

# Foucault Studies

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## REVIEW

**Thomas Lemke, *Foucault's Analysis of Modern Governmentality: A Critique of Political Reason*. Translation Erik Butler. London: Verso, 2019. Pp. 445. ISBN: 9781786636454 (paperback).**

There is something deeply untimely about the writings of Michel Foucault: his historical analyses of madness in the classical age, of the birth of the prison, and of ancient practices of the self all speak in their own way to Foucault's time and ours. This is perhaps a legacy of Foucault's debt to Nietzsche, whose own *Untimely Meditations* constituted a turning point in Foucault's early intellectual biography.<sup>1</sup> It is this same paradoxical feature of untimely contemporaneity that grants so much strength to Thomas Lemke's book *Foucault's Analysis of Modern Governmentality: A Critique of Political Reason*, originally published in German in 1997 and finally translated into English by Verso Books in 2019.

Despite being more than 20 years old, Lemke chose to make no changes to the book's content or argument for the English edition, a decision that in some ways adds to the book's relevance to contemporary research on Foucault and governmentality. The book's introduction takes us through many of the critiques and (mis)interpretations of Foucault that were widespread in German- and English-speaking scholarship in the 1990s. This includes critiques from major thinkers such as Nancy Fraser, Michael Walzer, and, most famously, Jürgen Habermas. The fact that many of these critiques – accusations that Foucault's work lacks any normative framework, that he cannot distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms of resistance, and that his critique of reason leaves him trapped in 'irrationalism' – are still levelled against Foucault to this day should not be taken as a failure on Lemke's part to fully defend Foucault from his critics. Rather, this fact speaks to the urgency of Lemke's book, signalling that a wider audience needs to read his work in order to better understand (and, indeed, to critique more effectively) Foucault's thought.

The body of the book is composed of three sections, each made up of between four and five chapters. A reader would be forgiven for assuming, based on this structure, that Lemke's analysis will follow the traditional tripartite division of Foucault's intellectual trajectory: first grappling with archaeology/knowledge, next genealogy/power, and finally subjectivity/ethics. However, it is precisely such a structure that Lemke wishes to

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<sup>1</sup> Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (1991), 52.

avoid, arguing that it “requires just as much explanation as it affords” (19) and often gives rise to the interpretation that Foucault’s later works on ethics constitute a break with his critical project and an embracing of a liberal, humanist perspective. Lemke’s central contention (similar to, yet distinct from, that of Deleuze’s book on Foucault<sup>2</sup>) is that there is a clear continuity between Foucault’s critique of power and his work on ethics. The material which Lemke uses to bridge the gap between these two apparently incompatible projects is the analysis of governmentality – the material for which was not widely available at the time of the book’s original publication. It is the concept of government – the government of the self and others, as Foucault’s penultimate course at the Collège de France is titled – that explains how Foucault moved from the first volume of *History of Sexuality* to the second, third, and fourth volumes.

Lemke’s first section is titled ‘The Microphysics of Power’ and deals briefly with Foucault’s early works up to his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (‘The Order of Discourse’) before grappling with the questions that preoccupied Foucault from 1970 to 1976. This section includes extended reflections on Foucault’s work on genealogy and power, on discipline, and on ‘Nietzsche’s hypothesis’ (also known as the politico-military model or strategic conception of power, which Foucault elaborates in *“Society Must Be Defended”*). Lemke’s analysis of this material is exceptionally strong, drawing from a remarkably wide range of sources, considering so much of this material would not have been readily available to him at the time of the book’s writing.

However, the analysis does more than just stand the test of time, it also makes a valuable contribution to the contemporary field of Foucault studies. Where many contemporary scholars will admit (usually in quite vague terms) that Foucault saw limitations to his work in this period, Lemke provides a truly and deeply critical reflection on what those limits were and why they prompted Foucault to take up the concept of governmentality. Lemke’s refusal to pull his punches with regard to the failures and inadequacies of Foucault’s work from this period (of which Foucault himself was well aware; in reference to the work of previous years, Foucault begins his 1976 course, the final course before his turn to governmentality, by saying: “We are making no progress, and it’s all leading nowhere. It’s all repetitive, and it doesn’t add up.”<sup>3</sup>) is genuinely refreshing to read and no doubt stems from the ‘untimeliness’ of this work. While Foucault has become a highly respected figure in the academic mainstream of our day, he was more roundly criticised in the context in which Lemke was writing this book. While many of the criticisms of that time are unfair or represent misunderstandings of Foucault’s work, the lack of deference in the wider academic atmosphere allowed Lemke to engage in a sustained and brilliant critique of Foucault’s writings from this period, while still acknowledging their conceptual innovativeness and importance for understanding contemporary society.

