

# Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

*Foucault Studies*, No 7, pp. 148-153, September 2009

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## REVIEW

**Tina (A.C.) Besley and Michael A. Peters, *Subjectivity and Truth: Foucault, Education, and the Culture of Self* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), ISBN: 978-0820481951**

The long impact of Michel Foucault's scholarship is well documented in fields as diverse as Geography, Philosophy, and Political Theory. Other fields, however, are still coming to grips with the entirety of Foucault's works, including the field of education. This is not to say that Foucault has not inspired researchers in and of education – several important anthologies especially come to mind<sup>1</sup> – rather, it is to say that the genre is still rapidly maturing. *Subjectivity and Truth: Foucault, Education, and the Culture of Self* by Tina (A.C.) Besley and Michael A. Peters marks a significant turning point in that maturation process.

The authors have been writing about Foucault for quite some time and are two of the most respected Foucault scholars in educational studies. Therefore, it is unsurprising that they would author the “first systematic exploration of the relevance of Foucault's explorations of subjectivity and truth, and its significance for educational theory of what Foucault referred to on a number of occasions as ‘the culture of self,’ especially in a course of lectures he gave in Berkeley in the early 1980s.”<sup>2</sup> Much of the book is drawn from conference presentations and course offerings by the authors, with significant revisions in order to make them cohere as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

Besley and Peters mobilize Foucault's later work, especially his lectures, to frankly discuss the neoliberal shift in society and its implications for education. This is a crucial and welcome move, as discussions of neoliberalism in education are almost the exclusive playground of Marxist-inspired educational researchers such as Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, and Michael Apple. Besley and Peters provide a rationale for looking at

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<sup>1</sup> Bernadette M. Baker and Katharina E. Heyning, *Dangerous Coagulations?: The Uses of Foucault in the Study of Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004); Thomas S. Popkewitz and Marie Brennan, *Foucault's Challenge: Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Tina (A.C.) Besley and Michael A. Peters, *Subjectivity and Truth: Foucault, Education, and the Culture of Self* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 5. Abbreviated throughout as *ST*.

<sup>3</sup> Besley & Peters, *ST*, xi.

neoliberalism from a non-Marxian point of view in a lengthy paragraph that deserves a significant excerpt here:

First, a neo-Foucauldian approach to the sociology of governance avoids interpreting liberalism as an ideology, political philosophy, or an economic theory and reconfigures it as a form of governmentality with an emphasis on the question of *how* power is exercised. Second, such an approach makes central the notion of the *self-limiting state* which, in contrast to the administrative (or police) state, brings together in productive ways questions of ethics and technique... Third, it proposes an investigation of neoliberalism as an intensification of an economy of moral regulation first developed by liberals... Fourth, the approach enables an understanding of the distinctive features of neoliberalism... And, further, it understands neoliberalism through the development of a new relation between expertise and politics...<sup>4</sup>

This lengthy section clearly differentiates Besley and Peters' project from much other writing on the topic of neoliberalism. It also provides the particular grounds on which this book stands.

The taking up of neoliberalism follows from Foucault's discussion of the topic in his Collège de France lecture series of 1978-1979, and recently translated into English as *The Birth of Biopolitics*.<sup>5</sup> The final two chapters of *Subjectivity and Truth* address the new paradigm of neoliberalism exclusively; however, the first three quarters of the book are spent laying the groundwork for this later discussion.

The book begins by discussing the subject in the tradition of philosophy. As Besley and Peters note, "Ever since the first moment of institutional philosophy the notion of the self has presented itself as an object of inquiry, as a problem, and as a locus for posing questions concerning knowledge, action and ethics."<sup>6</sup> This statement acts as a foil in order to situate Foucault's shift from the study "of sexual behavior and pleasures in antiquity based on *aphrodisia* to extract from it and study the more general problem of 'the subject and truth'."<sup>7</sup> Periodizing Foucault's work is helpful in many ways, and Besley and Peters are perhaps correct to begin by analyzing the disjunctures in Foucault's *oeuvre*. However, dividing Foucault's work into early, middle, and later periods<sup>8</sup> is problematic in that it gives the impression that there were separate projects being undertaken, which can lead to the false understanding that, for example, the "early" and "late" Foucault were at odds with one

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<sup>4</sup> Besley & Peters, *ST*, 132-133.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Besley & Peters, *ST*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> As do, for example, Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Eric Paras, *Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge* (New York: Other Press, 2006).

another or that he revised his earlier work on power to re-inject a liberal subject.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, it is a necessary place to begin.

The remainder of “Chapter One: The Culture of Self” is dedicated to laying the groundwork for the rest of the book. Besley and Peters draw attention to Foucault’s discussion of technologies of the self, a brief discussion of Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism*, an analysis of the notion of care of the self, and, finally, the practices of reading and writing the self. The latter section is particularly important for educationalists, because, as the authors note, “It is especially this last notion [learning how to read] that is worth pondering in relation to pedagogy.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, they close the chapter with the following observation:

Almost certainly we are witnessing a shift from the shaping of an individual of classical liberalism – the ethical individual of Kantian humanism – to a market individualism of neoliberalism where the self is shaped as a utility maximizer, a free and contractual individual, who is self-constituted through the market choices and investment decisions that he/she makes.<sup>11</sup>

This statement has clear implications for the remainder of the book.

