Review

Foucault and neo-liberalism

Michael C. Behrent and Daniel Zamora (eds.)

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Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent's edited volume *Foucault and Neoliberalism* is concerned with the intellectual ambiguity of the later Foucault in relation to what was then nascent neo-liberalism. At its core is the uneasiness that a critic of neo-liberalism should feel when encountering Foucault's presentation of neo-liberalism. The primary focus is therefore the intellectual backdrop of the Collège de France lectures, published in English as *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, as well as various other interjections of this period and the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. The question is an important one because it tackles head-on Foucault's presentation of neo-liberalism, of which he is ambivalent at best.

The essays in this collection are particularly pertinent for academic circles in which, as Zamora notes in his introduction, '[Foucault] has acquired almost saint-like status' that is also part of the 'critical Left' (p. 2). This is not simply an attempt to paint Foucault as a neo-liberal or to postulate the question of whether he was for or against neo-liberalism, but rather to understand the intellectual context of Foucault's commentary on neo-liberalism. This is something that the editors contend is often lacking, particularly in American scholarship (p. 26). In this sense, the essays in this volume constitute a rich contribution to recent intellectual history and political theory that will be an important reference for both Foucault scholars and those interested in the historical development of neo-liberal thought.

The volume is book-ended with an introduction and conclusion, written by the editors, that frame the essays within. This gives the volume a narrative that so many edited volumes lack. Also included is a short essay by Foucault that originally appeared in *Le Nouvelle Observateur* in 1977, in which he glowingly reviews Glucksmann's (1980) *The Master Thinkers*. His endorsement of Glucksmann's attack on the politics of the Left, as a system of domination, in turn seems to open Foucault up to thinking about contemporary politics in a different way. This is the lens through which we are asked to view Foucault's engagement with neo-liberalism. This is an important point because it puts Foucault's ambivalence towards neo-liberalism into a context in which it is a proxy for a critique of Leftist politics. It was therefore a strategic intervention into the politics of the late 1970s through which

Foucault is shown participating in the debate that surrounded the rise of the neo-liberal paradigm.

Michael Scott Christofferson's essay seeks to understand why Foucault endorsed Glucksmann's *The Master Thinkers* and the 'new philosophy' of the late 1970s. Christofferson presents two key arguments. The first 'lies in Foucault's use of the mass media in his strategy of intellectual consecration ... he was a useful ally in Foucault's bid for recognition' (pp. 11–12). This leads to the second argument, that 'Foucault's support of Glucksmann was political and must be understood in relationship to his anti-statist attachment to direct democracy, his vehement anti-communism, and his criticism of the union of the Left' (p. 13). Foucault's engagement is here understood as part of his rejection of the Left and of revolutionary politics. The new philosophy was here a useful ally.

Michael C. Behrent's essay begins with the premise that 'Foucault's attraction to neo-liberalism was real' but that this must be understood within the political and economic context of France in the 1970s. This context was one of economic crisis and the collapse of the statist assumptions that had underpinned post-war growth through which 'Foucault recognised the affinity between his theoretical objection to state-based conceptions of power and the economic liberalism that was the subject of contemporary debates' (p. 30). Crucially Behrent argues that Foucault and the neo-liberals shared an insight into a form of liberalism absent of humanism. However, this interest in neo-liberalism is understood within Foucault's search for alternatives to statist Leftism through the 'second Left'. Foucault wasn't overtly attracted to the creed of Thatcher and Reagan but was instead searching for an alternative to state forms of power that were less disciplinary. In this sense he was responding to the same political and economic situation as the neo-liberals and shared some of their responses.

