

Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, Michel Senellart (ed.); Graham Burchell (trans.); Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2008; RRP \$AUD59.95; ISBN:9781403986542

This volume of Foucault's Collège de France lectures (the sixth to be published in English) closely follows the previous year's (1978) course, *Security, Territory, Population*. In what is Foucault's most explicit discussion of economy, as well as his most contemporary discussion of genealogies, he tracks the mode of political rationality developed in the post-war neoliberalisms of the German ordoliberal and American anarcho-liberal schools. This volume is presented with less scholarly apparatus than earlier ones. Unlike all the other translated volumes excepting the previous year's, there is no specific introduction. The short 'Course Context' essay (pp.327-331) reprints the section on the 1979 lectures that had already appeared with the 1978 course—this last, however, being largely a consequence of the necessity of consulting the lectures of this two-year period in combination with one another. As if in compensation, the editors have once again been given greater freedom to access and reprint sections from Foucault's lecture notes in cases where the words he spoke diverged from the manuscript.

In the first lecture, Foucault recounts the conclusions of his previous year's course and begins his discussion of liberalism, which continues in the next two lectures. In the fourth lecture, he begins his discussion of German ordoliberalism, which extends (longer than he expected) over the next four lectures. The ninth and tenth lectures are devoted to the American neoliberalism of the Chicago school, and the eleventh and twelfth look at the accompanying model of *homo oeconomicus*, closing with a discussion of civil society. Overall, Foucault is interested in describing a transformation that consisted in the self-limitation of the art of government: the establishment of 'an internal regulation of governmental rationality' (p.10). This principle of the internal self-regulation of power—which he indicates by the maxim 'Let sleeping dogs lie' (p.1) and the question of 'how not to govern too much' (p.13) —will become the fundamental tenet of liberalism.

Though the title speaks of 'the birth of biopolitics', Foucault never reaches the point of engaging in a thorough description and analysis of this phenomenon whose name (if not always substance) has become so ubiquitous in contemporary discussions. In the first lecture, he indicates his intention to talk about biopolitics, which is tied to the central question of 'population' as an object of governmental intervention (which he discussed, among other places, in the final chapter of *The Will to Knowledge* and in the previous year's lectures). But, as he remarks, 'only when we know what this governmental regime called liberalism was, will we be able to grasp what biopolitics is.' (p.22) However, his discussion of liberalism swells to take up the whole course. He closes his 'Course Summary' (pp.317-325), written after the completion of the course, by stating that 'What should now be studied, therefore, is the way in which the specific problems of life and population have been posed within a technology of government which ... has been constantly haunted by the question of liberalism.' (pp.323-324) This undertaking is never fully realised; as has come to be expected from his peripatetic working method, he continues to change his focus, with the following year's course, 'On the Government of the Living', being largely devoted to the study of early Christian practices of confession. Thus the need to articulate a distinctively Foucauldian voice in contemporary debates over the biopolitical, wherein the concept has often been turned from governmentality back to sovereignty and from history back to metaphysics, will not be met by the search for an original or authentic account, but will rather require the difficult work of extrapolation and reinvention.

These lectures provide greater insight into the period of Foucault's work, interstitial between what have become known as the 'genealogical' and 'ethical' moments, when he was developing his theory of 'governmentality'. This notion of a political apparatus that governs through conducting the conduct of others has already received considerable attention in certain areas of political theory. In these lectures, Foucault's analysis of governmentality is articulated

against what he perceives as an ambiguous and widespread state-phobia that is expressed in an inflationary critique of an omnipotent and intrinsically totalitarian state (pp.75-76, pp.186-192). He argues that while he does not ignore the state (that in fact ‘the gradual, piecemeal, but continuous takeover by the state of a number of practices ... is at the heart’ (p.77) of his previous and present analyses) one must nonetheless question the state from a different angle. Rather than working deductively, beginning from the essence or universality of the state, Foucault questions it from outside and underneath, in terms of the micropolitical practices by which it comes to be, and in terms of its specific characteristics, the main example being a reduction rather than expansion of state powers.

In addition to this critique of phobia of the state, the lectures contain a number of interesting remarks on what he calls at one stage ‘critical morality’ (p.186). There is an interesting digression on the ‘antagonistic fate of Weberianism in Germany’ (p.106) as demonstrated in the historical paths of the Frankfurt School of critical theory and the Freiburg School of ordoliberalism (pp.105-106). There is a provocative observation of the relationship of the Situationist ‘critique of mass society, of the society of one-dimensional man, of authority, of consumption, of the spectacle’ to the Nazi critique of bourgeois, capitalist society (pp.113-114). He also has a jab at critiques of consumerism, arguing that ‘the sociological analyses—for they have never been economic analyses—of mass consumption, of consumer society, and so forth, do not hold up and have no value in relation to an analysis of consumption in the neo-liberal terms of the activity of production.’ (p.226) By this he reasserts his famous theory of the productivity of power, arguing that neoliberal governance is not simply repressive, keeping consumers subjugated by their very consumption, but produces subjects as free, rational economic agents, calculating their own risks and investments, in order to generate the very ground of the neoliberal free market, that is, the figure of *homo oeconomicus* as ‘an entrepreneur of himself’ (p.226), a producer of his own human capital, capacity to earn and, indeed, happiness. Liberalism, thus, is conceived ‘as the management and organization of the conditions in which one can be free’ (pp.63-64). A central task for Foucault scholars will be to articulate the manner in which the ‘late’ Foucault’s conception of ascetic self-government in fact differs from the neoliberal modes whose analysis led him to his ‘ethical turn’.

Foucault’s lectures, delivered thirty years ago, were (as he often made clear) only schematic and provisional, intended to provoke himself and others to further research and questioning. Nonetheless they have proved to be extremely prescient analyses of phenomena whose significance would only increase in the decades since. I refer not only to the obvious rise of neoliberalism which became so dominant since the eighties, and whose crisis is causing such consternation at present. Foucault also highlighted the manner in which American neoliberalism extended its economic logic of scarcity and interest to realms previously held to be external to economic concerns, whether criminality (pp.248-260), education, the family, the environment, or life itself—or when, ‘engaging in a bit of science fiction’ (p.227), he points to how ‘the political problem of the use of genetics arises in terms of the formation, growth, accumulation, and improvement of human capital’ (p.228). This problematic by which genetic risk is factored into decisions ranging from procreation to health insurance has, of course, become a familiar part of today’s very science-fictional world.

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