
Review

The government of life: Foucault, biopolitics, and neoliberalism

Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter (Eds.)

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The debate concerning Michel Foucault's relationship to neo-liberalism has recently rekindled. Despite some claims to the contrary, Foucault's alleged turn to (neo) liberalism during the final decade of his life is hardly a new discovery. As Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter point out, the idea that Foucault became a liberal in the mid-1970s is a recurring legend, one that the book seeks to put to rest. Most of the contributions to this volume are either explicitly or implicitly at odds with the contention that Foucault would have embraced any type of liberalism in his late work. As Roberto Nigro puts it, 'It would be highly misleading to suggest that Foucault's reading of liberalism was *liberal*' (p. 130). That said, the essays in this collection offer much more than simply a defence of Foucault against those who would brand him as one or another type of liberal.

Divided into four parts, the book provides contributions on the normative orders of neo-liberalism, the genealogies of biopolitics, the relationship between law and liberal governmentality, and ethics and embodiment. The essays are not confined to discussing the texts where Foucault explicitly examines neo-liberalism or biopolitics. Rather, they draw on a wide range of his writings, from the texts on the Iranian Revolution to his final lecture courses at the Collège de France. Furthermore, Foucault's work is discussed here not only in relation to the contemporary biopolitical canon – Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – but also in relation to the thought of such diverse figures as Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Canguilhem, Friedrich Hayek, Jan Patočka and John Rawls. In addition to the breadth and depth of these engagements, the volume also deserves credit for acknowledging and drawing attention to existing readings of Foucault in languages other than English, most notably French, German and Italian.

The editors suggest the concept of *nomos*, understood as 'normative order', as a way of bringing together the pastoral and the economic dimensions of social order (p. 6), thus hoping to draw attention also to the spiritual preconditions of power. This conception of *nomos* is proposed as the thread that weaves the chapters together. This is a welcome perspective considering that examinations of biopolitics often



focus on the intertwining of economy and biology, paying less attention to notions of the spiritual. Recognising the juncture between the economic and the biological is of course key to any discussion of biopolitics, as the chapter by Francesco Paolo Adorno shows. Nevertheless, it seems that several of the chapters find various notions of the spiritual useful, especially in considering alternatives to liberal governmentality. Most of the texts thus contribute to the body of work that has come to be known as ‘affirmative biopolitics’. As the Foucauldian biopolitical problematic, the *dispositif* of security, has already been rather well-rehearsed in recent years, I highlight in this review those essays that in my view most expressly engage with the question of how to challenge, resist or even overcome contemporary biopolitics. The ways of approaching this problematic that are proposed here are quite diverse, but in different ways they all appear to revolve around the question of how to understand the relationship between biological life (*zoē*) and life with form (*bios*) in a way that is politically enabling.

According to Maria Muhle, biopower functions by imitating the vital dynamics of *zoē*. Rejecting Gilles Deleuze’s vitalist reading of Foucault, she argues that there can be no vitality that would be external to strategies of power (pp. 93–94). Muhle follows Foucault in arguing that resistance does not even need to be imagined outside the analytics of power. Rather, counter-conducts and counter-discourses are the ‘stage of the political’ where particular constellations of power can be effectively contested (p. 97). In a fascinating text, Adorno makes the case for what could be called an affirmative *thanatopolitics*. He argues that whereas *zoē* knows only biological death, *bios* can appropriate a form of death that is articulated around anti-economical, non-productive and powerless forms of existence (p. 109). The central idea is that ‘learning how to die’ transforms one’s life too. The relationship between *zoē* and *bios* is key also to Judith Revel’s account of an affirmative biopolitics. Revel proposes an affirmative biopolitics where ‘life’ is entirely understood as *bios*, as thoroughly produced by the sociality of differential singularities. For Revel, such forms of being are excessive in relation to apparatuses of power. ‘Where power administers life’, she argues, there is ‘a simultaneously ontological and political strategy of resistance: a creation, an augmentation of being’ (p. 123). Miguel Vatter, in turn, finds the possibility of challenging liberal governmentality in a republican understanding of law where the law-making power belongs irreducibly to a people that cannot be reduced to a population. Whereas neo-liberalism places the power to make law in the hands of the judges and at the mercy of political economy, turning citizens into a population governed through administrative orders (p. 178), Vatter wishes to revive a conception of law as the political self-organisation of a people. Law, thus conceived, expresses the ideal of a self-mastery that is independent of technologies of power (p. 167).

In perhaps the only chapter of the book that is directly and explicitly critical of Foucault, Melinda Cooper argues that the late Foucault’s turn to political spirituality and self-sovereignty as an alternative to both the normalising welfare state and



neo-liberalism revives ‘a classical Greek conception of noble beneficence and restrained luxury to open up a space of limited excess among aristocratic men, while insisting on the absolute submission of women to the intimate law of the household’ (p. 51). Cooper draws intriguing links between Foucault’s support for the Iranian Revolution, his critique of neo-liberalism and his pursuit of an ethics of the self that coincided around the year 1979. Whereas many of the other chapters follow the late Foucault in formulating different notions of self-sovereignty and ethical self-formation as alternatives to the government of life that is entailed by neo-liberalism, Cooper sees it as a sign of Foucault’s ‘philosophical limits’ that he would seek a new economy of pleasures by returning to the Greek *oikos* and the ethical practices associated with it (p. 58). I do not entirely agree with Cooper that ‘Foucault’s ethics of the self is concerned exclusively with an *ars erotica* developed for free men’, which is functional only on the condition of female piousness (p. 50). I believe that a much broader and nuanced reading of the ethics of the self is possible. Nevertheless, Cooper’s essay is one of the most stimulating in a compilation that, while extending Foucault’s thought, is otherwise fairly uncritical of it.

The final two chapters, by Simona Forti and Vanessa Lemm, examine the lecture course on *The Courage of Truth*, which was to remain Foucault’s last at the Collège de France, given only a few months before his death in 1984. Both Forti and Lemm take up the Greek concept of *parrhesia*, which broadly speaking refers to the courage to say what one believes to be true. Due to the relatively recent publication of Foucault’s lecture courses (some of which still have not been published in English), many of the directions for thought that Foucault hinted at especially in his very last lectures remain to be fully developed. Thus, the chapters by Forti and Lemm are more than welcome engagements with the notion of truth-telling in the late Foucault. Forti offers an engaging reading of the concept of the soul as that which overcomes the distinction between the everyday and the divine, and as ‘that which in the subject constantly offers resistance’ (p. 195). Lemm, in turn, emphasises the animality of the ancient Cynics who are Foucault’s chosen example of truth-telling subjects. Animality that nevertheless brings forth its own *bios*, a form of life that is not imposed on nature and does not attempt to exclude it, but rather finds its model of existence in *zōē* (p. 221). In different ways both Forti and Lemm point towards the importance of embodying, living and telling the truth in the face of the government of life. However, neither of them relates the discussion of truth-telling back to the theme of neo-liberalism. Considering both the title of the book and the contemporary political situation, a discussion of the potential subversive role of truth-telling specifically in the context of neo-liberalism would have been a befitting ending to what is nevertheless a highly readable and inspiring collection of essays.

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