REVIEW ESSAY

AN ‘INDISPENSABLE HYPODERMIS’?
The role of scale in *The Birth of Biopolitics*

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Nature is something that runs under, through, and in the exercise of governmentality. It is, if you like, its indispensable hypodermis. It is the other face of something whose visible face, visible for the governors, is their own action. Their action has an underside, or rather, it has another face, and this other face of governmentality, its specific necessity, is precisely what political economy studies. It is not background, but a permanent correlative. (Foucault 2008, p. 16)

Foucault’s 1978–79 lectures course entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics* (henceforth *Biopolitics*) needs to be read alongside the 1977–78 lectures, published as *Security, Territory, Population* (henceforth *Security*, Foucault 2007). They founded the study of governmentalties, which provided a major theoretical and methodological toolkit across the humanities and social sciences; encouraging dense, historical investigations which demonstrated penetrating insights into genealogies of the present (and showed how awareness of the present could become a powerful foresight). The *Biopolitics* lectures are phenomenally rich and bring to us something of the fluidity, experimentation, and exceptional clarity with which Foucault taught. Rather than attempt a complete synopsis of the lecture course (see Lemke 2001), this review will proceed in two distinct parts. The first will draw attention to the ways in which the lectures address some common criticisms made against Foucault (his neglect of the economy, resistance and the law), provide insights into current controversies within governmentality studies (regarding Marxism, and the state-government-freedom relationship), and indicate Foucault’s prescience in drawing attention to a number of developments which are only now garnering full academic attention (genetics, globalization, and neo-liberalism). The second section will reflect on the role of scale in these lectures as both extent or scope, and as a reified domain.

I

Foucault had always suggested that the domains of government included the economy, society and population, in which the apparatuses of security of political-economy, civil society, and biopolitics would play out. While the last of these has attracted the most attention to date, the *Biopolitics* lectures, ironically, focus on civil society and, for the most part, economy and political economics, as the contexts in which biopolitics must be situated. Resistance is acknowledged within the lectures, initially through legal resistance to sovereign power. Overturning interpretations that have seen Foucault...
dismissing law and the juridical as the weapons of the sovereign, here Foucault suggests that in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries law shifted from the multiplier to the subtractor of royal power (p. 8). While the juridical form that emerged as an effective regulator of sovereign power was not necessarily liberal (p. 321), the law later inscribed the liberal form of sovereign limitation (p. 11). This took place variously through complex engagements with the process of ‘veridiction’ (the verification or falsification of governmental practice through the true/false game of the market, pp. 32–35), through limiting the power of public authorities using juridical limitation, whether revolutionary or radical (p. 37), or through embracing the new spaces of free competition in maritime law and contributing to the ‘juridification of the world’ (Foucault 2008, p. 56, in terms reminiscent of, Schmitt 2003[1950]). In reflecting on the reformulation of the juridical in neo-liberalism, Foucault insisted that the law was neither super-structural nor instrumental to the economy, but that the economy was regulated by the law from the start through economic-juridical orders (p. 163).

The above comments on the need to be situated in relation to Foucault’s ongoing and controversial engagement with Marxism (see Jessop 2007). Biopolitics can be viewed as a sustained attack on the pervasive influence of the Marxist left in France at the time. The attack can be considered at a general level, in which sideswipes are taken against various Marxist principles such as the inherent logic of capitalism, or the importance of historical and political context as against economic structure.

At the level of governmental reason Biopolitics contains the controversial suggestion that socialism lacks a governmentality (defined as ‘...a reasonable and calculable measure of the extent, modes, and objectives of governmental action’, p. 92). Socialism’s historical-economic rationality and its techniques of intervention are dismissed as evidence of an autonomous governmentality because they must be implemented using other forms of governmentality (liberalism, the police state, the hyper-administrative state, p. 92). What supposedly stands in the place of a socialist governmentality is a series of texts and the orthodoxies of their reading, which will not provide a thorough mode of governing.

