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REVIEW

Sam Binkley and Jorge Capetillo (eds.), *A Foucault for the 21st Century: Governmentality, Biopolitics and Discipline in the New Millennium* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), ISBN: 978-1443804448

Twenty-five years since his death, how does Foucault's thought fit within our present? Can his thought be relevant to the issues we currently face? The essays in this volume—papers presented at the fifth annual meeting of the Social Theory Forum at University of Massachusetts, Boston—attempt to answer these questions.

As Sam Binkley notes in his introduction, there are certainly critics of Foucault who argue that his thought is passé and the questions he concerned himself with of another era. Society has moved beyond disciplinary power into a post-panoptic stage. As Binkley points out, these critics fail to recognize two crucial elements in Foucault's thinking. First, they forget that Foucault was not offering a totalizing critique of one particular age. Rather, he was interested in understanding how a society produces subjects and, in doing so, constitutes itself. Second, they take Foucault's use of the past to be nothing more than an account of his particular present. But this is to miss Foucault's larger purpose, which is to show how critical engaging of the past transforms the present, whenever that present might be.

The twenty-four essays in this anthology comprise a blend of new perspectives on familiar topics (e.g., biopower, subjectivation, prisons) and efforts to bring Foucault's thought to bear on emerging issues that he himself never anticipated (e.g., genetic science, ecology). The book is divided into nine sections. The first three treat recent developments in Foucault scholarship and contain papers dealing largely with the themes of neo-liberalism, subjectivation and governmentality, and biopower. The remaining six sections shift away from Foucault's own intellectual development and seek to apply his thinking to contemporary issues. Given the number of essays in the volume, this review can only address a few of these.

In "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity," Jason Read examines the analysis of neoliberalism Foucault develops in *The Birth of Biopolitics* and argues that with the production of *homo economicus* as a particular type of subject, neoliberalism is able to exploit a gap in classical economic theory. Neoliberal thinkers, like Marx, recognized labor as critical to the production of capital. But where Marx limited labor to the worker and thereby opposed the worker to the capitalist,

neoliberalism makes every worker a capitalist with the idea of “human capital.” Once this becomes the common denominator that erases the distinction between labor and capital, everyone becomes an investor: it is up to us to decide how our human capital will be deployed for the greatest return.

Read then compares Negri’s Marxist critique of neoliberalism to Foucault’s analysis. For Negri, the real subsumption of society by capital transforms not only modes of production but also the very way in which capitalism presents itself. The conception of society as a market overshadows the productive power of society. Neoliberalism reduces society to a monoculture, as it were: “All of these differences [between work and the market, between the citizen and economic subject] are effaced as one relation; that of economic self-interest, or competition, replaces the multiple spaces and relations of worker, citizen, and economic subject of consumption.”(12)

Foucault’s analysis, which presents neoliberalism as a form of governmentality rather than ideology, yields distinct advantages over Negri’s. For Foucault, the power of neoliberalism stems less from its effect on actions and more on its effectiveness in closing off any sense of possibility. Collective action becomes more difficult, not because of any interference by dominant forces but simply because, with the privileging of self-interest, such action is no longer regarded as possible. (13)

While Read sees our present circumstances suffering from the same lack of possibility Foucault diagnosed in the 1970s, Michael C. Behrent contends that Foucault’s analysis of neoliberalism cannot be extended to the present. It must be contextualized, and when it is, we see that his interest in neoliberalism was motivated by three reasons particular to his time and place. First, this interest was a reaction to the ideological flux that characterized the intellectual milieu of 1970s France. The general disillusionment with Marxism and the co-opting of neoliberal critiques of the state by the Second Left made neoliberal ideas an appealing alternative. This reason by itself, though, yields an inadequate explanation as to why Foucault would focus on neoliberalism. It is merely a necessary cause, as Behrent realizes. He finds the sufficient cause in Foucault’s own philosophical development. By 1975 Foucault was thinking about biopower and questioning the idea of discipline as modern society’s defining form of power. And by 1978, he was clearly distinguishing disciplinary power from biopower. It is the economic liberalism of the Physiocrats “that attuned Foucault to the ‘non-disciplinary’ potentialities of modern power regimes.”(23) Finally, Behrent argues that Foucault’s analysis of the Ordo-Liberals was an oblique attack against the French Left’s statism: the SPD had adopted the principles of the Ordo-Liberals and was much more effective because it could govern. Neoliberalism offered the possibility of non-disciplinary political practice. In the end, Behrent refrains from claiming that Foucault wholeheartedly embraced neoliberalism and tempers his argument by claiming that Foucault’s endorsement was strategic rather than an act of conversion.

Behrent’s argument is predicated on the view that Foucault’s intellectual development follows a dialectical movement in which his “disciplinary phase” was subsumed by

his “biopower phase.” Jeffrey T. Nealon rejects this view in “Foucault’s Deleuze or, On the Incorporeality of Transformation in Foucault,” which explores Deleuze’s influence on Foucault’s thinking, especially after 1969. Nealon points out that Deleuze was the first to reject the periodization of Foucault’s work: “Deleuze goes out of his way to insist, time and again, that Foucault’s was a continuous experimental research agenda, a series of problems intensified and sharpened by each new discovery, rather than a series of attempted (and failed) conceptual or methodological totalizations.” (141)

The question of Foucault’s development gets at the very issue of Foucault’s relevance for us and our present (and, presumably, other presents to come): if his work is really a Hegelian progression of failed and abandoned efforts culminating in the idea of self-creation qua resistance to normalization, then Foucault is, in the end, simply a precursor to the narcissistic self-fashioning that defines late capitalism. As he does in *Foucault Beyond Foucault*, Nealon here argues for the consistency in Foucault’s trajectory. Focusing on “Theatrum Philosophicum,” he builds his case around Deleuze’s concept of incorporeal materiality and its influence on Foucault.

