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Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France, 1978–1979, Michel Foucault. Edited by Michel Senellart. Seuil/Gallimard, 2004, xi + 355 pages.

The title of this book is rather misleading. “Birth of neoliberal governmentality,” or something like that, would have been more faithful to its contents. In Foucault’s vocabulary, “biopolitics” is the “rationalisation” of “governmentality” (p. 261): it’s the theory, in other words, as opposed to the art (governmentality) of managing people. The mismatch between title and content is easily explained: the general theme of the courses at the Collège de France had to be announced at the beginning of each academic year. It is part of the mandate of every professor at the Collège, however, that his lectures should follow closely his current research. As a consequence it wasn’t unusual for Foucault to take new directions while he was lecturing. In 1979, for the first and only time in his career, he took a diversion into contemporary political philosophy. His principal object of investigation became “neoliberal” political economy. More precisely, he got increasingly interested in those strands of contemporary liberalism that use economic science both as a principle of limitation and of inspiration for the management of people.

Naissance de la biopolitique is the latest instalment in a series of publications that will eventually cover Foucault’s entire period as “Chair of the History of Systems of Thought” at the Collège de France (1970–84). The books are based on tapes recorded by students and other members of the audience, edited using Foucault’s own notes, and complemented by comprehensive bibliographical material. The course of 1978–79 is not Foucault’s only engagement with economic science, of course, for a decade earlier he had devoted many pages of *The Order of Things* (1966) to outline the transition of economics from immature to mature science. As we shall

see however there are several differences between Foucault's perspective in *The Order* and in *Naissance*, which make the latter much more interesting quite independently of its topical character.

In the opening pages of *Naissance* Foucault outlines a project that will be familiar to his readers. His goal is to lay bare the "*savoir*" of liberalism. The concept of *savoir* is perhaps Foucault's most enduring legacy to epistemology and the philosophy of science. The customary way to present it to an Anglo-American audience is by way of a contrast with Thomas Kuhn's notion of scientific paradigm (e.g. Hacking 1979). Like a Kuhnian paradigm, a *savoir* is a changing historical entity that is mostly invisible to those who live and work within its boundaries. As with Kuhn's revolutions, there's a high degree of incommensurability across the "ruptures" (the term is Bachelard's) that separate different *savoirs*. Unlike a paradigm, however, a *savoir* isn't organized around exemplary achievements. Its role is less in determining what ought to be done within a certain discipline, than what *can* be done. A *savoir* defines primarily the conditions of possibility of science, by making certain kinds of entities amenable to a certain type of discourse. More precisely, with the birth of a *savoir*, an entity or domain becomes a legitimate object for a discourse that can be evaluated in terms of truth and falsity.

During his career Foucault investigated this process of "veridification" in disciplines as diverse as linguistics, medicine, biology, psychiatry, criminology, and sexuality. In the case of economics, he identifies an important transition from a predominantly *juridical* discourse about markets in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, to a *veridical* discourse that begins to take roots from the middle of the eighteenth century (see the lectures of 10–17 January). *Naissance* however does not deal primarily with epistemological matters. The birth of economics as a scientific discipline is important to Foucault for another reason. The birth of a regime of truth (and falsity) makes it possible for political economy to take the role of *arbiter of governmentality*. Government intervention can now be assessed in terms of its economic efficacy, rather than justice.

To claim an objective knowledge of the functioning of markets effects a reversal in the traditional hierarchy between what is and what ought to be. In the old regime, the relation between markets and government is framed primarily in moral and legal terms: the government (the monarch, usually) is in charge of supervising and guaranteeing justice in the market place, by making sure, for example, that market prices are not fraudulent. Under the new *savoir*, the mechanism of price generation (the market) becomes the arbiter and measure of the adequacy of government. The positive theory of markets will tell us whether the government is "right" – where this term loses its juridical connotation to acquire the utilitarian sense of "efficacious." Liberal political economy shifts the attention from the problem of the origins and legitimacy of government, to the issue

of its effects or efficacy. There are things that a government cannot and should not do, not because it doesn't have the right to do them, but because it lacks the means and the power. There are intrinsic limitations to governmentality, which stem from the market mechanism and come to light via its scientific study.

