

“You too, Brutus?” Michel Foucault’s Relation to Neoliberalism

Robert A. Winkler

Abstract:

In *Foucault and Neoliberalism* Michael C. Behrent, historian, and Daniel Zamora, sociologist, historicize Michel Foucault's intellectual engagement with (neo-)liberal theory in order to criticize his status as left thinker – and the concordant prevalence of his approaches. This volume brings together seven critical perspectives on the intellectual and political development of the 'late' Foucault in order to open up the possibility of a more effective, left critical theory; instead of dismissing his extra-ordinary influence, this essay collection delineates thought-provoking analytical approaches that fuse Foucault's 'governmentality' framework with Marxist ideology critique.

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Foucault and Neoliberalism is being published, and controversially debated, at the juncture of two significant events: the fall of the 'master thinker' Martin Heidegger, and the election of the billionaire-turned-president Donald J. Trump. The first event reveals a general tendency to question the status and influence of institutionalized grand intellectuals, while the latter – and doubtless more significant one – clearly and painfully manifests the apparent ineffective intervention of critical leftist thought beyond the safe spaces of the ivory tower. These seemingly unrelated developments crystallize in the legacy of Michel Foucault, who is on the one hand the “superstar of twentieth-century French thought” (p. 5), with theories and methods that saturate the arsenal of contemporary humanities' apparently critical projects; this very influence of Foucault is on the other hand singled out as contributing to the demise of effective leftist theory and politics, to its being made incapable of convincingly addressing the economic, social, and political monstrosities of the neoliberal reign (cf. p. 3-5; 183-85). The volume itself was originally published in French in 2014 and additionally features a translation of Foucault's favorable review of André Glucksmann's *The Master Thinkers* – a radical critique of Marxism as inherently totalitarian.

In the introduction to their volume, entitled “Foucault, the Left, and the 1980s” (p. 1-5), Zamora broadly contextualizes questioning Foucault's relation to neoliberalism: “These questions pertain not only to Foucault himself, but also to the ambiguities inherent in the Left (or at least a part of it), [...] in light of neoliberalism's rising tide” (p. 3). Obviously, the issue at stake is the intellectual impotency of the political left and one of its causes is identified in the prevalence of Foucauldian frameworks. Consequently, half of the volume (the contributions by Christofferson, Behrent, Zamora, and Amselle) aims at ‘exorcising the demons of the left’ by historicising Foucault as sympathizer of neoliberalism in the intellectual context of his times; what can be grouped as the second part of the volume (the contributions by, at least partially, Dean, as well as Wacquant and Rehmann) critiques and develops Foucault’s concept of governmentality from the angle of critical social theory.

Zamora's contribution, “Foucault, the Excluded, and the Neoliberal Erosion of the State” (p. 63-84) is a prime example of the intellectual history approach; the author convincingly traces the development of Foucault's political standpoints in the post-1968 era to conclude that his

rather negative stance towards social security is in accordance with both neoliberal theory and the emerging anti-statism within parts of the French left: “The intellectual consecration of neoliberalism by the Left as well as the Right, and the 'symbolic coup' after which one principle of vision and division of the world (one of social classes and exploitation) has been superseded by another (one of exclusion and poverty), are integral parts of Foucault's (and many others') intellectual development” (p. 80). The historicizing contributions in the volume are indispensable for questioning the saint-like status as prototypical leftist intellectual that Foucault has acquired in parts of the academy; however, they are not overly helpful in evaluating the possibilities of fruitfully appropriating his theoretical and methodological approaches towards neoliberalism. It thus comes as no surprise that they (along with the entire volume) have been heavily criticized by the Foucault camp.

The fourth chapter, “Foucault, Ewald, Neoliberalism, and the Left” (p. 85-114), although rather hidden in the middle of the volume, is its most convincing contribution as it brings together the two main approaches: discussing the lectures under scrutiny from the standpoint of critical social theory and contextualizing a seemingly insignificant event related to Foucault. Mitchell Dean recounts the fascinating public exchange between François Ewald and Gary Becker which took place in a series of seminars at the University of Chicago in 2012; the former man was a close associate of Foucault and general editor for the recent publication of his lectures, and the latter the foremost economist of the 'Chicago school,' whose theories were discussed in several of Foucault's 1978/1979 lectures. The author traces the public consensus between Ewald and Becker to evaluate Ewald's intellectual and political activities, which have earned him the label “right Foucauldian” (Antonio Negri; p. 87). Thereby, Dean finds a way to point towards a reception of Foucault as sympathetic towards neoliberalism, which is mostly neglected as unfaithful to the “true Foucault” (Antonio Negri; p. 87). The author goes on to point towards “Empirical deficits in Foucault's governmentality lectures” before discussing textual evidence which demonstrates both Foucault's sympathies for and precautions about neoliberal theory (cf. 94-100). Dean convincingly concludes the piece by elaborating on concerns which need to be addressed in order to develop Foucault's thoughts on neoliberal governmentality, particular the problems of inequality and capital: “[Foucault] fails to capture the intersection of capital and value with such rationalities and technologies. He fails to link 'human capital' to the re-composition of capital, or to finance capital” (p. 107). This contribution can be read as an invitation to actualize – and fill with content – what Foucault could only grasp at its modest advent, namely the tremendous consequences of neoliberalism, which have re-centered the social question: “We can use Foucauldian governmental and ethical analytics to analyze the demand for a work on the self in welfare rationalities and technologies. However, these frameworks must never be mistaken for social-theoretical recipes for how such practices ought to operate” (p. 106, original emphasis).

It is rather unlikely that Foucault will have to forfeit his status as 'master thinker' due to the current debate about his (and his work's) relation to neoliberalism – however, the advent of the Age of Trump has already demonstrated that predictions have to be treated with caution. At any rate, Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent's essay collection stimulates a thought-

provoking and controversial discussion of Foucault's intellectual path within the political context of the French left and ultimately invites a (re-)reading of his oeuvre. This is all the more important as his approaches are too often appropriated in an uncritical, unreflected, and de-contextualized manner in the contemporary academy. Foucault and Neoliberalism is highly recommended for anyone eager to better understand the limits of contemporary intellectual and academic engagement in order to critically develop the analytical tools for subverting the current neoliberal regime – not against but with Foucault.