At the level of the specific, Foucault also takes aim at political-economic readings of the human body which, he claims, reduced labour to time (hours available on a market, wage, or supply for a market). The neo-liberal alternative is to look at how scarce means are allocated to competing aims; ‘...to bring labor into the field of economic analysis, we must put ourselves in the position of the person who works; we will have to study work as economic conduct practised, implemented, rationalized, and calculated by the person who works’ (Foucault 2008, p. 223). Foucault thus de-radicalizes the Marxists analysis of wages by arguing that they are also an income which reflects bodily capital and skills that are detachable from a machine (p. 224), failing to consider exactly the concrete conditions under which labour is divided, de-skilled, and thus made expendable on the production line.

Biopolitics also adds much to understandings of how government attempts to do what the state should be (p. 4). This is a process beyond the decisionistic impulses of the sovereign and is organized through transactional decisions taken over the line of the what to/not to do (p. 12), or between the maximum and minimum standards set by the nature of things (p. 19). In articulating these decisions, liberalism does not function as a radical rupture, but as an inflection of the development of Reason of State (p. 28). Foucault’s commitment to an anti-essentialist approach to the state is confirmed: ‘The state is
nothing else but the effect, the profile, the mobile shape of a perpetual statification (éstatisation) or statifications, in the sense of incessant transactions which modify, or move, or drastically change . . . ’ (Foucault 2008, p. 77). What is especially important is Foucault’s spelling out of how neo-liberalism is not laissez faire but, rather, marks the advent of a market economy in which neo-liberal government is permanently vigilant, active and interventionist (p. 132).

Adding to the insistence that governmentalities are always plural and specific, neo-liberal governmentalities are themselves divided into German-Austrian and American varieties. The ‘ordo-liberalism’ that established the 1950s West German state on the model of economic freedom rather than political sovereignty interpreted freedom not as a juridical or contractual right, but as an independence from government which would bolster economic processes and thus strengthen the state (p. 42). Freedom is, thus, posed not as a universal, but as a relation between governors and governed, which liberalism consumes and produces (p. 63). This productive-destructive tension with regard to freedom is negotiated by liberal security apparatuses which appraise danger and risk, yet also encourage individuals to live entrepreneurially and thus dangerously: ‘In short, everywhere you see this stimulation of the fear of danger which is, as it were, the condition, the internal psychological and cultural correlative of liberalism. There is no liberalism without a culture of danger’ (Foucault 2008, p. 67).

As will be obvious from the summaries above, Foucault’s Biopolitics lectures were prescient on various levels. David Harvey (2005, p. 1) has suggested that 1978–80 may be looked at by future historians as a turning point in the world’s social and economic history. That Foucault was already constructing a genealogy of that present in 1979 is startling, as is the dexterity with which he traced the historical geographies of the different forms of opposition to Keynes, state planning, and controlled economic intervention (p. 78). The German model posited the market as weak, and thus in need of intervention so as to protect the individual from the economy, marking an ambivalence regarding the market from which America did not suffer. Foucault suggested that market rationality spread into new domains in America so as to mobilize liberalism as a whole way of thinking that appealed to the left and the right (p. 218).

One domain which Foucault identified in this respect was that of human capital. In considering how hereditary or innate characteristics of the body could come to constitute a form of capital as valued through risk, Foucault suggested he was dealing in ‘science fiction’, but that this problematic was becoming pervasive (p. 227). In addition to preempting much contemporary work in genetics and sociology, Foucault also considered acquired body capital, in the form of education and nurturing within the home which, as such, became part of the neo-liberal marketplace. This spatial extension marks just one of the scalar innovations that permeate the Biopolitics lectures.