With the rise of political economy the idea begins to circulate that any government intervention must demonstrate its efficacy by passing what Foucault calls the "market test." Why should we govern in the first place? Is this kind of intervention needed? Would the market be able to solve this problem if left on its own? Are we not governing too much? These are the questions posed by liberal political economy, and that make up the peculiar character of liberal governmentality: a style of government that is suspicious of government intervention itself. In the rest of the book Foucault looks at some contemporary versions of this tradition, which he subsumes under the term "neoliberalism." Clearly his neoliberalism is just a small portion of contemporary liberal thought. It's not a matter of left or right, here, but of foundations. For Foucault's neoliberals, political discourse stems from social science rather than moral philosophy. By framing the rise of neoliberalism historically the way he does, Foucault implicitly introduces a deep wedge between the "juridical" traditions of contractarian and natural rights philosophy, and the form of (neo) liberalism he is interested in. Forget John Rawls and Robert Nozick, in other words. Think of the tradition that goes from Hobbes, Hume, and Adam Smith, to Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, David Gauthier, and contemporary evolutionary game theory.

Hayek and Friedman are often mentioned in Foucault's lectures, which however do not take the form of an in-depth reading of the "great texts" of neoliberalism. As Foucault's readers know very well, the most genuine and revealing manifestations of a *savoir* are to be found in the works of relatively low-rank figures. Thus Foucault spends most of the time discussing the writings of fairly obscure German economists of the 1930s, or scanning the pages of the *Journal of Political Economy* of the 1960s and 1970s. It's worth pointing out, by the way, that he does his homework conscientiously. When a famous philosopher ventures in your territory, it is tempting to engage in malicious reading, just to catch him out of his depth. There are few objectionable claims in these pages, however. Foucault's rendition of familiar texts is generally recognizable, there's little overinterpretation, and all the paragraphs are backed up by a robust body of references that the editors have reconstructed from his notes and personal library. Sometimes Foucault relies heavily on secondary literature (mostly in French), and is clearly selective in what he decides to focus upon. But these lectures were not prepared for publication, after all, and it's important to understand the nature of Foucault's project before we proceed.

As usual with Foucault, this is no ordinary history of ideas, but a philosophical enterprise carried out by means of historical investigation. To place this project in context, it's worth reminding ourselves of a few dates. The lectures published in *Naissance de la biopolitique* date from January to April 1979. We are in the later phase of Foucault's thought, but still relatively close to the crucial years of 1975–76. *Discipline and Punish* came out in French in 1975, and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* in 1976. These two books elaborate in full-fledged form the two central categories of Foucault's later philosophy – the concepts of “technique of domination” and “technology of the self.” During the 1970s Foucault became increasingly conscious that all his work – from *Madness and Civilisation* onwards – had been dealing with the Kantian theme of the formation of the human subject. It is, of course, a historicized Kant and a historically contingent subjectivity. Who I am (a university lecturer, a husband and father, an Italian citizen) is the product of the interaction of several factors acting upon our selves and our sense of ourselves. The subject is literally “subject to” (in the sense of “passive recipient of”) such forces, is moulded by them and is the contingent historical product of their attrition.

The forces are multiple and change in time, but can be usefully classified in two grand categories. *Techniques of domination* are the institutional factors at the center of Foucault's earlier investigations: they cover the legal, religious, and scientific institutions that have become the Foucauldian sites *par excellence* – the hospital, the asylum, the prison. Foucault tries to show that characters like the patient or the criminal would literally have not existed without such techniques of domination, because these techniques were not only an integral part of the *savoir* that defined the way to think and talk about these characters, but contributed to *bringing about* and sustaining the existence of such characters. (Via a “looping effect,” as Ian Hacking has called it, or a “performative process,” to use a more traditional Austinian expression.) *Discipline and Punish* probably constitutes the apogee of Foucault's study of techniques of domination. In the second half of the 1970s, with the ambitious project of the *History of Sexuality*, his attention turned to the ways in which our subjectivity is shaped (and kept in shape) by self-administered disciplinary techniques. Foucault's “technologies of the self” – from Socrates' demon to Catholic confession, to psychoanalysis – are the *internal* counterparts of the coercive forces that were at the center of his earlier research.

