

REVIEW ESSAY

Michel Foucault, *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*

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The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79, by Michel Foucault/edited by Michel Senellart/translated by Graham Burchell, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, xvii + 346 pp., ISBN 978-1-4039-8654-2

Neo-liberalism is not Adam Smith; neo-liberalism is not market society, neo-liberalism is not the Gulag on the insidious scale of capitalism ... but ... taking the formal principles of a market economy and ... projecting them on to a general act of government. (p. 131)

Neoliberalism was one of the most successful attempts in world history to reshape individuals in human history via government programs. Its achievements in this regard must be ranked close to those of Christianity, colonialism, Islam, and Marxism. The grand contradiction of neoliberalism was its passion for intervention in the name of non-intervention – pleading for investments in human capital at the same time as deriding social engineering, calling for the generation of more and more markets by the state while insisting on fewer and fewer democratic controls, and hailing freedom as a natural basis for life that could only function with the heavy hand of policing by government to administer property relations. Neoliberalism's lust for market conduct extended to a passion for comprehending and opining on every topic imaginable, from birth rates to divorce, from suicide to abortion, and from performance-enhancing drugs to altruism. Nothing could be left outside the market, and nothing left to the chance that market relations might falter absent massive policing.

The great boon of Michel Foucault's 1979 Collège de France lectures, rather misleadingly entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, is that they provide the best capsule history of neoliberalism's intellectual origins and early uptake in Germany and the USA. For our purposes here, I am most concerned with the US model, because it became the 'Washington Consensus', dominating global and local public policy for a generation across many fields. The 'Consensus' was used in cultural policy to stand against elitism, for populism, against subvention, for markets, against public service, for philanthropy, and so on, partly as a weapon of the US government in its struggle against public broadcasters and national cinemas, and partly by true believers elsewhere, from local government to talk radio, from creative-industry culturecrats to lapsed-leftist cultural-studies-lite professors.

I therefore think of Foucault's insights from thirty years ago, at the birth of this magic, as an extraordinarily valuable starting point for studying cultural policy.

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Unlike most works on neoliberalism, Foucault's book does not simply equate the concept with a stage of economic development, nor does it fall for the *canard* that this was truly about the withdrawal of the state from economic activity. He identified coin-operated think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute as the intellectual handservants of neoliberalism, whilst recognizing that these vocalists of a 'permanent criticism of government policy' (p. 247) actually sought permanent influence *over* that policy, because markets were their privileged 'interface of government and the individual' (p. 253). Foucault explained that neoliberalism governed populations through market imperatives, invoking and training them as ratiocinative liberal actors waiting for their inner creativity to be unlocked. Consumption was turned on its head: everyone was creative, no one was simply a spectator, and we were all manufacturing pleasure as we witnessed activities we had paid to watch. Internally divided – but happily so – each person was 'a consumer on the one hand, but ... also a producer' (p. 226).

I use the past tense to describe neoliberalism because the world's descent into an economic *mise-en-abîme* since 2008 via the delayed disasters of derivatives deregulation and the New International Division of Labor has forced neoliberalism's prelates, from Beijing to the Bourse, to rethink their dismissal of alternative norms (AKA Keynesianism). Dominant in world thought for three decades, neoliberalism was nothing less arrogant than 'a whole way of being and thinking', an attempt to create 'an enterprise society' through the pretense that the latter was a natural (but never-achieved) state of affairs, even as competition was imposed as a framework of regulating everyday life in the most subtly comprehensive statism imaginable (pp. 145, 147, 218). Before its ascendance, Foucault had identified its central contradiction. Those navigating the complex corridors of state, market, and culture would do well to heed his words as they pick over its ruins.