

Foucault, neoliberalism etc.

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The [recent online debate](#) triggered by the *Ballast* interview (translated in *Jacobin*) with Daniel Zamora will no doubt have helped to publicise Zamora's book and its forthcoming translation. As publicity for the French and English editions of the book, the interview seems to have been remarkably successful. I noticed the [original report](#) in *Foucault News* partly, I must confess, because it mentioned me and purported to report my views. I have been surprised by the amount of attention the piece has received, which seems to be disproportionate to its merits. The content of the interview, apparently summarising the content of the book, gives the impression that it consists of a mixture of old news and falsification. The old news is that Foucault was not a Marxist or a supporter of any existing model of revolutionary socialism, and was hostile to the USSR and the political influence of the French Communist Party. The falsification is the claim that Foucault 'endorsed' or 'embraced' some or all forms of liberalism and neoliberalism. This combination of the already known and the false is in turn packaged in the attention-seeking claim that Foucault's thought has become the unassailable, hegemonic discourse of our time, while its Marxist critics are now reduced to marginality within the neoliberal academy. The first part of this claim has already been met with deserved ridicule. As far as the second is concerned, the quality of this intervention does not tend to inspire regret at the decline in influence of the particular style of political culture it represents. Zamora, unborn at the time when Foucault was lecturing, appears, on the evidence of this interview and its successor interventions, to have put together an anthology of recycled old new left slurs on Foucault's work and politics, spiced up with one or two new confabulations of his own, plus a supplement of misinformation issuing from a rather different ideological source. I limit myself in the following notes to comment on some salient points in the online discussion.

I: My comments on Foucault and Blair

Zamora says in his interview: "Even Colin Gordon, one of Foucault's principal translators and commentators in the Anglo-Saxon world, has no trouble saying that he sees in Foucault a sort of precursor to the Blairite [Third Way](#), incorporating neoliberal strategy within the social-democratic corpus", adding subsequently, "Foucault, then, doesn't advocate neoliberalism, but he adopts all of its critiques of the welfare state. He attacks the supposed "dependency" it produces, the very notion of "rights," and its negative effect on the poor. His

objective is thus not to move towards a totally neoliberal society, but to incorporate within the socialist corpus some of the decisive elements of the neoliberal critique of the state. It's precisely in this sense that Colin Gordon sees him as a sort of precursor to Blairism". Zamora does not provide a reference to my remarks, which occur in my discussion with Jacques Donzelot (*Esprit* and [Foucault Studies](#)).

What I actually wrote (in 2007) was a little more nuanced and qualified than Zamora suggests:

I am not aware that Blair ever read Foucault. Anthony Giddens, for a time the Blair-Clinton court philosopher, usually includes a caricatural account of Foucault only as a marginal item in his doctrinal digests. But I think parts of the formulae of Clinton and Blair for a 'third way' may have effectively carried out a form of the operation which Foucault might have been taken as challenging the socialists to contemplate – the selective incorporation, in an updated and corrected social democracy, of certain elements of neoliberal analysis and strategy. In some ways, it is the continuation of a trend initiated in the 70s by Schmidt in Germany, Giscard in France and Healey in Britain, and in her different way by Thatcher – the truth-telling role of government, in a world of global economic uncertainty and competition, as moral tutor of citizens in an ethic of enterprise and responsibility. The success of this formula in Britain seemed for a long time to be limited only by the irritability of citizens and the claims of the fourth estate, the media, to make and unmake governmental power (both of these reactions being severely aggravated, of course, by Blair's extension of his governmental agenda to include the neoconservative enterprise of civilisational confrontation and global war on terror).

The comment on "irritability of citizens" was an allusion to the emerging public perception in these years of a "political class" separate from the rest of society, a perception itself no doubt generated in large part by the contradictory effects of neoliberalism itself – the new strident leadership style combined with the hollowing out of democratic political authority.