All this is well known, and each category has produced a huge amount of critical literature and historical case studies. I recall it because *Naissance de la biopolitique* can be plausibly read as work-in-progress, a tentative search for instantiations of these two categories within the space of liberal thought. Of course this is not a case study like any other. Liberalism is by its very nature a most challenging arena for Foucault, especially for his

views that (1) power is ineliminable and ubiquitous, and (2) government is pervasive and always coercive. Liberalism is a doctrine aimed at minimizing government, at keeping it in constant check and limiting its domain of application. Liberalism is *against* control and domination of the subject, except where it's really absolutely necessary and functional to an overall reduction of government intervention. But if Foucault is right, there can't be a modern subject without subjection. Given that the modern subject (in Western culture, at least) is imbued with liberalism, Foucault has got a problem. His approach ought to face the challenge posed by this peculiar form of (anti-)governmentality – it must face the “liberalism test.”

To write a history of contemporary liberal political economy in the domination frame is no mean feat. The important action is supposed to take place where a “series of practices” meets a “regime of truth” (p. 22). Practice here covers the rich ground of the manipulation and control of scientific entities – of people and institutions, in the case of the social sciences. But where's this productive interaction between theorising and policy-making, in the case of liberal political economy? The Chicago boys in Chile, let's say (Valdés 1995), don't fit a technique of domination story in the standard Foucauldian sense. There isn't enough physical separation, classification, eviction, incarceration, repression for that to be possible. This does not mean that Chicago-inspired policies had no effect on the Chilean people, of course, or that policing, imprisoning, and killing had no part in the overall political regime that led to the implementation of such policies. The trouble is rather that economic knowledge had little *direct* involvement with such techniques of domination, it didn't grow out of such practices of exclusion and repression, didn't have to negotiate directly with its victims and subjects. There's power, and there's knowledge. But there's little Power/Knowledge.

In *The Order of Things* Foucault wasn't particularly troubled by economists' lack of direct involvement with their subjects. *The Order* is probably Foucault's most radical and most dated book, a product of the Parisian 1960s in its extreme linguistic idealism. In hindsight, it looks like an episode between Foucault's early study of madness and his later investigations of the prison, the clinic, and sexuality. In the late 1970s, Foucault's perspective is rather different. The fact that economics lacks a laboratory, an asylum, a prison – the privileged theatres of Foucault's best dramas – looks like a big problem indeed.

The liberalism test of course could be easily by-passed by reducing liberalism to mere ideology, the Marxian way. Liberalism could be represented as a convenient cover for an underlying reality of oppression and domination. Liberal economics could be portrayed as pseudo-science, to be exposed and condemned as the servant of whatever power is in place. We can imagine that this would have been the natural attitude of Foucault's

Parisian audience in 1978, but it's probably still the default strategy of most antagonistic, anti-establishment movements of these days. However it's too easy an option for Foucault, and is explicitly dismissed fairly soon in the lectures. In doing so, Foucault is not driven merely by intellectual snobbism. Unlike the Marxian, Foucault does not have a convenient distinction between base and ideology, or science and pseudo-science, and therefore is forced to take liberalism seriously for deep theoretical reasons.

There are several episodes in the history of economics that would fit a Foucauldian narrative easily. Take Beveridge (often cited in these lectures), the management and invention of the unemployed in the 1920s, or the war economy in Britain in the 1940s. Here we've got a good combination of economic theory (Keynes) in a social context that called for a scientific justification of partly existing, and partly yet to be conceived, policies, with the explicit aim of controlling vast portions of society. These policies moreover display an array of techniques (labeling, separating, punishing, counting) that are typically associated with the birth of new social kinds (the deserving poor, the unemployed, the housewife, the working woman, etc.).

