A self-reflexive genealogy

Foucault’s 1976 lectures at the Collège de France can be read, in isolation, as an exploration of one of the key themes of his work; namely, the way in which – neatly reversing Clausewitz’s formula – politics is a continuation of war by other means.¹ In this sense, the lectures are an expression of Foucault’s attempt to analyse power in terms of its operation, functions and effects, rather than in terms of sovereignty and juridical models. They are a continuation of his project to look at power from the perspective of its functions and strategies, as it operates ‘under the radar’, as it were, of the juridical system of sovereignty (SMBD, 39). However, as far as the wider context of his work is concerned, the lectures also mark the point at which Foucault begins to shift his focus from a genealogy of power-knowledge. As Alessandro Fontana and Mauro Bertani note in their essay contextualising Society Must Be Defended, the lectures were delivered at a point when Foucault was beginning to think of power in new ways.² In this sense, they are an exercise in self-reflexive critique. In the course of analysing the history of discourses that draw on this model of war, Foucault undertakes the genealogy of an important component of his own method. He feels that his work up to this point has been couched in the ‘struggle-repression schema’, and he now wants to scrutinise the assumption that power mechanisms are essentially repressive. Also, he wants to interrogate the notion that the social field is characterised by a permanent war that is ‘rumbling away’ beneath the official structures of political power. Consequently, like so much of his work, this lecture series is a summation, a leave-taking, an attempt to gather what has been useful from a period of research, and to move on to new, more fruitful areas. In the final lecture of the series we encounter, for example,
one of Foucault’s first allusions to biopower, and in a subsequent lecture series Foucault focused more and more on the analysis of what he called governmentality.

As for the immediate socio-political context within which Foucault delivered these lectures, it has been claimed that they express, in coded and indirect ways, an ambivalent relation with the French Left at that point in the mid-1970s. Colin Gordon, for example, makes the claim that 1976 is the pivotal year when Foucault begins to distance himself from the ‘militant ideal’. In this chapter, after some preliminary analysis of the reassessment of the model of war that Foucault is undertaking in the lectures, I want to concentrate in particular on the significance of the themes of biology and population. In modifying the struggle-repression schema Foucault does not entirely abandon the model of war; rather, he gives it an important biological inflection. It will be argued that the emergence of the concept of population enables Foucault both to move on in his work and also to reconnect with, and make sense of, earlier biological themes. In conclusion, I will consider the utility of Foucault’s work on discipline and governmentality in the light of the ongoing genetic revolution.

The lectures

As indicated above, the Society Must Be Defended lectures trace the genealogy of the historical and sociological method of which Foucault himself is an inheritor; that is to say, the mode of analysis that draws out the material reality of the permanent war which underpins the frequently complacent and self-satisfied accounts with which the state provides itself. In the compelling narrative arc that Foucault sets out, this is initially a ‘counter-history’, a challenge to the official histories that celebrate and legitimise the ‘lustre’ of power. However, always attentive to the strategic reversibility of discourses, Foucault reveals, in a narrative twist at the end of the lecture series, that the dissident discourse of permanent social war has itself become an ‘official’ state discourse. In short, the discourse of war ultimately finds expression as a discourse of state racism in the twentieth century. In the course of the lectures, we are taken through a series of discursive reversals and ‘filterings’ of this polyvalent discursive tendency: the counter-historical claims of the Diggers and the Levellers in England; the discourse of ‘aristocratic bitterness’ directed against Louis XIV in the late seventeenth century; the bourgeois discourse of ‘national universality’ that develops out of the period of the French Revolution; and finally the genocidal state racism of National