How the media biopoliticized neoliberalism: or, Foucault meets Marx

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Abstract: This paper seeks to do two things. First, at a theoretical/exegetical level, it demonstrates important affinities between Foucault and Marx(ism): I contend that an opposition between them is misplaced, and their work can be fruitfully combined. Support for this position can be found in Foucault's writings on biopower. Second, at an applied level, I draw on biopower to understand the role of the media in the creation of neoliberalism, and their reciprocal relationship.

Keywords: Foucault; Marxism; biopower; media; neoliberalism

Resumo: Este artigo busca realizar duas coisas. Na primeira, em um nível teórico/exegético, demonstra importantes afinidades entre Foucault e Marx(ismo): eu argumento que uma oposição entre eles é inapropriada, e seus trabalhos podem ser prolificamente combinados. Apoio para esta posição pode ser encontrado nos escritos de Foucault, acerca do biopoder. Na segunda, em um nível aplicado, eu me baseio no biopoder para entender o papel da mídia na criação do neoliberalismo, e sua relação recíproca.

Palavras-chave: Foucault; marxismo; biopoder; mídias; neoliberalismo

Foucault and Marxism

Foucault's research and public intellectualism have inspired leftists living under authoritarian *régimes*, such as the Argentine *junta* (FRIERA, 2004), and he was forever engaging the humanistic Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre and the structuralist Marxism of Louis

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Althusser (who taught him). Foucault's political actions were often shared with Sartre or inspired by his example, for all that the *a priori* reasoning subject at the heart of existentialism was foreign to Foucault's projects, like its equivalent in *bourgeois* Anglo-Yanqui liberalism. And it is worth recalling Foucault's recommendation to 'open Althusser's books,' and the latter's contention that 'something from my writings has passed into his' (FOUCAULT, 1989, p. 14; ALTHUSSER, 1969, p. 256). As Foucault said of their relationship, 'I followed' (1991b, p. 55).

There is a significant link between Althusser and Foucault in their theorization of subjects, objects, representation, and interpretation. The accusation of functionalist Marxism sometimes leveled at Althusser – because of his totalizing view of ideological apparatuses – is similar to certain critics' lament for the absence of an outside to power in Foucault. Of course, there are major methodological differences as well as similarities. Althusser investigated problematics and their underpinning ideology in the context of the real. Conversely, Foucault looked at statements, their preconditions, and their settings in discursive formations, then moved on to research related archives. Only Althusser privileged science (MILLER, 1994).

Foucault's principal quibble with Marxism lay in its focus on class, to the comparative exclusion of struggle, and the totalizing certitudes of ideology critique. He complained that the latter half of the grand dialectical couplet received less than equal treatment. In particular, he sought to understand material manifestations of power that were not simply used to accrete *bourgeois* dominance or state authority – hence his archival readings and political actions are prisons, hospitals, and asyla. These commitments revealed that the micropolitics of forming and controlling subjects could not be read off from macroeconomic blocs, and were as much to do with dispensing power as with accumulating or exercising it (FOUCAULT, 1982, p. 782; 1980, p. 58).

That said, Foucault's concept of biopower drew extensively on Marx to construct homologies between civil and military training via 'docile bodies.' Comparing the division of labor to the organization of infantry, *Discipline and Punish* (1979a) has many Marxist features in its account of how disciplinary power developed alongside capitalism as the *élites* addressed the interrelated tasks of developing and maintaining a productive and compliant labor force and social order. One can pick up on these insights to consider post-industrial forms of sociality (SIBILIA, 2009).

Perhaps the most subtle and complex engagement between Foucault and Marxism emerged over the state. Roland Barthes (1973, p. 130) coined the term 'governmentality' during the high point of his own Marxism to describe market variations and the state's attempt to claim responsibility for them (when the outcome was positive).

Foucault (1991b, p. 4) developed this ironic, ugly neologism to account for 'the way in which the modern state began to worry about individuals' by asking: 'How to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept

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being governed, how to become the best possible governor.' These issues arose as twin processes: the displacement of feudalism by the sovereign-state, and the similarly conflictual Reformation and its counters. Daily economic and spiritual government came up for redefinition. While the state emerged as a centralizing tendency that sought to normalize itself and others, a devolved religious authority produced a void, via ecclesiastical conflicts and debates about divine right. The doctrine of transcendence fell into crisis, and royalty came to represent managerial rather than immanent rule (FOUCAULT, 1991a, p. 87-90).