Unfortunately these episodes fall on the wrong side of the liberal divide. Foucault is taking the liberal test in its most challenging form. In the eyes of neoliberalism as he conceives it, Beveridge and the New Deal are the enemy, the corrupted forms of capitalism that would eventually (indeed, inevitably) lead to the demise of free society and democracy. This liberal "phobia of the state" takes a distinctive shape in the writings of the so-called "Freiburg School" a group of German economists organised around the "Ordo Manifesto" of 1936 and then the journal *Ordo* (from 1948). The "Ordoliberalists" (Walter Eucken, Franz Böhm, Wilhelm Röpke, among others) play a double pivotal role in Foucault's story. First, as agents of the diffusion of neoliberalism during the intellectual diaspora of the 1930s and 1940s; and secondly for their influence on the economic policies of the Adenauer government in West Germany after World War II.

Two aspects of the Ordoliberal doctrine clearly capture Foucault's attention (see the lectures from 31 January to 21 February 1979). The first one is the idea of the market as constituting the foundations of social order. The fall of Nazism in 1945 provided Germany with a unique chance to start from scratch, and in typical neoliberal style the Ordoliberalists asked: Why do we need a state at all? The dirigisme of 1914–15 gave way to the aberration of the Nazi anti-state (a heavily planned society organized around the metaphysics of the *volk* and its emanation, the Nazi party). The new West German state will have to avoid these aberrations by taking the market as its central principle of organisation. Its main effect, economic growth, will be the glue that keeps German society together.

What is a market, though? The second fascinating feature of Ordoliberalism is its radical anti-naturalism. A well-functioning competitive

market is *not* a natural entity, one that we can expect somehow to evolve spontaneously and which only has to be liberated from the impediments of unnecessary government interference. Competition is rather a “formal principle,” a theoretical entity to be artificially created and nurtured. It’s a historical goal or target, rather than a natural phenomenon to be preserved from extinction.

Foucault is less precise than usual here. The Ordoliberals, especially Eucken who was probably the philosophically most sophisticated of the lot, rejected unambiguously the theoretical approach of the Austrian school. They did not believe the job of the economist to be the search for essences or the abstract analysis of formal concepts. In his *Grundlagen* Eucken (1940) speaks of “forms” (and sometimes “pure forms,” which probably engendered Foucault’s confusion) that must be identified by means of isolating abstraction from concrete economic reality. He is much more of an empiricist than one would infer from Foucault’s lectures: economic forms cannot and should not be defined in advance of extensive empirical (and historical) investigation. Foucault is also exaggerating in attributing to the Ordoliberals the view that pure market forms cannot evolve spontaneously. They rather argued that there’s no reason to expect that they should. Sometimes economic forms emerge and survive on their own, but sometimes they require quite a lot of policy intervention, for example to prevent the formation of oligopolies.

Foucault does not realise, or at any rate forgets to mention, how unusual this doctrine is. Hayek’s work, which Foucault confusingly associates with the Freiburg economists, is full of biological metaphors and is thoroughly naturalistic in character. As far as he constitutes the link between German and American neoliberalism, Hayek can be held partly responsible also for the evolutionary faith permeating much of the latter. The Ordoliberals are very different, and in a very interesting way.

Ordoliberalism appears to be an odd spin-off of the *Methodenstreit*. The interpretation of pure economic concepts as ideal essences was a crucial element in the Austrian defense of economic theory from the attack of Gustav Schmoller’s historical school. The Austrian distinction between pure and applied economics – in the writings of Menger and Mises, for example – however opens the difficult problem of explaining how the pure concepts of economic theory can be relevant for understanding the real economic world and, most importantly, intervening in it. Eucken seems to have an interesting solution to this problem: the forms distilled from historical investigation may well *not* be relevant to understanding contemporary economic reality. They can *become* relevant, however, if we make them so. We can create the conditions for the emergence and the smooth functioning of markets. A perfectly competitive market is a historically contingent entity, “a sort of subtle and very reliable mechanism, provided it functions well and nothing intervenes to disturb it” (p. 145).

