

REVIEW

Miguel de Beistegui, *The Government of Desire: A Genealogy of the Liberal Subject* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018), 320 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-54737-4

The Government of Desire (GD) applies a genealogical method to characteristically Foucauldian questions: what kind of subjects are we today, how did we become such, and how might we be otherwise? But as the author himself puts it, this text is not so much a book on Foucault, but one written with him, exploring possibilities latent within Foucault's later works without dwelling overly long on exegetical material. Ultimately the text draws on both Foucault and the collaborative work of Deleuze and Guattari to suggest a principle of resistance focused on escape from and experimentation with the normative frameworks of governmentality.

While Foucault himself discussed the 'man of desire' as one arising in the Hellenistic period and elected to focus on the imposition of norms within the realm of sexuality, de Beistegui claims that such texts as *The Subject and Power* suggest that Foucault had already realized that desire shapes us in a multitude of other ways, forming a 'transcendental-historical' horizon of possible experience. As Foucault claims, Western society is *the* civilization of desire, and de Beistegui grounds this specificity in the development of three 'regimes' of knowledge and power which naturalize desire as a 'vital power', defining human nature in terms of a *homo economicus, sexualis, and symbolicus*. The author's central contention is that the supposed freedoms of Liberalism only exist within these frameworks, the origins of which are equivalent to the shift from sovereignty to biopower in the 18th Century. Liberalism is thus defined not by ideological content but according to this form of population management and discourses extending beyond the direct operations of the state, making the liberty it promotes the means by which the normative frameworks of governmentality are implemented.

A genealogical method avoids the polemic constructions by which Liberal theorists have typically attempted to define the ideology, discussions which too often presuppose a certain autonomy on the part of theorists which is in itself suspect. Genealogy is better able to explain the changing beliefs, institutions and practices which have characterized concrete states, and in particular is inclusive of the industrial and social relations which content definitions often dismiss as contingent. In this sense, and despite significant differences between them, de Beistegui might be productively considered alongside such figures as Domenico Losurdo as part of a critical trend to examine the history of Liberalism as a practice or method of government.

The originality of this response alone is of great value in a discipline which often remains exegetical without going beyond the thought of a single thinker or lending itself to a contemporary application. While a knowledge of such concepts as biopolitics and governmentality would be useful to the reader, as would some knowledge of Deleuze and Guattari, concepts are lucidly explained throughout the text and grounded in both contemporary and historical examples. The text draws on a substantial range of broad but pertinent examples and discourses in its pursuit of the history of desire, and this review cannot hope to reproduce them in their diversity. Note that our summary is thus limited to those references best placed to characterize the central argument, and that the rich historical backing of the text extends far beyond them.

Historically, in such discourses as Stoicism and Augustinianism, desire was considered a negative aspect of human experience individuals ought to limit. It was however vindicated as the 'motor' of human agency by the discourse of political economy, redefined through such concepts as utility and self-interest. The first three chapters concern the emergence and development of this economic regime, the primary references ranging from early liberal theorists such as David Hume and Adam Smith, the French Physiocrats, and the development of neoliberalism in the work of Hayek, von Mises and the Mont Pèlerin society. Following the naturalization of desire as utility, the aim of government and the function of law becomes that of ensuring the proper conditions for the spontaneous development of order from individuals independently seeking their own interest, resulting in unprecedented levels of surveillance. Neoliberalism, de Beistegui argues, radicalises this through the addition of competition and efficiency to the normative framework, further transforming the function of law into the fostering of competition and the discouragement of crime and social ills through the manipulation of the risk entailed by actions deemed antisocial. Risk and competition are placed at the heart of human nature, resulting in a normative framework within which it is beholden on individuals to become managers and entrepreneurs of their human capital.

The following two chapters contextualize the clinical discourses of psychology and psychoanalysis as a direct result of a tension within this economic discourse. The argument suggests that crimes without rational motivation necessitated a psychological discourse to explain them, involving a gradation of culpability as well as the reclaiming of the Christian notion of perversity as the abnormal functioning of a regulative behavioural norm. In the case of sexuality, the aim is taken to be propagation, and the motivating desire of criminal acts became categorized according to distortions to the sexual drive. Sexual desire thus became naturalized as an immanent drive which could hermeneutically explicate the vicissitudes of the self, as psychiatry and psychoanalysis came to see manifestations of the sexual drive in the most mundane of acts. The author again demonstrates an enormous reach of pertinent examples and discourses, and concludes by reiterating Freud's suspicion of the supposed freedom of the sexual revolution, and questioning what self is supposedly identified through an expression of one's sexuality. While the removal of governmental oppression of non-normative sexualities is a positive development, what is questionable is the way that the

identification remains subject to the dictates of the market, and indeed to the third regime of desire.

