Review

The government of desire: A genealogy of the liberal subject

Miguel de Beistegui,
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In a time where our desire is solicited and titillated in all areas of life, ranging from food, pornography, data-mining companies, and self-help books, Miguel de Beistegui's analysis of how desire has been constitutive of the modern liberal subject seems more imperative and prescient than ever. As desire and its never-ending quest for fulfillment is identified as characteristic of our contemporary condition, the author questions how its omnipresence in our everyday life came to be. The book thus echoes trends in sociology, political science, and anthropology, questioning the naturalness of emotions, their historical developments, and their political relevance in relation to (neo)liberalism.

Taking up Michel Foucault's own underdeveloped claim that 'Western civilization is *the* civilization of desire' (Foucault, quoted on p. 3, emphasis in original), de Beistegui enjoins us to consider that far from being natural, desire might 'have emerged at a particular time and under specific historical circumstances' (p. 3). Desire, he insists, 'defines who we are today in ways that we are not always aware of' (p. 3). Therefore, the author claims, its emergence and evolution should be carefully examined to grasp how it permeates our lives. The contemporary human, de Beistegui posits, is essentially 'a man [*sic*] of desire' (pp. 12–20). Through a genealogical inquiry, the author argues that the contemporary 'man of desire' governs himself through three main normative regimes: sexuality, political economy, and recognition/self-love (pp. 21–24). The book's three sections – *homo oeconomicus*, *homo sexualis*, and *homo symbolicus* – follow the distinction between these regimes. Each section documents the emergence and shifting dominant meanings of desire inside a specific regime, and how they render specific modes of (self) governance possible. This presentation not only helps the reader understand how desire plays out in different domains, but it also greatly nuances the genealogical account of desire in each of these spheres.

The book should be praised for presenting Foucault's thoughts on governmentality, liberalism, sexuality, and biopower in a clear and accessible way. Chapters on

homo oeconomicus are especially compelling at presenting how desire came to enter the field of economic governmentality and to be identified with the norms of interest and utility (p. 34). These chapters convincingly argue there is nothing natural about ‘self-interest’ and the ‘truth of the market’: de Beistegui introduces us to other ways of considering desire, moving from Aristotle and the Greeks to Machiavelli and Botero, and from Locke to Bentham and Polanyi. These conceptual changes in key canonical texts illustrate a crucial shift: ‘Specifically the kind of desire that Aristotle designates as intrinsically negative, for being insatiable, is precisely the desire that was eventually rehabilitated... [and] presented as an irreducible and necessary condition of general prosperity’ (p. 37). De Beistegui convincingly shows us how ‘[f]rom from a place of sovereign power, it [the market] became a place of truth, and from an object of jurisdiction, it became one of “veridiction”’ (p. 40). This section constitutes an effective take down of any preconceived idea about the naturalness of ‘the market’ and the role desire plays in it.

Yet to the extent that de Beistegui claims that ‘it is not so much a book *on* Foucault as one that is written *with* him’ (p. 4, emphasis in original), it is worth noting that *The Government of Desire* remains within the bounds of political theory, the targeted audience for the book. While his is not a traditional work of exegesis, per the author’s own admission, his argument always finds echo in the texts. This makes the claim about the undertheorized importance of desire in Foucault’s work even more compelling. De Beistegui’s erudition on key canonical texts spanning several centuries is palpable: going from the Greeks to St Augustine, while also covering Hayek, Freud, and Butler, to name but a few, the various chapters tackle how each author has mobilized desire to justify ways of acting and of being. This offers the advantage of textual analyses in key theoretical figures that theorists will undoubtedly appreciate.

Yet this methodological decision is not without serious analytical consequences that cannot be eschewed, the first one being an odd absence of embodiment and corporeality throughout. Desire need not be limited to a sexual understanding for corporeality and embodiment to stand out as key to a genealogy of desire: be it a pulsion, a force, a sin or a drive, desire engages the body. De Beistegui’s genealogical account recasts desire as it has been theoretically intellectualized. This has clear merits, but by not taking race, gender, and colonialism seriously, the account is silent on how grappling with desire has been central to the formation of the modern (neo)liberal subject. Brown and black men and women, for instance, have historically been construed as subjects of desire, as opposed to subjects of love—or subjects at all. They have notably been defined by their sexual appetite or their inability to manage money responsibly, especially in opposition to white people: they have been depicted as *overdetermined* by desire. De Beistegui’s ‘man of desire’ is thus not anybody: it is an implicitly white (heterosexual) male body apprehended in relation to (neo)liberalism. Analytically this leaves unchallenged

Foucault's own 'reliance on an unspecified "human" as the object of biopolitics', and it fails to examine how the sociopolitical and economic relations between Europe and the colonies have been central in shaping the modern subject of desire (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2019, p. 5).