Power as described by Foucault illustrates this incorporeal materiality since it affects produces real effects but on relations and capacities rather than brute objects. Along with this notion of incorporeality, Foucault also borrows the language of “intensity” and sees power’s saturation of a given field as its intensification, and that power’s intensity increases with its increasing incorporeality. “For Foucault ... intensification ... primarily names the movement of [power’s] increasing spread throughout the socius: power’s intensification is its increasing saturation or generalization from the seventeenth century onward in Europe.” (149) This link between intensity and incorporeality is critical to Nealon’s argument: if, as Foucault shows, the gradual intensification and incorporeality of power are historical claims, his shifting focus is not the tacit admission of methodological and conceptual failures. Foucault’s trajectory is a product of simply following power’s own shifting alterations. The fact that his final work focused on modes of self-creation does not indicate the arrival at a final theoretical position. It was simply the form of power he was studying when that trajectory came to an end.

Skipping a host of essays, I want to point out Section VII, which is titled “Religion and Political Spirituality,” and is comprised of two essays on Foucault’s writings on Iran. Both essays defend Foucault’s “philosophical journalism” from its critics, arguing that far from being a quixotic and failed effort, his experiences in Iran altered his thinking about ethics and politics. While these pieces were written before the recent political unrest in Iran, their analyses of Foucault’s concept of political spirituality offers an interesting perspective on current events.

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi’s essay, “When Life Will No Longer Barter Itself: In Defense of Foucault on the Iranian Revolution,” is in large part a response to Afary and Anderson’s critique of Foucault’s work on Iran in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*. Where they claim Foucault sympathies with the Islamic Revolution arise from a shared naivete regarding pre-modern cultures, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues that for Foucault, the attraction of

the revolution was in its transcending of Western developmental explanations—and that rather than ultimately backtracking and accepting Enlightenment values in the face of the terror the revolution unleashed, as Afary and Anderson contend, Foucault's later work remained consistent with his writings on Iran.

For Foucault, the Islamic Revolution challenged Western notions of teleological history. It did not result from internal contradictions, nor was it striving for some clearly defined future; the actors—the men and women in the street—had no clear agenda. Their acts of revolt were ambiguous and aimed only at transforming the present. Instead of an agenda, the Iranian people were motivated by a political spirituality.

Political spirituality, according to Ghamari-Tabrizi, represents the coming together of state institutions, religion, and the individual to create a particular form of governmentality: “In Iran, Foucault recognized the possibility in Islam of a continuous and active creation of a political order perpetuated by an individual experience of piety and the care of the self.” (281) Political spirituality, then, links Foucault's later focus on ethics and care of the self with his earlier theories of power. But Iran also challenged those earlier theories. After Iran, he began to consider political revolt as an ethical act, even if it must inevitably produce or expand disciplinary power. The outcome must be distinguished from the initial act.

In the Islamic Revolution, Foucault also found the possibility of a permanent critique of the present and self-creation. In this critique, the Revolution is not a rejection of modernity but an embracing of it. However, it embraces modernity in the spirit of Baudelaire, not Kant. As Ghamari-Tabrizi shows, Foucault does not, *pace* Afary and Anderson, jettison the Revolution for Kantian Enlightenment; he projects the Revolution onto Kant's *Was is Aufklärung?*

Jeremy D. Posadas elaborates further on Foucault's engagement with Iran in “Political Spirituality, ‘Revolution’ and the Limits of Politics: What was Foucault Talking About in Iran,” claiming that Foucault's approach to religion, which prioritizes practices over doctrine, was integral to his assessment of the Islam he was observing. It was not mere ideology; it was a source of action and a motivating force behind the people's revolt. The demonstrations it provoked “fit within Foucault's prior framework of domination and resistance, [yet] they revealed an aspect of religious experience that he had not thematized: religion as a means of resistance rather than domination.” (296) Domination and resistance were always coextensive in Foucault's thinking, but heretofore in this thought, the effects of domination generally had the advantage. Iran presented a case “in which resistance crystallizes at a much faster rate than domination.” (300) By providing the resources for this resistance, Islam became a politicized spirituality, which Posadas describes as the emergence of a collective will that bridges two poles: the people's willingness to risk their lives, which represents the limit of politics and spiritualizes politics, and the refusal of politics in which the people re-conceive the political. (302) This conception of political spirituality shines light on Foucault's later thinking by presenting us with the political horizon of the ethical subject.

On the whole this collection provides works with interesting and provocative theses, although the majority of the strongest pieces are in the first three sections. Some of the essays feel truncated; arguments are hastily brought to a close with little or no discussion of their implications, and while this adds to their provocativeness, it is at times frustrating. Others read like works in progress, which they quite likely are. It should also be added the book is rife with copy-editing errors and inconsistencies. These shortcomings aside, the editors have provided a broad cross-section of essays that take Foucault's ideas in interesting directions.

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