II

Although Biopolitics attends to different scales of practice (understood as the scope or size of a network), its most pervasive scalar feature is its persistent interrogation of the role of scalar analytical domains in the transformation of European governmentalities through liberal thought (Lemke 2001, p. 191, for further work on Foucault and scale see Ferguson & Gupta, 2005[2002]; Isin 2007; Kolson 2008; Moore 2008; Legg 2009). At the level of practice, Matthew Hannah (1997) has drawn out the implications of Foucault’s (1977) insistence that the functional inversion of disciplinary power necessitated a wider
scalar analysis than that simply of the institutional. Foucault (2008, p. 67) bolsters this interpretation, insisting that panopticism is not a regional mechanics, but a general political formula that was equally valid for phenomena of a different scale, such as economic policy or the management of a whole social body (p. 186):

What I wanted to do – and this was what was at stake in the analysis – was to see the extent to which we could accept that the analysis of micro-powers, or of procedures of governmentality, is not confined by definition to a precise domain determined by a sector of the scale, but should be considered simply as a point of view, a method of decipherment which may be valid for the whole scale, whatever its size. (Foucault 2008, p. 136)

It is in this sense that Biopolitics marks a scalar turn in Foucault’s work, through the scope of space across which the techne of a governmentality is implemented (also see Jessop 2007). The lectures document this scope from the global down to the corporeal. The imperial scale features here, and in the Security lectures, to a greater extent than in any of Foucault’s previously published work (see Legg 2007). As in Security, Europe is posed as a post-imperial space, recovering from the hegemony of the Holy Roman Empire and orchestrating a balance of power between the post-Westphalian states (Foucault 2007, p. 298). While this balance was explicitly not about European states becoming a total and global empire in the medieval or theophanic sense (Foucault 2008, p. 6), Foucault at last provides some analysis of the formation of imperialism beyond the ‘European province’.

Three characteristics of the liberal art of government are listed: the problem of economic truth and the truth of the market; limiting government by the question of utility; and, finally, ‘...international equilibriums, or Europe and the international space in liberalism.’ (Foucault 2008, p. 51). Liberalism is posed as supplanting the mercantilist belief that the wealth of one state could only increase at the cost of another with the idea of mutual enrichment and unlimited economic progress (also see Wallerstein 1974). Europe itself thus emerges as a player on the world market, whereas the rest of the world becomes the stake (p. 56). Foucault suggests that these developments around the middle of the eighteenth century were later than colonialism but earlier than imperialism (therefore not being explainable by the economy or geopolitics alone), and should thus be thought of as: ‘...a new form of global rationality, of a new calculation on the scale of the world’ (p. 56). This entailed the construction of a worldwide space of legal principles allowing economic competition, but also allowed figures like Kant to imagine natural peace as ‘...a new form of political calculation on an international scale ...’ (p. 58). Despite the emergence of this new scale, and the suggestion that it could guarantee European peace, Foucault acknowledges that Europe secured its privileged position, and that wars and nationalism continued to flourish. But there is little sense of the violence delivered upon those lands and people who became resources, or stakes, for a European world system (Cooper 2004).

The emergence of political economy also forced the state to acknowledge not only a force above it (God’s intentions) but ‘beneath the sovereign ... something which equally eludes him ... the labyrinths and complexities of the economic field’ (Foucault 2008, p. 292). This is an inflection of the general shift towards treating the individual as a homo oeconomicus who was necessarily linked to more-or-less distant political events by market forces and interest in the distant world: ‘In short, the individual’s enjoyment is linked to a course of the world that outstrips him and eludes him in every respect.’ (Foucault 2008,
The smallest social unit is thus connected to even the widest scalar scope of activity through both self-interest and the relational networks of the market.