Daniel Zamora continues this theme and notes the similarity between Foucault's interest in neo-liberalism and what would later be called 'the third way'. Zamora argues that, 'At the dawn of the 1980s, it seemed clear to Foucault that the redistribution of wealth had ceased to be a concern' (p. 70). We must remember that at the time this was the case because the high marginal tax rates of the post-war years had dramatically reduced wealth inequality. This allowed Foucault to be more concerned with exclusion from the political process. For Foucault, part of this exclusion was constructed through the welfare state. Zamora presents Foucault as a critic of the welfare state and public health-care systems from the point of view of bureaucracy and state domination of self; this puts him on the exact territory of neo-liberals such as Hayek and Friedman. It also puts Foucault, perhaps uncomfortably for some, into position as a precursor to the third-way politics that dominated the left in the 1990s.

Mitchell Dean's chapter, which begins with a reading of the fascinating encounter at the University of Chicago between François Ewald (Foucault's assistant and the general editor of the Collège de France lectures) and Gary Becker

(the Chicago School economist and subject of Foucault's lectures in *The Birth of Biopolitics*) (Becker *et al.*, 2012). What is fascinating about this dialogue, in which Becker was invited to read and comment upon Foucault's lectures, and rightly drawn out by Dean, is Becker's inability to find a critique of own his work in Foucault's presentation. Dean then builds on the arguments of the previous chapters that paint Foucault as a precursor to the 'third-way' politics of Blairism.

Loïc Wacquant's chapter diverges more sharply from Foucault in his consideration of the carceral, stating that 'Foucault erred in spotting the retreat of penitentiary' (p. 121). Wacquant notes that rather than the demise of the prison that Foucault predicted, the neo-liberal era has seen 'a stunning comeback ... the contemporary prison is geared towards brute neutralisation, rote retribution, and simple warehousing' (p. 122). Thinking specifically of the American case, the twenty-first century constitutes a punitive society for an 'urban subproletariat' (p. 123) but not the middle and upper classes. In this sense, Foucault 'misread the trend of modern Western penalty' (p. 124) that has come with the advent of neo-liberalism. In this sense also, by inference, Foucault misunderstood the nature of neo-liberalism.

Jan Rehmann criticises Foucault, and more generally derivative governmentality studies, for making a methodological mistake that elevates 'neoliberal self-description', through the analysis of management literature, to 'an overall "theory"' (p. 151) that rejects the study of ideology. It thus fails to 'grasp the contradictions between neo-liberal discourses of self-activation and the submission to alienated relations of domination' (p. 153), which a 'critical ideology theory' could do. Governmentality studies is thus understood as failing to break the appeal of neo-liberal ideologies and to build a counter-hegemonic alternative, because it fails to acknowledge the importance of such categories.

The final chapter, written by Jean-Loup Amselle, is concerned with the later Foucault's 'spiritualisation of philosophy', which he developed through his engagement with the classicist Pierre Hadot. Hadot was particularly interested in the spiritual exercises of late antiquity, particularly Stoicism. Foucault drew upon Hadot in the later volumes of *The History of Sexuality* in his turn towards the care of self. With this move, Amselle notes, 'Foucault foreshadowed the rise of vertical revolutions driven by identity, which have replaced class struggle' (p. 166). In this sense, contemporary political activism 'harmonises perfectly with neo-liberalism' (p. 167) with its emphasis on the niche rather than on the conquest of political power.

This final chapter thus returns to the overriding argument of this excellent collection: that Foucault, to his detriment, forgot class struggle and economic inequality in his rejection of the Left in the mid-1970s. The move towards identity politics, which appeared appropriate at the time, neglected class struggle. However, given the decrease in economic inequality that occurred in the post-war period, class struggle was perhaps less of an issue, while the Left had materialised into bureaucratised systems of power. In this situation, Foucault shared some of the concerns of the neo-liberals: he was interested in what they had to say but was certainly not a

fully paid-up member. This collection gives us a better appreciation of Foucault's intellectual development towards the end of his life as well as the early intellectual context of neo-liberalism and what became known as the 'third way'. It is therefore a valuable contribution to contemporary debate.

References

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David Hancock
High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire HP11 2JZ, UK