Acknowledging how desire relates to corporeality and embodiment appears even more crucial given de Beistegui's own insistence that 'our culture of desire may have an origin and a history, and *a very Western history* at that' (p. 3; my emphasis). Given his recognition that positionality matters in a genealogy of desire, his account's foregoing an engagement with colonialism as a system constitutive of 'the Western civilization' remains unfortunate. Because de Beistegui rightly points out that genealogy is not merely a method, but also 'a politics', the aim of which is to 'set free' or 'desubjugate' (p. 8), the absence of race cannot be easily brushed off. Race, gender, and colonialism, for instance, can certainly help us make sense of Locke's take on rational and irrational desires. Therefore, while de Beistegui's survey is impressive, other genealogical accounts appear needed to supplement his analysis as to how desire came to define 'us'. Desire, I would contend, cannot do away with a specific notion of who is human, and whom 'Western civilization' encompasses.

This absence seems to be the result of methodological choices regarding the selection of authors covered. Povinelli (2006) and Stoler (1995), among others, have built on Foucault's work, and have documented how the education of desire has been inextricably bound with racial and political projects of constructing 'the modern subject' and 'Western civilization'. There are always more books to read, and one cannot cover all the literature there is. But without a sustained engagement with the issue of gender, race, and colonialism in relation to desire and the making of the liberal subject, readers get little sense of the messiness and ruptures that characterize the genealogical exercise.

Bodies do emerge in the analysis though, but in the guise of 'identity' in the section devoted on *homo symbolicus*. Here de Beistegui examines how self-love remains a 'key mechanism of government, which exceeds the purely economic regime of desire' (p. 144). The author mobilizes scholars such as Kwame Anthony Appiah and Taiaiake Alfred to confront the revolutionary, emancipatory, or constraining potential of identity for marginalized subjects. Following Butler, de Beistegui makes a good case as to the limits of identity politics understood in terms of claims for recognition (p. 189). He concludes that the desire for symbolic recognition fundamentally leaves unchallenged the neoliberal system that disciplines, and tames our desires: 'For so long as homosexuals – and, I would claim, gender or racial minorities – see the central problem of their ... existence as a woman or a person of color, as the problem of their own identity ... they will perpetuate the traditional heterosexual (or male, or white) norm ... The struggle...is not for the recognition of what one is, but for the creation of what one can be' (pp. 194–195). Given this conclusion, it would have been interesting to

see the author engage with queer theory's take on desire, emotions, and identity politics under neoliberalism [e.g. Ahmed (2004)].

After detailing the three different regimes of desire, de Beistegui refuses to see them as all-encompassing. What is one to do to escape their constraining grip? De Beistegui favors individualistic solutions, different from the individualism of liberalism, as he rightly explains (p. 217). Going back to Deleuze and Guattari's work on affect and desire, he suggests that the solution lies with individual counter-conducts and tactics, i.e., go back to states of 'untamable intensities' and 'invent breaks that produce new flows of desire' (pp. 226–227). This concluding turn to Deleuze and Guattari brings a fresh insight. Embodiment and corporeality suddenly get introduced in the analysis as front and center to desire, as even the author's tone changes to reflect the very drive and messiness desire is purported to carry: 'Become in order not to recognize (even yourself)! Lose yourself, undo yourself! For only then ...can desire reveal its immanent voluptuousness' (p. 227).

This move might be a bit confusing to readers unused to these authors' peculiar vocabulary, but those who are will appreciate how mobilizing them expands desire beyond identity politics. Still, after de Beistegui's genealogy of the shifting definitions and roles of desire, this turn to Deleuze and Guattari remains surprising. For them, desire is a life force, something affirming that has an ontological status. This status sits uncomfortably with the book's argument about the construction of desire itself. Why de Beistegui feels the need to move away from Foucault, and somehow 'save' desire is unclear, as the process of becoming that the author enjoins us to do is not necessarily antithetical to Foucault's project. In any case, we cannot help but embrace the author's hopeful tone, as he lays out how desire can be a constructive force not necessarily aligned with the dominant regimes he carefully documents. It certainly convinces us that desire's political role and potential remain greater than we might think.

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