

# Foucault Studies

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## REVIEW

***Lessico Di Biopolitica*, introduzione di Ottavio Marzocca (manifestolibri, la nuova talpa, 2006), ISBN88-7285-431-8,**

**Ottavio Marzocca, *Perché Il Governo: Il Laboratorio Etico-Politico Di Foucault* (manifestolibri, la nuova talpa, 2007), ISBN978-88-7285-466-2.**

One of the outcomes of the intersecting processes of modernity and globalization, whose genealogies, grids of power, and modes of subjectivity Michel Foucault described, is the omnipresence of English as a veritable universal language in the scientific and academic domains. As a result, more people will read Foucault in English translation than in the original French, with the result that the very interesting and significant work on Foucault being done by Italian thinkers and scholars may be overlooked. Some, at least, of the most important work on Foucault in French or German will be translated into English, but unfortunately few of the Foucault studies written in Italian have or will likely appear in English translation. As these two volumes show, that will be a loss for those of us concerned with the task of grappling with Foucault's thinking.

The lexicon has its point of departure in Foucault's focus on the significance of biopolitics in contemporary life, and the importance of tracing its genealogy in the modern world. Much of the vocabulary of biopolitics is a modern phenomenon, e.g., biodiversity, sociobiology, genetically modified organisms, and even terms with a more ancient provenance, e.g., police, pastoral power, government, subjectification [*assoggettamento*], have been redefined as the very grids of power in the modern world have been transformed. The lexicon, with entries by more than thirty scholars, whose work includes important studies of Foucault, and the several dimensions of modern political power, is animated by Foucault's own commitment to *genealogy* and to *nominalism*. For these thinkers, there are no fixed and ahistorical meanings to the terms through which we seek to comprehend the modes of political power that shape our world. The objective of the lexicon is to explicate both the contemporary modes of political power and their *historicity*. In this respect, it bears comparison with the

*Begriffsgeschichte* championed by Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, who in the massive *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* brought together numerous scholars who sought to demonstrate both the historically shifting usage and meaning of key terms and concepts, as well as the emergence of completely new ones, and thereby to reveal the ever-changing nature of our socio-political experience.

Certain of the entries in the *Lessico*, which are typically five to eight pages in length, focus on the development of a concept in Foucault's own work, as is the case with Alessandro De Giorgi's entry on "discipline," while others, like Renata Brandimarte's entry on "biotechnology," trace the emergence and usage of a concept in the political and scientific realms over the past few decades, while still others, such as Roberto Ciccarelli's entry on "citizenship," trace the upheaval wrought by the re-appearance of this concept in the emerging world of modernity, and its successive transformations over the course of the past several centuries. In his excellent introduction, Ottavio Marzocca shows how the "specific emergence of BIOPOLITICS as a form of government" has given rise to the several dimensions of what Foucault designated as "modern GOVERNMENTALITY" (p. 14). What the lexicon permits us to do is to better link together the diverse manifestations of governmentality that have reshaped the very landscape of our political, social, and psychic lives, from our experience of our own bodies, to the ambient ecological transformations, and the omnipresence of genocide in our modern world.

Marzocca's own volume, *Perché Il Governo*, is an important contribution to the growing number of studies that explore the various dimensions of Foucault's understanding of "governmentality," and the genealogy of the forms of government of human beings. Marzocca's analysis of the new technologies of power that emerged in the form of the state's power over life focuses on the genealogies that Foucault traced in his 1976-1979 courses at the *Collège de France*. One dimension of this is his treatment of the links between Foucault's analysis of the "biologization" of political life and conflicts, and the views of Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and Antonio Negri on the discussion of biopower. Here Marzocca demonstrates his command of the various elements that contribute to an understanding of the modernity of Nazism and racism, as well as the significance of Negri's distinction (Spinozist in its origins) between two forms of power that the English language, alas, has no easy means to distinguish: *potere* and *potenza* (power over others and the creative power to transform oneself, respectively). Marzocca recognizes the significance of this distinction for an understanding of the final Foucault's move from the political to the *ethical*, though the full implications of that move are not explored in this volume (and will only be clear when Foucault's last lecture courses at the *Collège* are published, though the publication of the first of these, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1981-1982) already permits us to

grasp the significance of Foucault's distinction between subjectification [*assujettissement*] and subjectivation [*subjectivation*]).

The final Foucault's concern with ethics, one's relation to oneself, and the various technologies of the self, with its link to *potenza*, compliments his earlier focus on technologies of domination and control. In several ways Marzocca significantly contributes to our understanding of this aspect of Foucault's thinking. In his analysis of Foucault's writings on the Iranian revolution, Marzocca shifts the emphasis away from the accusation that Foucault failed to see the totalitarian thrust of the Khomeini regime, and provided its depredations with an ideological cover, to a subtle reading that both recognizes that Foucault – at the time, not just with hindsight -- saw the dangers represented by a fundamentalist clerical caste, even as he grasped the possibility that the mass movement against the reign of the Shah might interrupt the flow of history and constitute a manifestation of what he designated as *spirituality*, with its prospects for “a transformation of the subject” and the “ethical constitution of freedom” (p. 134). That such a process was thwarted by the reassertion of technologies of domination should not obscure the opening represented when a population hurled itself against the armed power of the state.

Marzocca also deftly handles the question of Foucault's understanding of neo-liberalism and its relation to biopower. Liberalism and its ideology of minimal government are not seen as a repudiation of the growth of biopower, technologies of control, and the grids of power linked to governmentality. In ways reminiscent, I believe, of Karl Polanyi's analysis in his *The Great Transformation*, Marzocca shows how for Foucault the free market is not natural but *constructed*, a process in which the state plays the decisive role, one that continues in its phase of neo-liberalism. Indeed, far from being a weak state or system, neo-liberalism should be linked to control mechanisms that in some respects exceed what was possible for the Nazi or Stalinist regimes.

In his final chapter, Marzocca takes up the question of whether in a world shaped by governmentality and biopower, “another principle” [*un altro principio*] (p. 197) can assert its claims. In the only course at the *Collège* so far published from this last cycle, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Marzocca finds in Foucault's journey to Greece, and his focus on *parrhesia*, a new and different possibility of government, and a prospect for “desubjectification” [*desoggettivazione*] (p.205). Given Marzocca's understanding of the thrust of Foucault's thinking, one can only hope that he will undertake to extend his analysis into a confrontation with all the implications of Foucault's ethical turn, and the possibilities for a transfiguration of the subject. And that again raises the question of the need for Anglophone publishers to seriously consider the merits of translating more of the exciting work on Foucault being produced in Italy.

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