I stand by these comments, which clearly fell some way short of representing Blairism as a fulfilment of Foucault's political dreams. The New Labour project was, however partially, incompletely and inadequately, an attempt to devise and apply a form of centre-left governmentality – drawing both on ideas from the triangulating New Democrats in the USA, and from policies of social inclusion developed under Socialist governments in France. One thoughtful paper by William Davies (an intelligent reader of Foucault's work albeit not a card-carrying practitioner of governmentality studies) offered what seems to have been an isolated attempt, drawing on work by Rose and Miller among others, to analyse this project, and some of its

difficulties, in these terms.¹ Some more work of this kind would, I suggest, still be useful.

II: Foucault's attitude to liberalism and neoliberalism: the 1978-79 lectures

Foucault's 1979 lectures present an original analysis of liberalism and neoliberalism as forms of governmental rationality, a category which, as is well known, Foucault had himself introduced in his previous year's lectures. I heard the 1978 and 1979 lectures at the time or soon afterwards, live and/or on tape. It has always seemed to me completely obvious that the lectures contained neither a categorical endorsement nor a categorical critique of any of the forms of governmentality Foucault discusses – neither the eighteenth-century thought of the Physiocrats, Smith and Ferguson, nor the German, French or American forms of twentieth-century neoliberalism as these were available for study in 1979. Foucault no more 'embraces' liberalism in any of its forms in the lectures of 1979 than he 'embraces' the respective political claims of the *ancien régime* French crown, nobility or Third Estate in 1976, or the precepts of Christianity in 1980, those of Platonism, Pythagoreanism, Epicureanism or Stoicism in 1982-3, or those of Cynicism in 1984. I arranged for the translation of one of Foucault's 1978 lectures in 1979, and wrote some accounts of the 1978-79 lectures in pieces published in the 80s and early 90s, most extensively in our volume [The Foucault Effect](#), which has been widely used and cited and whose overall accuracy as a basic summary has, I hope, survived the test of comparison with the full published text of the lectures themselves.² The editor of the 1978-1980 lectures, Michel Senellart, cites *The Foucault Effect* and my introductory chapter within it in his "Course Context" for the 1978 volume. Concerning Foucault's attitude to liberalism and neoliberalism, I wrote in *The Foucault Effect* 1991:

One of the conspicuous attributes of Foucault's governmentality lectures is their serene and (in a Weberian sense) exemplary abstention from value judgements. In a pithy preamble he rejects the use of an academic discourse as a vehicle of practical injunction ("love this; hate that; do this; refuse that..."), and dismisses the notion that practical political choices can be determined within the space of a theoretical text as trivialising the act of

1 William Davies, "The Governmentality of New Labour", *Public Policy Research* 13, 4 (2006). http://potlatch.typepad.com/weblog/files/ppr_dec06.doc

2 For some discussion of this in a talk: <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2011/06/colin-gordon-governmentality-and-the-genealogy-of-politics/> ; unabridged text available here: https://www.academia.edu/9865830/Governmentality_and_the_Genealogy_of_Politics

moral decision to the level of a merely aesthetic preference. [...] In a nutshell, he suggests that recent neoliberalism, understood (as he proposes) as a novel set of notions about the art of government, is a considerably more original and challenging phenomenon than the Left's critical culture has had the courage to acknowledge, and that its political challenge is one which the left is singularly ill equipped to respond to, the more so since, as Foucault contends, socialism itself does not possess and has never possessed its own distinctive art of governing. The conclusion from this exercise in critical attentiveness to the present lies in the affirmation of the possibility and necessity, for those who wish to pursue certain ends and values, of fresh acts of inventiveness. (p 6)

I have not encountered in the statements of Zamora or his co-contributors (including the previously published text by Michael Behrent which is reprinted in this volume), or in the published text of the lectures themselves any evidence which disconfirms these comments: more on this below.