This last regime, explored through chapters six, seven, and eight, targets a collection of positions which follow from Kojève's reading of Hegelian recognition: the communitarian movement of Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser, as well as a wider 'politics of difference' incorporating demands for and attempts to provide the recognition of increasingly specific differences. Once again, the regime vindicates a form of desire previously criticized, the vain and specifically social desire Rousseau would name *amour propre*. By enshrining the desire for recognition at the heart of human nature, if as a problem, Rousseau opened the possibility of a biopolitical discourse that would categorize the desire for recognition as a matter of governmentality, instituted through the law, schools, universities, families and businesses in an entire normative and ethical framework focused upon the individual. This regime naturalises the desire for respect and esteem, the former concerning the recognition of one's dignity (as enshrined in universal rights) and the latter one's specificity. The notion of *self-esteem* becomes an almost unquestionable good, a panacea to such social ills as crime and dependency. Far from the more archaic notion of respect found in honor systems, it is no longer associated with a group identity to which one belongs (as in the sense of one's class) but becomes solely a matter of individual achievement. This requires a cultural or symbolic field determining worthy forms of self-realization, continually open to the influence of certain groups aiming for recognition of traits and abilities currently neglected. Recognition thus becomes both the critical social mechanism, a space of symbolic conflict, and a vital mechanism, one which goes beyond the biological to the possibility of self-discovery and self-realization.

Drawing on such figures as Judith Butler and Franz Fanon, de Beistegui argues that any scheme of recognition is normative to the extent it determines who is to be considered a subject worthy of recognition, bearing its own risks of exclusion or fixity alongside new possibilities of resistance, and revealing the real struggle for recognition to take place over the norms of identity by which recognition occurs. We must turn a Foucauldian eye to claims of essential identity and reveal the produced nature of these categories themselves: visibility is in this sense very much a trap, a form of subjection to norms of power imposed from without.

Considering the ascendancy of communitarianism and other politics of recognition in institutions and political science departments worldwide, this critique is both controversial and timely, and through the provision of extensive historical and contemporary reference, de Beistegui avoids the trap of an increasing tendency to strawman politics of identity by identifying them within a wider historical movement. Defining Liberalism in terms of its governmentality allows the author to identify these positions as a new pillar of Liberalism despite their claims to difference, and can thus explain the interrelation of this struggle for recognition within the wider economic context.

This includes a particularly interesting treatment of poverty in Britain following the welfare reforms of the Blair government. Rather than offering redistribution, these bodies offer 'opportunity', avoiding the perceived danger of passivity and learned helplessness (along with the associated risk to self-worth). Far from misrecognised, the poor have been redefined without irony as 'jobseekers', constrained to a normative framework which demands their continual participation in an 'aspirational' discourse. Neoliberalism thus incorporates an entire discourse of self-esteem, in the name of which it has dismantled a variety of institutions and rebuilt them on its economic model.

The concluding chapters elucidate a more primary regime of desire, one which is explicitly 'anarchic': a sovereign desire for engendering new ways of life, relationships, values, practices, and means of exchange beyond the current norms. Unlike traditional anarchism, which sought freedom from power as such, de Beistegui's variation accepts that no lives exist independently of an existing framework, and instead targets specific organisations of power and modes of subjectivation. While life cannot be ungoverned, neither can it be reduced to the rationality of the existing discourses and the subjectivation imposed upon it, and always contains possible avenues of escape. This position is "the opposite of, and an alternative to, identity politics"¹ as well as a new politics of desire concerning how we might be governed not less, but differently.

This sovereign desire is, to borrow a Deleuzian affectation, a 'zone of indiscernibility' between Foucauldian counter-conduct and Deleuzo-Guattarian experimentation. On the one hand this is a tactics of 'play': to operate within existing structures and push the variability and space of freedom they maintain to its limit, without allowing ourselves to be entirely subjected; to find spaces for freedom even when faced with seemingly endless bureaucracy and surveillance. On the other, it is a strategy of engendering alternative practices, experiences and spaces, opposing existing discourses through non-compliance and resistance in the name of an alternate and engendered regime of desire. To oppose power is to form an independent line within it, to burrow between its points until it crumbles and is replaced with an alternative discourse. We must therefore, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, 'become imperceptible', unrecognizable according to the existing metrics and categories of recognition, unknown and impersonal even to ourselves, and continually open to new lines of becoming.

The sovereign desire to be other than what we are thus reveals the indeterminate *demos* or multitude which forms the presupposition of any politics or right of sovereignty. The author thus opposes the entrenched market discourse of constant productivity and self-investment and the sexual hermeneutic discourse to a demand for leisure and a 'new voluptuousness', a conception of the body as a radically open assemblage which extends beyond any of the determinate categories imposed upon it, one which goes beyond and denies the determined subjectivity to which it is subjected. By moving from normativity to experimentation we reveal the ungovernable point at the very limit of life itself.

While everything remains to be done concerning the endlessly plastic face of Liberal governmentality, de Beistegui here provides an excellent set of conceptual tools with

¹ Miguel de Beistegui, *The Government of Desire: A Genealogy of the Liberal Subject* (2018), 207.

which to continue this process, alongside an excellent reversal of the dogmatism which characterizes the presuppositions of Liberal theory, in a text likely to appeal to all with an interest in philosophy and political science: from scholars of Foucault and Deleuze to those concerned with alternatives to our current forms of government.

References

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