Biopower

It's significant that Foucault's 1970s lectures on biopolitics were close partners with his investigations of how colonialism gave Europe a new life by pauperizing the rest of the world (2003 and 2007). During the emergence of capitalism and imperialism, 'biopower' subjected bodies to regulation, self-surveillance, and self-discipline. This complex governmentalization was initiated in asyla, hospitals, prisons, schools, and plantations. The emergence of biopower made the relationship of populations to their environments a central strut of governance in 18^{th-} and 19th-century Europe, as productivity and health were linked to climatic and geographic surroundings. Each part was subject to human intervention and hence governmental interest, via forecasting, measuring, and estimating (FOUCAULT, 2003, p. 245).

With the upheavals of the 17th century, such as the Thirty Years War and rural and urban revolt, the conditions for implementing new modes of social organization arose. In 18th-century Europe, the government of territory became secondary to the government of things and social relations. Biopower freed the arts of government from the pre-modern *motifs* and *idées fixes* of the sovereign and the household. The population displaced the prince as a site for accumulating power, and the home was displaced by the economy as a newly anthropomorphized and international dynamic of social intervention and achievement. The populace became the province of statistics, and the nation was bounded not by the direct exertion of juridical influence or domestic authority, but by forms of knowledge that granted 'the people' life. City, country, and empire substituted for household, with all the hierarchical dislocation that implies, as the epidemic and the map displaced the kitchen and the church (FOUCAULT, 1991a, p. 98-99).

Government was conceived and actualized in terms of climate, disease, industry, finance, custom, and disaster – literally, a concern with life and death, and what could be calculated and managed between them. Wealth and health became goals to be attained through the disposition of capacities across the population once 'biological existence was reflected in political existence.' Biopower brought 'life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations' and made 'knowledge-power an agent of transformation

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of human life.' Bodies were identified with politics, because managing them was part of running countries and empires, with 'the life of the species [...] wagered on its own political strategies' (1991a, p. 97, 92-95; 1984, p. 143).

Governing people came to mean, most centrally and critically, obeying the 'imperative of health: at once the duty of each and the objective of all.' So even as Revolutionary France was embarking on a *régime* of slaughter, public-health campaigns were underway, as the state constructed a Janus-faced 'game between death and life' (FOUCAULT, 1991b, p. 277). Modern capitalism was articulated to the modern state's desire to deliver a docile and healthy labor force to business; but not only to business, and not merely in a way that showed the lineage of that desire. Cholera, sanitation, and prostitution were figured as problems for governments to address in the modern era, through 'the emergence of the health and physical well-being of the population in general as one of the essential objectives of political power.' The entire 'social body' was assayed and treated for its insufficiencies. In shifting its tasks from naked, controlling power to generative, productive power, government in general increasingly aimed to "make' live and 'let' die,' as well as 'take life or let live'' (FOUCAULT, 2003, p. 241).

The critical shift here was away from an accumulation of power by the sovereign, and towards the dispersal of power into the population. The center invested people with the capacity to produce and consume things, insisting on freedom in some compartments of life, and obedience in others (FOUCAULT, 1994, p. 125). Out of that came the following prospect: 'Maybe what is really important for our modernity – that is, for our present – is not so much the *étatisation* of society, as the governmentalization of the state' (FOUCAULT, 1991a, p. 103).

Put another way, the 'problem of the central soul' of the state was immanent in 'multiple peripheral bodies' and the messy labor of controlling them. Such move was allowed for the 'transformation not at the level of political theory, but rather at the level of the mechanisms, techniques, and technologies of power' (FOUCAULT, 2003, p. 29, 37, 241).

Drawing on Barthes, Foucault proposed a three-fold concept of governmentality to explain life today. The first element utilizes economics to mold the population into efficient and effective producers. The second is an array of apparatuses designed to create conditions for this productivity, via bodily interventions and the promotion of fealty and individuality. The third translates methods between education and penology, transforming justice into human 'improvement.' Put another way, we might understand this as the indoctrination of the state by the social and the infestation of sovereignty with demography (1991a, p. 102-103).

Governmentality centers the population as desiring, producing, and committed subjects who stand ready both to fight for the state and to question its actions. In Foucault's words, the market has latterly become 'a 'test,' a locus of privileged experience where one [can] identify the effects of excessive governmentality' (FOUCAULT, 1997, p. 76). This is a way of resituating management of the social squarely within civil society – a further

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transformation in governmentality. As he argued, 'civil society is the concrete ensemble within which these abstract points, economic men, need to be positioned in order to be made adequately manageable' (FOUCAULT, 1979b).

For Foucault, governance organizes the public by having it organize itself, through the material inscription of discourse into policies and programs of the state and capital via technology. He defines a technology as 'a matrix of popular reason.' It has four categories: 'technologies of production' make for the physical transformation of material objects; 'technologies of sign systems' are semiotic; 'technologies of power' form subjects as a means of dominating individuals and encouraging them to define themselves in particular ways; and 'technologies of the self' are applied by individuals to make themselves autotelically happy (FOUCAULT, 1988, p. 18). This analysis is not so distant from Marxism, and it opens up neoliberalism to inspection.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism was one of the most successful attempts to reshape individuals in human history. Its achievements rank alongside such productive and destructive sectarian practices as state socialism, colonialism, nationalism, and religion. Neoliberalism's lust for market regulation was so powerful that its prelates opined on every biopolitical topic imaginable, from birth rates to divorce, from suicide to abortion, from performance-enhancing drugs to altruism.