III: Class struggle and the welfare state

Zamora claims to find evidence outside of these lectures of Foucault's supposed embrace of neoliberalism, his principal exhibit being a 1983 interview with the national secretary of the CFDT trade union, Robert Bono. Zamora's account of this interview, which has been available in English translation for some time, contains several major misrepresentations.

(a) Zamora alleges that Foucault here adopts overtly neoliberal arguments, criticising and advocating the dismantling of the Post War welfare state, and rejecting the principle of universal healthcare provision. In fact the interview contains no reference whatsoever to neoliberalism or to any of the key neoliberal ideas discussed in Foucault's lectures – the market, enterprise, competition or human capital theory.

(b) Foucault says in this interview that the goal of a social security system is to provide both security and autonomy: he says that, for understandable historical reasons, the welfare state established in France since the inter-war years provides security, but not autonomy; it needs to be modified to meet the growing social demand for individual autonomy which has emerged in society since the 1950s and 60s, while (crucially) still continuing to provide for the needs of individual security as well: “we should expect our system of social security to free us from dangers and from situations that tend to debase or subjugate us”. (*Power*, 366). To achieve this, he says that “We must transform the field of social institutions into a field of experimentation” and undertake “a campaign of decentralisation... in order to bring the users closer to the decision-making centres on which they depend, and to tie them into the decision-making process” (370).

(c) Zamora represents Foucault as radically attacking the welfare-state concept of universal healthcare provision, together with all welfare-relation notions of social rights. In the interview, Foucault objects to the notion of a “right to health” which Bono says the CFTD is considering as a slogan, on grounds of its simple material unachievability (no healthcare system, however comprehensive and amply resourced, can guarantee to achieve health for all); instead he advocates a system of guaranteed access to the “means of health” (preventative as well as therapeutic). Foucault says nothing whatever in this interview in criticism of the notion of social or health-related rights.

(d) Zamora represents Foucault as positing a political antagonism between the proletarianised, socially disciplined working class, whose security is assured by the present system, and the insecure, marginalised sub-proletariat. I explained in *The Foucault Effect* and in my introduction to *Essential Writings 3: Power* Foucault's (often overlooked) position on this matter: in several texts and discussions of the 1970s including *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault developed the idea that the aggravation of division and antagonism between proletarianised and non-proletarianised popular classes (not least through the effects of the prison system) was a significant nineteenth century class-struggle tactic of the bourgeoisie whose effects the mainstream Left has generally failed to register or to resist, and has been too ready subsequently to accept. One of the points of Foucault's initiatives and interventions, starting with at the time of the Prisons Information Group, was to overcome this antagonism, not to aggravate it.

(e) Possibly the most illiterate strand in Zamora's rhetoric (possibly influenced here by Behrent: see below) is his recurring attribution to Foucault of a systematic hostility to the state, including specifically the welfare state. In fact, as is well known and as I and others have often pointed out, Foucault goes out of his way in the 1979 lectures, making what he calls a point of “critical morality”, to reject the tendency, shared by some neoliberals such as Hayek and by many on the Marxist left, to a phobic view of the state as inherently despotic and totalitarian in its tendencies. In the interview with Bono, Foucault again quite firmly rejects the Manichaean view of civil society and state as antagonistic principles of good and evil.

IV: Can there be a socialist governmentality?

Michael Behrent is an American historian who describes himself as “working on a project that examines the role played by Michel Foucault played in ushering in the 'liberal turn' in French thought during the 1970s”. Behrent's 2009 article “Liberalism without Humanism: Michel Foucault and The Free-

Market Creed, 1976–1979”³, which has been reproduced in Zamora's volume, says that it “challenges conventional readings of Michel Foucault by examining his fascination with neoliberalism in the late 1970s. Foucault did not critique neoliberalism during this period; rather, he strategically endorsed it.” In the words of its conclusion, “Foucault’s 1979 lectures, I have argued, should be read as a strategic endorsement of economic liberalism.” In fact Behrent's paper, despite its profusion of background historical colour, including citations from unpublished correspondence, provides no evidence of any such “endorsement” on Foucault's part, either in the text of the 1979 lectures or elsewhere, and I suggest this is for the simple reason that no such evidence exists. Where Behrent endeavours to show the appearance that Foucault affirming a clear preference for liberalism over socialism, he does this by means of a citation which is selective to the point of manipulation:

