



The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979

Michel Foucault , Graham Burchell (Translator) , Arnold I. Davidson (Editor)

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Michel Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France in 1979, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, pursue and develop further the themes of his lectures from the previous year, *Security, Territory, Population*. Having shown how Eighteenth century political economy marks the birth of a new governmental rationality – seeking maximum effectiveness by governing less and in accordance with the naturalness of the phenomena to be governed – Michel Foucault undertakes the detailed analysis of this liberal governmentality. This involves describing the political rationality within which the specific problems of life and population were posed: "Studying liberalism as the general framework of biopolitics".

What are the specific features of the liberal art of government as they were outlined in the Eighteenth century? What crisis of governmentality characterises the present world and what revisions of liberal government has it given rise to? This is the diagnostic task addressed by Foucault's study of the two major twentieth century schools of neo-liberalism: German ordo-liberalism and the neo-liberalism of the Chicago School. In the years he taught at the Collège de France, this was Michel Foucault's sole foray into the field of contemporary history. This course thus raises questions of political philosophy and social policy that are at the heart of current debates about the role and status of neo-liberalism in twentieth century politics. A remarkable feature of these lectures is their discussion of contemporary economic theory and practice, culminating in an analysis of the model of *homo oeconomicus*.

Foucault's analysis also highlights the paradoxical role played by "society" in relation to government. "Society" is both that in the name of which government strives to limit itself, but it is also the target for permanent governmental intervention to produce, multiply, and guarantee the freedoms required by economic liberalism. Far from being opposed to the State, civil society is thus shown to be the correlate of a liberal technology of government.

The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979 Details

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From Reader Review *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* for online ebook

Hossein Rahmani says

[illegible]

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Biopolitics jäi kokonaan käsittelemättä, mutta ei haittaa.

Yongtaek says

Excellent analysis about the neo-liberal governmentality!

Above all decisive differentia between German neo-liberalism(ordoliberalism) and American neo-liberalism.

Röpke said:“Competition is a principle of order in the domain of the market economy, but it is not a principle on which it would be possible to erect the whole of society. Morally and sociologically, competition is a principle that dissolves more than it unifies.”So, while establishing a policy such that competition can function economically, it is necessary to organize “a political and moral framework,”(pp.242-3)

Therefore this political and moral framework required a state that can maintain itself above the different competing groups and enterprises. And this political and moral framework must ensure “a community which is not fragmented,” and guarantee cooperation between men who are “naturally rooted and socially integrated. (p.243)

In comparison with the ambiguity of German ordoliberalism, American neo-liberalism evidently appears much more radical or much more complete and exhaustive. American neo-liberalism still involves, in fact, the generalization of the economic form of the market. It involves generalizing it throughout the social body and including the whole of the social system not usually conducted through or sanctioned by monetary exchanges. This, as it were, absolute generalization, this unlimited generalization of the form of the market entails a number of consequences or includes a number of aspects.

First differentia: the generalization of the economic form of the market beyond monetary exchanges functions in American neo-liberalism as a principle of intelligibility and a principle of decipherment of social relationships and individual behavior. This means that analysis in terms of the market economy or, in other words, of supply and demand, can function as a schema which is applicable to non-economic domains. And, thanks to this analytical schema or grid of intelligibility, it will be possible to reveal in non-economic processes, relations, and behavior a number of intelligible relations which otherwise would not have appeared as such—a sort of economic analysis of the non-economic. The neo-liberals do this for a number of domains. (ex. human capital and human investment, mother-child relationship, and types of relations that previously fell more in the domains of demography, sociology, psychology, and social psychology, and the phenomena of marriage and what takes place within a household) (pp.243-5)

The second differentia is that the economic grid will or should make it possible to test governmental action, gauge its validity, and to object to activities of the public authorities on the grounds of their abuses, excesses, futility, and wasteful expenditure. In short, the economic grid is not applied in this case in order to understand social processes and make them intelligible; it involves anchoring and justifying a permanent political criticism of political and governmental action. It involves scrutinizing every action of the public authorities in terms of the game of supply and demand, in terms of efficiency with regard to the particular elements of this game, and in terms of the cost of intervention by the public authorities in the field of the market. In short, it involves criticism of the governmentality actually exercised which is not just a political or juridical criticism. (p.246)

Med says

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Brian says

Foucault's history of neoliberalism – which, as he eventually admits, this series of lectures putatively addressing biopolitics swiftly became – reveals the genesis of a mode of governmentality defined by its fundamental mistrust of the state as such. From 18th-century liberalism's conviction – hypostatized in Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' – that the mechanisms of the market economy are opaque to the sovereign's insight, an ideological thread of free-market determinism unwinds into the 20th century, culminating in the theories of Freiburg-school economists in the 1940s who emerged from the experience of the second World War having drawn the conclusion that state power and economic intervention are mutually inflationary, inevitably tending toward totalitarianism. As it happens, then, this is an excellent genealogical study of the logics motivating and structuring liberal thought (and thus the mode of government underpinning most modern Western states) – just don't come to it expecting the promised discussion of how these states comprising individual rational enterprises attempted to govern their statistical-aggregate populations!