Lemke then turns to Foucault’s proposed resolution of the problems that he perceived in his own work, which Lemke has demonstrated so vigorously. The most significant problems of Foucault’s works preceding the analysis of governmentality, as Lemke describes them, are the failures to sufficiently elaborate the relation between the workings of power at the macro and micro scales, as well as the too-narrow conception of the

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<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *“Society Must Be Defended”: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (2003), 4.

relation between subjectivity and power. Foucault introduced the concept of governmentality in order to better deal with these problems, and Lemke divides Foucault's work on government into two parts: the genealogy of the modern state and the genealogy of the modern subject.

The book's second section, titled simply 'Governmentality', deals with the genealogy of the modern state, focussing largely on Foucault's *Security, Territory, Population* and *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures and supplementary material surrounding them (interviews, shorter texts, etc.). It also contains a chapter detailing work by Foucault's contemporaries – figures such as Giovanna Procacci, Jacques Donzelot, François Ewald, and Pasquale Pasquino, many of whose works remain untranslated into English – which Lemke uses to fill in certain historical gaps in Foucault's genealogy. Lemke traces the genealogy of the modern state to its roots in the Christian pastoral and on through 'raison d'état' and the 'police state' up to liberal governmentality. Lemke turns to Foucault's colleagues in order to describe the transformations of liberal governmentality before returning to Foucault to discuss the development of the neoliberal governmental rationality.

As in the previous section, Lemke's analysis here is exceptionally astute and well thought out. By virtue of the fact that they are lectures, Foucault's reflections on governmentality are often quite disorganised, the discussions developing in a less systematised way than would be the case with books. They are also, Lemke is correct to point out, incomplete, with a significant historical period in which liberal rationality evolved left out of Foucault's lectures. Given all of this, and in particular taking into account that Lemke would have been working mostly with archival material rather than the published editions of the lectures we have today, the reconstruction of Foucault's (and others') genealogy of the modern state is a remarkable feat that has yet to be surpassed in terms of analytical clarity and rigour.

The final section is titled 'Politics and Ethics' and concerns itself with the genealogy of the modern subject, as well as reflections on a variety of concepts important to the entirety of Foucault's thought which are given greater clarity in later works. These concepts include subjectivity, power, truth, and critique. In discussing the genealogy of the modern subject, Lemke attempts to show how this project was, for Foucault, simply the other side of the coin in the analysis of governmentality. Governmentality is composed of two processes: state-formation and subject-formation. Thus, Foucault's later works on ethics do not constitute a break but rather a continuation of his critical project. Lemke places special emphasis on the notion of 'experience' in Foucault's work on ethics, a decision which arguably possesses greater significance today than it did in the late 1990s, owing to the recent posthumous publication of *Confessions of the Flesh*, one third of which is concerned with the question of experience in early Christian thought.<sup>4</sup>

However, there are also certain limitations to this section. Lemke focusses primarily on the already published second and third volumes of *History of Sexuality* for his argument on the continuity of Foucault's work, and while this was no doubt a reasonable choice in his own context, it leaves something to be desired in our own. The third section largely avoids grappling with the later lecture courses, thus missing out on significant material which has since been used to great effect in a variety of studies, both directly concerning

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 4: Confessions of the Flesh* (2021).

the development of Foucault's thought and in a range of other contexts. The concept of *parrhesia*, for example, is relegated to a footnote, despite the fact that it would have served as an excellent tool for analysing the question of truth in Foucault's thought, which is the central goal of the book's penultimate chapter. This is not to say that Lemke's work in the third section is any less convincing or valuable; Lemke continues to offer compelling accounts of Foucault's work, explaining potential points of confusion and allowing the continuity of Foucault's intentions to come through clearly. Nonetheless, Lemke's decision to avoid dealing with the lectures of later years is arguably the one part of the book which makes it feel less relevant to contemporary discussions in the field of Foucault studies.

It is hard to overstate the importance of Foucault's writings in the academic world today; in particular, the concept of governmentality has become a vital touchstone in a huge range of academic disciplines. In this light, Lemke's work serves as an utterly invaluable text for its explication and clarification of the meaning of this elusive and challenging concept as it is outlined in Foucault's work. The English translation of this book is long overdue, but the lateness of its arrival has in no way diminished its impact. If anything, this text has only become a resource of greater value in the years since its original publication.

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