As Foucault saw it, the most pernicious problem with Mitterrand and his supporters was not their leftist orientation, but their inability to recognize socialism’s constitutive shortcoming: the fact that there is “no autonomous socialist governmentality.”⁴ (564)

Let us leave aside the point that Foucault makes no mention in his lectures of François Mitterrand, his party or his supporters. In Foucault's lectures at this point we do indeed read the following:

But I do not think there is an autonomous socialist governmentality. There is no governmental rationality of socialism. In actual fact, and history has shown this, socialism can only be implemented connected up to diverse types of governmentality. (*Birth of Biopolitics*: 92)

At this precise moment, one might think Foucault has declared as an iron historical law that socialism cannot produce its own governmentality. But he then almost immediately qualifies this (emphasis added):

But in any case, I do not think that *for the moment* there is an autonomous governmentality of socialism". (*BoB* 93)

After a further page (all of which is worth rereading, and which indeed includes harsh words on actually existing socialisms) he says:

3 Michael C. Behrent, Liberalism without humanism: Michel Foucault and the free-market creed, 1976–1979, *Modern Intellectual History*, 6, 3 (2009), pp 539-68.

4 Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France. 1978-1979*. Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2004, p. 93.

In any case, we know only that if there is a really socialist governmentality, then it is not hidden within socialism and its texts. It cannot be deduced from them. It must be invented. (BoB: 94)

Two years later, Foucault welcomed the electoral victories of Mitterrand and his party, suggesting they had been made possible by what the socialists had learned from the new social movements of the 70s. He spoke of recognising in the new government's first measures what he called a "logic of the left". As is well known, the subsequent performance of the government did not live up to his hopes, but it is clear that at this point he was ready to entertain hopes, and indeed declared his own readiness to engage in dialogue with the government.

To those who read French, I recommend the chapter by Christian Laval, "L'entreprise comme nouvelle forme de gouvernement. Usages et messages de Michel Foucault", in the recent volume *Usages de Foucault*, edited by Hervé Oulc'hen. (PUF 2014). Laval notices, as I have done, that there has been a degree of left/right cooperation in efforts to re-brand Foucault as a transfuge from the Left to neoliberalism, involving not only those (among whom Zamora is evidently not the first) who are keen to expose and denounce this alleged conversion as a betrayal, but also those (amongst whom one should no doubt count, in recent times, François Ewald, together with Zamora's co-author Michael Behrent, himself the author of a somewhat gushing interview-profile of Ewald) who are keen to recruit Foucault as a late convert to their own views. Other commentators of whom one perhaps might have expected better seem to have recently slid with surprising facility into a similar malaise of confabulation and falsification. That topic would require another post. In the meantime I suspect we will still have to wait some time before seeing Foucault inducted into the Mont Pelerin Society's hall of fame, or awarded a posthumous Nobel for neoliberal economics. It has become routine since the publication of the lectures to credit Foucault's contribution with "prescience", where what we should really be asking is why he was so unusual in his attentiveness to the visible developments of his present and recent past. It is good that some people operating outside of sectarian bunkers are now not only making intelligent uses of Foucault's work on neoliberalism, but developing our critical understanding of many aspects of neoliberalism which Foucault did not live either to witness or to describe.⁵ This work needs to continue.

5 Notably Jamie Peck (2010), *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford UP 2010), Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe eds., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Harvard UP 2009), and William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (Sage 2014). See also the excellent chapter by Mary Poovey, "Stories We Tell about Liberal Markets: The Efficient Market Hypothesis and Great-Men Narratives of Change", in Simon Gunn and James Vernon (Eds.) *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain* (UCP 2011).