Gerardo says

Il titolo è fuorviante: Foucault aveva intenzione di parlare della biopolitica, ma in realtà è riuscito solo a fare un corso introduttivo alla biopolitica. Il testo è una approfondita analisi del liberalismo.

Il liberalismo è un modo di concepire la governamentalità, cioè quelle tecnologie che permettono la gestione dello stato. Mentre nel passato si è ragionato su come gestire lo stato, il liberalismo ha pensato a come limitare l'azione del governo, confinandolo in questioni lontane dalla gestione economica.

Il liberalismo, in sostanza, crede nel fatto che il mercato non debba essere controllato e che debba essere "lasciato-fare", poiché controllato da una "mano invisibile" che regolerà le cose a favore di tutti, nonostante ogni attività economica nasca dall'interesse personale.

Il neo-liberalismo, invece, agisce altrimenti: per il neo-liberalismo bisogna impedire che i rapporti tra stati, le calamità o i semplici cambiamenti storici possano alterare i "giusti prezzi" del mercato. Ma non lo deve fare intervenendo sul mercato stesso, bensì su fattori limitrofi: popolazione, interventi strutturali, gestione delle città e dei trasporti, ecc. Il mercato non deve essere mai toccato, ciononostante il governo deve agire in maniera forte sul resto affinché il mercato possa continuare ad agire in tutta tranquillità. Per certi versi, questo è l'unico punto dove si presagisce un certo legame col ragionamento biopolitico.

Il pensiero liberale non contempla più l'individuo come unità di base, bensì l'impresa: l'individuo stesso diviene un'impresa, quindi il suo essere si basa sul rapporto investimento-rischio-profitto. In questa logica, lo stesso diritto viene alterato: colui che compie un crimine "rischia" la pena, facendo sì che le sue azioni entrino in un gioco di investimenti "pericolosi". Per tale motivo, in alcuni casi, il crimine non è stato

debellato proprio perché il rischio non ha limitato gli introiti, ma ha contribuito a innalzarli.

Inoltre, si attua una scissione tra l'homo oeconomicus e l'uomo juridicus: il secondo si rivolge al sovrano, al quale cede dei diritti, per avere in cambio protezione e una gestione efficace della cosa pubblica. Questo accade perché si crede che la gestione centralizzata possa portare al progresso. L'uomo economico, al contrario, non crede in ciò: nessuna azione dirigistica può controllare il mercato, quindi è meglio che la sovranità non si occupi di ciò e ne resti fuori. L'economia, aumentando il guadagno di uno stato, in realtà ne indebolisce propria la struttura stato e quella giuridica.

Un testo illuminante, nonostante bisogna superare la forma lezione: ci sono molte ripetizioni, parentesi, collegamenti non troppo chiari. Eppure, così, si vive la creazione di un pensiero in presa diretta, nella bellezza del suo meravigliare chi non aveva mai pensato quelle cose prima d'allora.

Kelly says

Docked one star because my 25th birthday will now forever be associated with neoliberalism and the logic of the market economy. Damn youuuu Foucauuuuult! *shakes fist*

Kyriakos Michail says

A bit hard to read and sadly Foucault didn't describe that much in depth biopolitics here but rather economy and liberalism. Good book to read for anyone interested in these three topics

Rui Coelho says

An history of liberalism. Foucault meant to speak about biopolitics but got lost in the introduction and now his fail is published for everyone to see.

David McGrogan says

These lectures represent one of the most interesting intellectual failures in the last 100 or so years: Foucault's attempt to describe what he meant by "biopolitics" (a topic he originally raised a few years earlier in the series of lectures collected in *Society Must Be Defended*). Ultimately, reading this book, one has to come to the conclusion that he simply could never quite put his finger on it - he got lost right from the beginning and ended up giving a kind of history of liberalism, which was supposed to be the introduction but ended up being the entire project. Yet his account of liberalism is incredibly rich nonetheless, and throws up a vast number of interesting ideas: one has an image of Foucault taking out his spade and shoveling downwards into the earth, throwing sods of soil haphazardly over his shoulder. At the end one is left with only a mound of dirt haphazardly arranged, but there are plenty of diamonds if you're prepared to sift through it.