Neoliberalism provided more than 'a political alternative' to mixed-market social welfare. Its singular triumph over thirty years was to sustain a 'many-sided, ambiguous, global claim with a foothold in both the right and the left' (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 218) through a seeming rejection of tyranny and promotion of transparency. The neoliberal clerisy enlisted philosophical liberals and conservatives alike by opposing labor and welfare, remaining agnostic about elections, other than when governmental outlays were at stake, and maintaining that individuals could govern themselves. Neoliberalism stood rhetorically against elitism (for populism); against subvention (for markets); and against public service (for philanthropy).

I use the past tense to describe neoliberalism because of 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. The ensuing crisis has forced the clerisy, from Beijing to the Bourse, to pick over the social ruins they oversaw. Ultimately, neoliberalism sank under the weight of contradiction, buried beneath its own blend of individuation and authoritarianism. But even as its wreckage is everywhere to be seen, neoliberal ideology continues to bob about and hinder reform. Its hold over the world via the "Washington Consensus" may be over, but its tentacles still control much of ordinary life and policymaking.

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Foucault's biopolitical insights into neoliberalism's birth in the 1970s provide 'a way of thinking about this problem before it became actual,' before it 'ruined people's lives and wrecked social, political and economic institutions' (TRIBE, 2009, p. 694). He did not simply equate the concept with a stage of economic development; nor did he fall for the *canard* that it sought to withdraw the state from economic activity. Rather, Foucault explained that neoliberalism governed populations through market imperatives, invoking and training them as ratiocinative liberal actors *per medio* biopower.

Neoliberalism's 'whole way of being and thinking' (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 218) was spread by neoclassical economists who knew everything and spared no-one their analyses and prescriptions. Many of us looked on, bemused, as these demagogic true believers denounced or ignored work done by sociologists, anthropologists, artists, historians, linguists, and social movements, while promoting their own capacity to comprehend the totality of human life without reference to class, gender, race, culture, ideology, or collective identity, other than as acts of individual rationality.

Given the fervor accompanying this extraordinary, self-appointed claim to omniscience and omnipotence, it comes as no surprise that economics has a religious origin. When the Trinity was being ideologized within Christianity, something had to be done to legitimize the concept at the same time as dismissing and decrying polytheistic and pagan rivals to the new religion's moralistic monotheism. Hence *oikonomia*, a sphere of worldly arrangements that was to be directed by a physical presence on Earth to represent the will of the deity. God gave Christ "the economy" to manage, so "the economy" indexically manifested Christianity (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 9-10).

Neoliberalism sought to create 'an enterprise society' (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 218, 147) through the pretense that the latter was a natural (albeit never-achieved) state of affairs and people were intelligible through the precepts of selfishness, with the market privileged as 'the interface of government and the individual' (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 253). At the same time, consumption was turned on its head. Internally divided – but happily so – each person was 'a consumer on the one hand, but [...] also a producer' (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 226).

This trend reached its rhetorical apogee when 2000-06 Mexican President Vicente Fox asked reporters: '¿Yo por qué? ... ¿Qué no somos 100 millones de mexicanos?' (apud VENEGAS, 2003). In other words, each person must assume responsibility for his or her material fortunes. The fact that not every one of the other hundred-million Mexicans exercized control over the country's money supply, tariff policy, trade, labor law, and exchange rate might have given him pause. Similarly, George Bush Minor's Presidential mantra was 'making every citizen an agent of his or her own destiny' (apud in MILLER, 2007). Paradoxically, this discourse flourished by imposing competition as a framework to regulate everyday life through the most comprehensive statism imaginable (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 145). It did so through a mediatised anthropomorphism that drew on biopower.

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Communicating Biopolitically

The backdrop to neoliberalism was the anthropomorphization of the economy and the intensification of globalization via an international division of labor, regional trading blocs, globally-oriented cities, and an anti-labor *ethos* of deregulation.

How was this hegemony achieved? The *media* were central to that remarkable achievement, because a popular unity was established between the assayed social body of biopower and the anthropomorphic figure of the economy. The neoliberal right won many struggles enacted over culture, sometimes in concert with the new right of communication studies – the prelates of creative industries, and their doctrine of 'prosumption' – and sometimes in concert with conservatives, when making nationalism into a cultural and commercial norm. New media technologies deepened the biopolitical impact of neoliberalism by seeming to oppose the state and speak to the multifaceted ability of people to make their own media – and destinies (RITZER; JURGENSON, 2010). But this achievement drew on an earlier shift in media coverage of economics.

