex and gender, give one pause. For instance, Veyne recounts how at a meeting of their cell in the early 1950s Foucault made deliberate use of a feminine homosexual argot to shock Veyne and other comrades into their first awareness of homosexuality within the Parti communiste français (pcf). Veyne reports that 20 years later Foucault “no longer sneered or relayed tittle-tattle. There was nothing at all hysterical about him.” (141) What a relief. We can all rest easy now knowing that one of the 20th century’s greatest thinkers was no flamer. And what is really behind Veyne relating in some detail the story of having once discovered Foucault, “proud as a peacock,” in bed with “a beautiful young woman with an intelligent face”? (139) The ostensible purpose is to demonstrate Foucault’s “open-mindedness” and to draw a far-fetched parallel with Nietzsche, but Veyne’s own tittle-tattle, now preserved in print, seems rather churlish, especially when compared to Foucault’s gracious acknowledgement of Veyne in *The Use of Pleasure*.

Not all of the book’s idiosyncrasies can be pinned on Veyne. Some of them surely stem from the translation into English (the book first appeared in French in 2008). Janet Lloyd is a prominent translator of French work in ancient Greek cultural studies, including some of Veyne’s previous work in that field. But she may not have been the wisest choice for a book on Foucault, for she appears not to be overly familiar with the academic discourse on Foucault in the English-speaking world. And so we get clunkers such as “Foucauldistism,” (51) or more seriously, Foucault as a “specialized intellectual,” (76) which misses by a long shot Foucault’s notion of the “specific intellectual.” But most bizarre is Lloyd’s decision to render the notoriously difficult *dispositif* as “the ‘set-up’” and in the index as “set-ups,” as if such a generic use of the concept actually existed in Foucault’s work. (Foucault was always careful to specify *le dispositif de guerre*, *le dispositif disciplinaire*, *le dispositif de sexualité*, etc.) In her translator’s note, Lloyd opines that “dispositif is usually a hard word to translate, it can mean so many things, depending on the context.” (9) True in a general sense, but the context here is clearer than Lloyd realizes, and it includes the essays by Deleuze (1989) and Agamben (2006), both titled “What is an Apparatus?,” which, in addition to their interpretive contributions, signal the more accepted if still imperfect English translation of *dispositif*. Greater precision and understanding about this key concept are not likely to emerge from such off-the-wall renderings of *dispositif* as a “set-up.” Those interested would do better to consult the 1977 interview, “The Confession of the Flesh,” in which Foucault set out quite clearly what he intended by the term.

Two of Veyne’s many characterizations of Foucault are particularly pertinent to those with a historical-materialist bent. First, and unsurprising for the author of the much admired essay, “Foucault Revolutionizes History,” Veyne insists
Foucault was an “empiricist” who started with “the concrete practices of power” to “establish the material reality of what happened.” (17, 48) If reality could only be comprehended in and through discourse, that discourse remained part of what Veyne usefully designates as the “materiality of incorporeals” in Foucault’s work. (33) Second, in answer to the question about Foucault posed in the chapter title, “Was He the Despair of the Workers’ Movement?,” Veyne argues he was not, pointing to Foucault’s exemplary history as a political militant. At the same time, Veyne is unable to provide a satisfactory explanation for the basis of Foucault’s life-long radical political activity. Veyne’s efforts to fold Foucault into some form of liberalism, detectable in characterizations of Foucault as “this righter of wrongs, this reformer always on the attack, neither a Utopian nor a nihilist, neither a conservative nor a revolutionary,” are unconvincing. (143) Foucault quit the pcf in the mid-1950s, but remained within more of a left milieu than Veyne is willing to seriously consider.

There’s no doubt, this is a strange little book. Still, faced with a choice between Veyne’s eccentric perspectives, which sometimes also take the form of insights, and the many other solemn, all-too-straight introductory texts on Foucault, I recommend Veyne. After such a long and illustrious career, surely Veyne is entitled, following his favourite poet, René Char, to cultivate his “legitimate strangeness.”

Steven Maynard
Queen’s University