It's perhaps worth saying that ultimately one gets the impression that Foucault ended up being more convinced by the work of Smith, Ricardo, Ferguson, Hayek, Roepke, etc. than he was by his own leftist

critique of them, but couldn't quite bring himself to admit it in so many words.

Jacob says

In this text Foucault goes at length into the birth of neoliberalism in German, France and the United States. He develops an analysis for showing the development from the disciplinary societies of the 18th/19th century into what Deleuze will call a society of control in the 20th century through the birth of neoliberalism. This is no longer a system of power interested in individuals, and impacting their lives explicitly. Instead, neoliberalism is content to shape the rules of the game and allow people to play a game within that framework. In this work Foucault shows the ways that those rules are developed throughout the early part of the 20th century, and how they are implemented starting in Germany after WWII.

This text has been used to suggest that Foucault is sympathetic to neoliberalism, but I would suggest otherwise. The method of analysis used by Foucault to show the transition from New-Deal Era Keynesian economics to the neoliberal economics of the late 20th century is not so different from the method he uses in earlier texts such as *Discipline and Punish* which did not provide a normative, but rather an empirical account of the difference between spectacle and disciplinary societies. In the former book, Foucault does not give an explicit preference to either penal system. Instead, he works to show the difference in the mechanisms of power in order to display that the relation of power does not disappear in the new society, but it simply changes into a different type of power relationship. In other words, discipline is not discussed as better or worse, but simply as different from spectacular power.

It seems that a similar account is taking place in this series of lectures. Foucault is exploring not whether neoliberalism exerts a better form of power relation than the disciplinary society, but instead how power dynamics function differently between these two societies. To cite Deleuze speaking on the different between “control” societies (neoliberal societies) and disciplinary societies, “There is no need to ask which is the toughest regime, for it’s within each of them that liberating and enslaving forces confront one another” (*Postscript on the Societies of Control*). Foucault’s account does not ask which society is superior, he only examines the ways that power flows through each of them in order to show that relations of power are inherent to both systems. Neoliberalism works to enable the freedom of individuals within a system, or game. Instead of intervening in that game, neoliberalism simply creates the board on which the game is played—it is the creator of rules, if you will. Thus, even though neoliberalism purports to extend economic freedom to each individual in society, Foucault’s analysis shows that one is free insofar as one plays within the rules of the system. Escaping the game is an impossibility. In this way, Neoliberalism does not work to discipline and produce individuals, but instead, works to control the flows of desire by presenting the only acceptable milieu. Not trapped within a system of discipline, but trapped within the milieu.

Katarina says

Since biopolitics comes out of the liberal need for limitation of government, the plan was to discuss liberalism in its classical and contemporary forms and then come to the discussion of politics of life. But Foucault never comes to the second part so this book is actually the comprehensive guide to the development of liberalism and neo-liberalism.

It starts with the Freiburg School which dealt with the same Weberian "irrational rationality" of capitalism as

the Frankfurt School, but takes a completely different direction in the Ordoliberal thought. Ordoliberals believed in the free market, but also in the responsibility of the government to ensure that the fragile price adjusting mechanisms of the market function properly and actually bring the best possible results of competition. They defined themselves against National Socialism, Soviet Socialism, and Keynesian interventionism.

The next development in the liberal thought is American neo-liberalism of the Chicago school and "anarcho-capitalism" which applies the market rationality to new spheres such as the family, birth rates, delinquency, etc. Instead of being a political or economic theory, liberalism in the US is "a way of being and thinking" and thus supported from both the left and the right.

It would be interesting to hear Foucault's thoughts on the development of neo-liberalism and possible emergence of post neo-liberal societies in the past few decades. This work is essential for any attempt at a discussion of liberal governmental rationalities, past or contemporary.

Gregory Sotir says

Foucault is Foucault, what can you say. Difficult and fascinating, able to comprehensively join together the currents and threads of our culture in an intellectually rigorous and stimulating way. These lectures gave me a far greater understanding of liberalism and neoliberalism than I believe I could have gained anywhere else. Listening to pundits and American politicians speak of these trends of capitalism after reading this just shows how unlearned most Americans are of things they should know about but just use as propaganda tools to fool the masses.

The *raison d'Etat* of our modern culture rests on the obvious sense for freedom, and even if it is corrupt at heart, and possibly malignant, it is a world that we maintain by our own sense of freedom.

Neoliberalism started out well enough on these foundations but it was transformed via globalization (Reagan, the Japanese model, Clinton.) Foucault's lectures do not go into this most recent mutation however.