English-language media references to "the economy" as a living subject, with needs and desires, derive from coverage of the Depression. At that time, press attention shifted from relations between producers and consumers of goods (a labor-process discourse of the popular newspapers) and onto relations between different material products of labor. There was a similar change in emphasis from use-value to exchange-value. The discursive commodities "the economy" and "the market" were given life and value through being textualized, then fetishized as empirical truths in the newspapers of the day (EMMISON, 1983; EMMISON and McHOUL, 1987).

In other words, the crisis of the 1930s and the diffusion of Keynesianism ushered "the economy" into popular knowledge. This process bore some relationship to material reality, but like all statistical forms, it textualized biopolitical interests and conflicts. The discursive framework "the economy" came to be theorized as an entity with needs and emotions. This invention was *constructed* rather than merely *described* by economics (ARMINEN, 2010). From that time, "the economy" began to thrive and suffer in bodily and emotional ways, just like a person, and become subject to biopolitical promotion and security.

While the press helped to anthropomorphize the economy, the neoliberal drive to economize all forms of life had a reciprocal effect. Perhaps neoliberalism's most powerful impact on the media was the financialization of news and current affairs. Foucault identified cash-operated US think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute as the intellectual hand-servants of this practice, vocalists of a 'permanent criticism of government policy' (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 247). Today they do "research" in order to pen op-eds in newspapers and provide talking-points on cable news.

Neoclassical economic theory is deemed palatable on US television in a way that other theoretical vocabularies are not. In addition, stories are presented in terms of their monetary significance to investors. TV parrots the market's specialized vocabulary, assumes a community of interest and commitment to fictive capital, and takes the deep affiliation

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and regular participation of viewers in stock prices as watchwords. The heroization of business executives by fawning journalists became part of a doubling of time dedicated by television news to the market across the 1990s. In 2000, finance was the principal topic on ABC, NBC, and CBS nightly news, and second only to terrorism in 2002. Promoting stocks where one had a personal financial interest became *de rigueur* for anchors and pundits. By 2002, even the New York Stock Exchange was worried by this tendency, and called for regulation requiring reporters to disclose their investments, so egregious had been their complicity with the dotcom overinvestment of the 1990s (MILLER, 2007).

Business advisors dominate discussion on dedicated finance stations like CNBC and Bloomberg, and are granted the status of seers when they appear on MSNBC, CNN, or the broadcast networks. The focus of many "news" has become stock markets, earnings, profits, and portfolio management. Journalists stalk politics in order to discredit democratic activities that might restrain capital. Labor news has been transmogrified into corporate news, and politics is measured in terms of its reception by business.

During his time as Chair of the Federal Reserve, the now-discredited and always laughable Alan Greenspan was filmed getting in and out of cars each day as if he were *en route* to a meeting to decide the fate of nations, each upturned eyebrow or wrinkled frown subject to hyper-interpretation by a bevy of needy followers. This obsessive pattern repeated as a farce in the latter part of the decade, when financial markets crumbled into self-indulgent, infantile fury and tears.

The trend is international: leading sources of wholesale video news, such as Reuters, make most of their money from finance reporting, which infuses their overall delivery of news. Primarily political journalists at Reuters refer to themselves as 'cavaliers' and their primarily financial counterparts as 'roundheads,' severe metaphors from the English Civil War (PALMER et al., 1998). The focus falls on stock markets in Asia, Europe, and New York, reports on company earnings, profits, and stocks, and portfolio management (MARTIN, C., 2002; MARTIN, R. 2004).

Journalistic veneration of the market is ever ready to point to infractions of this anthropomorphized, yet oddly subject-free sphere, as a means of constructing moral panics around the conduct of whoever raises its ire. Even the global financial crisis hasn't eroded faith in reactionary solutions to a radical problem, as the bizarre press coverage of the Gringo financial meltdown indicates (PEW, 2009; THOMPSON, 2009). Meanwhile, the leftist media, which had investigated Enron and other sites of malfeasance for years, remained ridiculed or ignored.

Conclusion

Foucault's work has under-appreciated ties to Marxism. These are evident in his biopolitical activism and research. They provide a way for us to comprehend neoliberalism, and how the latter has been formed by, and in turn has helped to revise, the news media.

The next challenge is to develop two tendencies. The first of these should be a program of research into the ongoing biopoliticization of everyday life via an anthropomorphizing

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economism. The second tendency must engage in activism, working with social movements that oppose neoliberalism to help them construct a counter-discourse to the ratiocinative, calculating fraud at the heart of the *bourgeois* media.

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