We find here some typical Foucauldian themes: an accent on artificiality, contingency, but also an account of the need to intervene in order to create social order. The Ordoliberals advocate a *Gesellschaftspolitik*, a politics of society that is, in Foucault's words, "at the same time active, multiple, watchful and omnipresent" (p. 165). The scholar of the Panopticon is clearly enjoying himself here. The Freiburg school may be an exception in the galaxy of contemporary liberalism, but displays a lot of features that make it appealing to Foucault. Every social order must be constantly created and sustained, because no order is naturally given. A sophisticated neoliberal doctrine must be able to recognize this philosophical truth *and* at the same time continue to preach government abstinence. How can this be done? The key move is to distinguish between economic mechanisms and social framework, i.e. the background conditions that must be in place so as to allow the correct functioning of markets. The government must constantly intervene, but *in society*, rather than in the economy itself.

Notice the diametrical opposition with social democracy: government intervention is not required so as to fix the imperfection of markets, but to make a market economy possible – by creating and sustaining competition, for example, by having in place an appropriate legal system that supports the functioning of markets. But also by encouraging entrepreneurship in all areas of life, including those areas that were traditionally alien to the economic way of thinking and acting. In a world where individual choice, risk management, investment in personal development, and so forth have become ubiquitous buzzwords, these ideas do not seem bizarre at all.

The promotion of individual entrepreneurship, autonomy, and freedom of choice stemmed in the Ordoliberals from deep philosophical commitments. Eucken's father, Rudolf, was a prominent Kantian philosopher (as well as winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, in 1908). Walter Eucken himself and many Ordoliberals were fervent Christians, keen to translate their ethical beliefs in social scientific practice. None of these themes is elaborated in the lectures, but the style of the discussion suggests that we are entering in the realm of the "technologies of the self" at this point. This is the implicit *leitmotif* in Foucault's analysis of the second body of neoliberal doctrines. After a cursory look at contemporary French policies (7 March lecture, where he clearly finds nothing of interest), Foucault turns to the Chicago school (14–28 March). The *economization of everyday life* is what fascinates him here. The bulk of these lectures is devoted to human capital theory and to the economics of crime and punishment. An important difference between the Ordoliberals and the Chicago school is that the latter rejects the distinction between the economic and the social. The fundamental methodological postulate of the economic approach to human behaviour is that every aspect of economic life is, or can be represented in terms of, economic choice.

This is a tricky but important point. It's well known that Stigler, Becker, and their followers do not present their models as faithful descriptions of what goes on (or perhaps even could go on) in the real world. The economic imperialism of the Chicago school is usually predicated on an anti-realist stance, such as Friedman's famous "as if" methodology. Where the Ordoliberals had an explicit program of creating the conditions for the existence of efficient markets, Chicago economists have a much more ambiguous relation with economic reality. They are not afraid to put forward policy advice, of course, but at the same time insist that their theories do not tell us what is *really* going on.

I insist on these points mainly to highlight the fragile distinction between a mere ideology and a "technology of the self." Consider the biopolitics of population in the eighteenth century, the main topic of Foucault's 1977–78 courses (Foucault 2004). The story told by Foucault (and later by other historians) outlines a complex web of connections between the consolidation of the great European states, the necessity of collecting taxes, counting births, deaths, marriages, the organization of the Napoleonic army, the birth of statistics, and much more. Compared to this rich narrative, Foucault's account of liberalism looks remarkably thin, exposing very little of the institutional/discursive apparatus (*dispositif*) that supposedly makes up liberal governmentality. That's why Foucault is occasionally forced to admit that American neoliberalism is more a "utopian nucleus" and a "way of thinking" than a concrete policy alternative (p. 224). There's no presumption that each individual is really, wholly and always a homo oeconomicus. Rather, the model of homo oeconomicus is a predicting tool, useful to limit government intervention to those policies that are not going to be frustrated by the behavior of its citizens. In this sense, homo oeconomicus works as "the interface between government and individual" (p. 258). It belongs to the liberal strategy of using social science to raise the question of the unnecessary presence of the state, but it's not clear whether it's part of an explicit project of socio-economic engineering, in Foucault's account.

