

Neoliberal Governmentality: Foucault on the Birth of Biopolitics

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„The political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to liberate the individual from the State and its institutions, but to liberate ourselves from the State and the type of individualisation linked to it” (Foucault 1982: 216).

„Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free.”

Introduction

Foucault’s overriding interest was not in ‘knowledge as ideology’, as Marxists would have it, where bourgeois knowledge, say, modern liberal economics was seen as false knowledge or bad science. Nor was he interested in ‘knowledge as theory’ as classical liberalism has constructed disinterested knowledge, based on inherited distinctions from the Greeks, including Platonic epistemology, and endorsed by the Kantian separation of schema/content that distinguishes the analytic enterprise. Rather Foucault examined *practices* of knowledge produced through the relations of power.¹ He examined how these practices, then, were

1 In his *Résumé du cours* for 1979 (Foucault 2004b: 323) Foucault indicates that the method he will adopt is based on Paul Veyne’s nominalist history and in this respect he writes: “Et reprenant un certain nombre de choix de méthode déjà faits, j’ai essayé d’analyser le »libéralisme«, non pas une théorie ni comme une idéologie, encore moins, bien entendu, comme une manière pour la »société« de »se représenter«; mais comme une pratique, c’est-à-dire comme une »manière de faire« orientée vers objectifs et se régulant par une réflexion continue. Le libéralisme est à analyser alors comme principe et méthode de rationalisation de l’exercice de gouvernement – rationalisation qui obéit, et c’est là sa spécificité, à la règle interne de l’économie maximale.”

Foucault (in 2001) explains in “Questions of method” his emphasis on practice with an accent on “eventalization” and “the problem of rationalities”. He talks about “eventalizing singular ensembles of practices, so as to make them graspable as different regimes of ‘jurisdiction’ and ‘verification’” (p. 230) and he ascribes the method to Veyne with the following remark: “It’s a matter of the effect on historical knowledge of a nominalist critique itself arrived at by way of historical analysis” (p. 238). The concept of practice here is crucial to understanding Foucault. Stern (2000: fn 33, p. 358) indicates in a footnote a reference to Dreyfus’ course at the NEH Summer Institute on Practices on July 24, 1997, under the title “Conclusion: How background practices and skills work to ground norms and intelligibility: the ethico-political implications” and summarises Dreyfus’ account of five ‘theories’ (Wittgenstein and Bourdieu; Hegel and Merleau-Ponty; Heidegger; Derrida; and Foucault). He summarises Foucault’s notion as fol-

used to augment and refine the efficacy and instrumentality of power in its exercise over both individuals and populations, and also in large measure helped to shape the constitution of subjectivity. Fundamental to his governmentality studies was the understanding that Western society professed to be based on principles of liberty and the Rule of Law and said to derive the legitimation of the State from political philosophies that elucidated these very principles. Yet as a matter of historical fact, Western society employed technologies of power that operated on forms of disciplinary order or were based on biopolitical techniques that bypassed the law and its freedoms altogether. As Colin Gordon (2001: xxvi) puts it so starkly: Foucault embraced Nietzsche as the thinker „who transforms Western philosophy by rejecting its founding disjunction of power and knowledge as myth”. By this he means that the rationalities of Western politics, from the time of the Greeks, had incorporated techniques of power specific to Western practices of government, first, in the expert knowledges of the Greek tyrant and, second, in the concept of pastoral power that characterized ecclesiastical government.

It is in this vein that Foucault examines government as a practice and problematic that first emerges in the sixteenth century and is characterized by the insertion of economy into political practice. Foucault (2001: 201) explores the problem of government as it „explodes in the sixteenth century” after the collapse of feudalism and the establishment of new territorial States. Government emerges at this time as a general problem dispersed across quite different questions: Foucault mentions specifically the Stoic revival that focussed on the government of oneself; the government of souls elaborated in Catholic and Protestant pastoral doctrine; the government of children and the problematic of pedagogy; and, last but not least, the government of the State by the prince. Through the reception of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* in the sixteenth century and its rediscovery in the nineteenth century, there emerges a literature that sought to replace the power of the prince with the art of government understood in terms of the government of the family, based on the central concept of ‘economy’. The introduction of economy into political practice is for Foucault the essential issue in the establishment of the art of government. As he points out, the problem is still posed for Rousseau, in the mid-18th century, in the same terms – the government

lows: “Problematicization. (Foucault) Practices develop in such a way that contradictory actions are felt to be appropriate. Attempts to fix these problems lead to further resistance. This leads to a hyperactive pessimism: showing the contingency of what appears to be necessary and engaging in resistance to established order.” See also Schatzki et al (2001).