Chapter 2 is entitled “The Genealogy of the Confessional Self: Self-Denial or Self-Mastery?” and traces Foucault’s conception of the self from the death of man through the confessional technologies of Christianity and “medico-therapeutic confessional practices.”<sup>12</sup> Most notable here are the concluding thoughts of Besley and Peters, when they, along with Foucault, reject the Christian ethic of self-denial and instead “suggest that confession as a technology of self should be based less on an ethic of self-denial than one of self-mastery.”<sup>13</sup> This is clearly a moment in which Besley and Peters illustrate the project of Foucault’s later writing, especially his work on the technologies of the self. They also illustrate that Foucault’s discussions of power and discourse are integral to the care of the self:

Foucault (1997a) contrasts two different models of self-interpretation: liberation and freedom, suggesting that the latter is broader than the former and historically necessary once a country or people have attained a degree of independence and set up a political

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<sup>9</sup> This point is especially poignant when the authors state on page 89, “In his early work Foucault, [*sic*] treated truth as a product of the regimentation of statements within discourses that had progressed or were in the process of progressing to the stage of a scientific discipline. In this conception, the subject, historicized in relation to social practices, is denied its freedom or effective agency. This early conception of Foucault’s is to be contrasted with his later notion of the subject where freedom is seen to be an essential aspect of its constitution as in the concept of governmentality and in his studies of the history of sexuality.”

<sup>10</sup> Besley & Peters, *ST*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

society. For Foucault, liberation is not enough and the practices of freedom do not preclude liberation, but they enable individuals and society to define 'admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society' (Foucault, 1997a, p. 283).<sup>14</sup>

One must be free of chains in order to enter the realm of the political, but that political existence is tied to dominant discourses and regimes of truth.

By this point in the book, areas for clarification have become apparent. First is the somewhat productive, possibly distracting, tension between education, by which I think the authors mean schooling, and counseling and counseling education. I understand that counselors play significant roles in schools and in the lives of the young people with whom they work, but I wonder about the seeming conflation. At the least this tension deserves a more straightforward account. What do chapters that foreground counseling do for readers who are expecting to find a book on education? Is it because counseling happens within the school building? Or is it because counseling is particularly complicit in the production of neoliberal subjects skilled at negotiating risk and the actuarial self described by Besley and Peters in the later chapters which focus more squarely on schools and school policy? I am confident that the inclusion was intentional and calculated, but a more direct discussion would have been welcome.

A second troubling indistinction is the attempt to discuss education in the context of not just one or two major English-speaking countries, such as the United States and/or the United Kingdom, but also in Australia and New Zealand. Each of these countries has a robust educational research community and complex national and regional issues that greatly complicate their inclusion in a pan-Anglo discussion of schooling. Clearly there are global currents at work that need to be identified and engaged, but this area too could have used greater explication and sustained attention by the authors. However, neither area seriously detracts from the major arguments presented or from the valuable contribution the authors make to educational research.

Much of the middle portion of the book is useful and deserves thoughtful engagement, but for the purposes of this review I will move on to chapters 7 and 8, entitled "Understanding the Neoliberal Paradigm of Education Policy" and, "Enterprise Culture and the Rise of the Entrepreneurial Self." Together, these chapters signal a new direction that I hope will be taken up by educational researchers in much more detail in the future. Where Besley and Peters survey the grounds of the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand in this book, it will be up to other researchers to address the specific ways in which neoliberalism interacts with individual subjects on a local level.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23 (citations in the original).

Chapter 7 traces the shift from liberalism to neoliberalism through what Foucault referred to as biopolitics. They note:

He [Foucault] focused on government as a set of *practices* legitimated by specific rationalities and saw that these three schools [German ordoliberalism, the Austrian school, and the Chicago school] of contemporary economic liberalism focused on the question of too much government – a permanent critique of the state that Foucault considers as a set of techniques for governing the self through the market.<sup>15</sup>

Later, they write;

This approach centers on Foucault's concept of governmentality as a means of mapping the 'history of the present' and *understands the rationality of government as both permitting and requiring the practice of freedom of its subjects*. In other words, government in this sense only becomes possible at the point at which policing and administration stops; at the point at which the relations between government and self-government coincide and coalesce.<sup>16</sup>

Essentially, Besley and Peters are pointing to the zone of indistinction between government and self-government where neoliberalism seems to have space to operate on and through subjects.

Besley and Peters highlight, in chapter 7, the rise of human capital theory under Theodore Schultz, Gary Becker, and the (second) Chicago School of Economics. The contemporary investment in human capital theory is a strong indicator of the path illuminated by Foucault in the *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures. In a generation, by Schultz's own admission, human capital went from being "inconceivable" in public discourse to being a focus of both Clinton and Bush in the 1992 presidential campaign.<sup>17</sup> More and more since the 1970s, governments are crafting education policy based on the assumptions put forth by Becker, essentially willing human capital theory into reality.

The one area in the book that could have been more developed is how the subject is produced at the moment that neoliberal education policy interacts with human bodies. This is unsurprising, though, as Foucault never truly addressed the issue either; indeed, Judith Butler provides a much more sophisticated account of subjectivation,<sup>18</sup> which may highlight some of the limits to which we can take Foucault's work (even his newly released

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 131-132 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 132 (emphasis mine).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>18</sup> See Judith Butler, *Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). See also Jason Read, *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003).

later lectures). As it is, Besley and Peters mention the mutual reinforcement of what they term “modes of responsabilization” (i.e., student loan debt) and the subject’s application of “certain management, economic, and actuarial techniques to themselves as subjects of a newly privatized welfare regime,”<sup>19</sup> but they do not adequately describe how and why the subject would actually do so. This could have been addressed through a more intentional linking of Foucault’s later work on the care of the self to his earlier discussions of disciplinary and sovereign power.

All told, Besley and Peters make a strong contribution to research on Foucault and education. There are a few areas where their analysis could have been more specific (i.e., by focusing more on localized techniques of neoliberalism), but overall they provide a strong reading of Foucault’s later work in a field Foucault himself only addressed tangentially and on occasion. It is worth reading and extending in future work.

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<sup>19</sup> Besley & Peters, *ST*, 164.