A way of thinking, of course, can have very concrete (looping) effects. That's what makes economic imperialism and similar intellectual movements somewhat disturbing. To some, a society entirely subjected to the law of the market looks as attractive as a society organised as a giant mental asylum. The last two lectures, devoted to *homo oeconomicus* and the concept of civil society (28 March–4 April) suggest however that this is not Foucault's worry. The market won't conquer the whole sphere of social life, for it can only exist as a niche *within* the structure of civil society. Foucault's idea of civil society is taken from Ferguson (and, less explicitly, Adam Smith), two obvious precursors of the Ordoliberal distinction between social framework and economic mechanism. Markets can only work smoothly in the right socio-institutional context. The

context is provided in part by civil society, a structure of interpersonal relations of trust, benevolence, sympathy, and (crucially, for Foucault) power, that is a necessary precondition for the functioning of the market economy.

Foucault thus endorses the Ordoliberal dual ontology, but introduces a twist by highlighting a constant tension between civil society and the market. The latter cannot exist without the former, but like a parasite is also constantly in danger of destroying it. There's a question of *how much* market we can afford, without destroying the social ties that make the market possible. The destruction of civil society will be the destruction of the market, and in the end of liberal governmentality itself. This is, of course, a possibility, perhaps a certainty if we assume that all forms of government are contingent and transitory. Liberalism in a sense can only exist as a *challenge*, a *test*, a question that we keep asking – why not less government rather than more? – rather than a stable and universal form of government.

These are some of the ideas to be found in *Naissance de la biopolitique*. There are various reasons that make it worth reading. One – the most superficial perhaps – is the curiosity of watching a famous philosopher battling with what is obviously an especially difficult topic, from his theoretical point of view. Does Foucault pass the liberalism test, then? I would answer yes, albeit perhaps without distinction. His case studies are less rich and convincing than those we are accustomed to from his other books. But again, we must remember the nature of these texts and be a little charitable – I wonder how many academics would feel comfortable with making their lecture notes available like this. Foucault's lectures at least have the virtue of pointing the way for a "thicker" analysis of liberal governmentality (which in part has already been attempted, see e.g. Miller and Rose 1990).

More interestingly, however, *Naissance* gives us an insight into the many things that remain to be done in the philosophy of economics. The history and philosophy of economics have been marching side by side for a good part of the last three decades, although this partnership is less tight now than it's been in the past. This may be partly because philosophers have asked the wrong questions and looked for inspiration in the wrong kind of history (i.e. the history of economic ideas, rather narrowly conceived). The truth is, you can't do much history of economics without economic history (a history of ideas without a history of the institutions). Much methodology and ontology of economics also involves issues of the creation of economic reality that can and should be tackled empirically rather than a priori. Luckily we are now beginning to see some studies of the interaction between economic science and economic policy-making, from the pricing of futures in finance, to the construction of auctions, to the fixing of fishing quotas in the North Sea, which cut right at

the interface between practice and theorizing (MacKenzie, Muniesa, and Siu, eds. 2006).

In many ways economics looks more like a Foucauldian discipline now than it did when these lectures were delivered at the Collège de France. Foucault himself didn't live long enough to see neoclassical economics flourish as a scientific and policy tool. He did not witness the rise of social capital theory, the Nobel prizes to game theory and experimental economics, the market transition of the former Soviet economies, and the cases of economic engineering inspired by mechanism design theory in the 1990s. Economic knowledge does shape social order to a greater extent than it did three decades ago. Whether that is to be welcomed or not is a question that Foucault himself would have obstinately refused to answer.

Francesco Guala
University of Exeter

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