While Foucault’s entire corpus could be seen as an attempt to avoid essentialist and overly structuralist accounts of reified processes or domains, his *Biopolitics* lectures chart how liberalism functioned through cultivating the belief in specific scalar domains at which laws operated without the stewardship of an economic sovereign (also see Foucault 2003, pp. 245–246). This is related back to the process, identified more fully in the *Security* lectures, by which the state was re-thought in the sixteenth century as a specific and relatively autonomous reality (p. 4). The government would thus have to respect certain rules which are ‘above’ or ‘external’ to the state. The difference between the analytic sense of scale as realm and the practical sense of scale as scope of practice is suggested in the following:

In other words, the state is not a household, a church, or an empire. The state is a specific and discontinuous reality. The state exists only for itself and in relation to itself, whatever obedience it may owe to other systems like nature or God. (Foucault 2008, p. 5)

If the sixteenth century saw the population and the government grappling with the existence of the higher reason and realm of the state, the eighteenth century saw the state grappling with the labyrinths and complexities of the economy (p. 292). Being based on the collective interests and discussions of *homo oeconomicus* this realm is impenetrable to the political sovereign because s/he is unable to know this realm in its entirety. Liberalism responded with the emergence of a principle of limitation of the state that was not external (e.g., the subject of rights) but internal, in that it would help the state meet its own objectives. This principle involved the examination of the effects of government action and ‘... revealed the existence of phenomena, processes, and regularities that necessarily occur as a result of intelligible mechanisms.’ (Foucault 2008, p. 15). As Foucault (2007), p. 349) had suggested in *Security*, this was a naturalness not of the natural world, ‘... but processes of a naturalness specific to relations between men [sic], to what happens spontaneously when they cohabit, come together, exchange, work and produce ...’. These natural phenomena constituted the ‘indispensable hypodermis’ of liberal governmentality, which had laws that would be studied through the human and social sciences, just as they had been discovered through the natural sciences. Ignorance of these laws would become the cardinal sin of government, not the abuse of subjects with whom they had a social contract. This natural realm of laws would set the borders at which states had to govern neither too much nor too little.

Foucault admitted that this development of liberalism shared much with the emergence of naturalism, and that mid-eighteenth century forms of government constituted a ‘governmental naturalism’ (p. 61). But this physiocratic form of government attempted to know the economic realm, as science sought to understand the natural realm, in all its detail. Liberalism withdrew from the realm of the economy enough such that it would let the natural laws of this domain function, but not so much as to leave the marketplace unsupported. Thus, ordo-liberalism’s anti-naturalistic stance dictated that the market needed support and intervention (Lemke 2001, p. 193), while the American school conjoined a faith in individual economic rationality with the invisible hand of the market.

The analytic question in terms of the scalar object of the economy is not, therefore, to show how the economy was once hidden and then discovered, nor to show that it is a wicked illusion or ideology, but to show: ‘... how a particular regime of truth, and
therefore not an error, makes something that does not exist able to become something. It is not an illusion since it is precisely a set of practices, real practices, which established it and thus imperiously marks it out in reality’ (Foucault 2008, p. 19) The interest here is clearly in how the scalar domain of the economy is fabricated out of particular practices and calculations, and thus attains a degree of reality.

But the economy was not the only scalar reality to emerge through the liberal art of government. A new object/domain/field emerged that could relate both to the traditional subject of ‘rights’ and the newer economic subject, a new reality that we know as civil society (p. 295). This was the reality which would be used to govern, in a language of rights, a space filled with economic subjects. This civil society was in part created by government, but still constituted a ‘transactional reality’ between the governors and the governed (p. 297). This reality of liberal governmentality was taken up by ordo-liberalism to justify interventions into the depth and fabric of society so as to ensure competition and enterprise in the economy (p. 160), while American neo-liberalism fully inverted the relationship between economy and society, making the later a subset of the former (p. 240). These are the scalar domains and technologies of intervention which Foucault suggested were the conditioning factors for the birth of biopolitics. The ongoing publication of the translated lecture series will no doubt augment these debates, returning the scalar focus to the individual and self conduct, although the scope and networks of Foucault’s populations, economies and societies would withdraw to more familiar European shores.

REFERENCES


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