

Biopolitics/Bioeconomics : a politics of multiplicity

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We have never understood the word of liberalism as much as during the referendum campaign. However, have these passionate debates contributed to make the logic of liberalism intelligible? According to the two courses by Michel Foucault, recently published as “Security, Territory, Population” and “The Birth of Biopolitics”, this is dubious.

These books trace a genealogy and a history of liberalism and effectively present a way of reading capitalism which differs from Marxism, from political philosophy and from political economy at once. In this genealogy of liberalism, I will concentrate on the analysis of the relation between the economy and politics and on the question of labour developed by the French philosopher. The remarkable novelty introduced by Foucault in the history of capitalism since its origins, is the following: the problem that arises from the relation between politics and the economy is resolved by techniques and dispositifs that come from neither. This “outside”, this “other” must be interrogated. The functioning, the efficacy and the force of politics and the economy, as we all know today, are not derived from forms of rationality that are internal to these logics, but from a rationality that is exterior and that Foucault names “the government of men”. Government is a “human technology” that the modern State has inherited from the Christian pastoral technique (a specific technique that is absent from the Roman and Greek traditions) and liberalism has adapted it, changed it and enriched it by turning it from a government of souls into a government of men!). To govern means to ask the question of how to conduct the conduct of others. To govern is to exercise an action on possible actions. To govern means to act upon subjects who ought to be considered free.

Foucault had already used government to explain the dispositifs of regulation and control of the sick, the poor, delinquents, the insane etc. Within this genealogy of liberalism, the theory of micropowers contributes to also explaining large economic phenomena, with major innovations. Liberal macro-governmentality is only possible because it exerts its micropowers upon a multiplicity. These two levels are inseparable. The theory of micro-powers is a question of method, of standpoint, and not of scales (the analysis of specific populations such as the mad, the prisoner etc.).

The economy and politics

Why does the relation between the economy and politics become problematic in the mid C18th? Foucault explains it in this fashion. The art of government of the sovereign must be exercised within a territory and on its subjects of rights, but this space is inhabited, since the C18th, by economic subjects who have no rights but hold some interests. The figure of the homo oeconomicus is absolutely heterogeneous and non superposable, nor is it reducible to homo juridicus or homo legalis. The economic man and the subject of rights give place to two processes of constitutions that are completely heterogeneous: the subjects of right are integrated into the body of other subjects of rights by means of a dialectics of renunciation. In fact, the political constitution presupposes that the juridical subject transfers (renounces) their rights to someone else. On the other hand, the economic man is integrated into the body of other economic subjects (economic constitution) not through a transfer of rights, but through a spontaneous multiplication of interests. One does not renounce one's interest. On the

contrary, it is only by persevering in one's selfish interest that there can be the multiplication and satisfaction of everyone's needs. The emergence of this irreducibility of the economy to politics has given rise to an unlikely number of interpretations. The problem is clearly at the centre of Adam Smith's work, since historically and theoretically he is found at this turning point, which has for centuries been a point of reference for all commentators. For Adelino Zanini, who perhaps sums up this debate in the most complete fashion, Smith is not the founder of political economy, but the last moral philosopher who attempted to determine the reason why ethics, politics and economics no longer overlap nor constitute a coherent and harmonious whole. According to Zanini, Smith arrives at the following conclusion: the relation between the economy and politics cannot be resolved, harmonised or totalised. And he leaves the solution to this riddle for posterity, which has not really followed the path traced by the Scottish philosopher.

For Hanna Arendt political economy introduces necessity, need, private interest (oikos) into public space, in other words, all those things that the classical Greek and Roman tradition had defined as non-political. It is in this way that, by occupying the public sphere, the economy irreversibly deteriorates politics. According to Carl Schmitt, the logic of political economy is an element of depoliticisation and neutralisation of politics because the struggle for survival amongst enemies is turned into competition amongst business men (the bourgeoisie); the State is turned into society, and the political unity of the people into a sociological multiplicity of consumers, travellers and entrepreneurs. Whilst for Arendt the economy makes the classical tradition ineffective, for Schmitt it cripples the modern tradition of public law of the European peoples. For Marx this division between the Bourgeoisie (economic subject) and the Citizen (subject of right) is a contradiction that must be interpreted dialectically. Bourgeois and Citizen are in a relation of structure to superstructure. The reality of the relations of production is blurred by those of politics, which mystify them. The revolution is a promise of reconciliation between these two divided worlds.

Foucault does not integrate any of these views and proposes completely original solutions: first of all, the relation between these different domains - the political, the economic and the ethical - can no longer refer to a synthesis or unity to return to, unlike in Schmitt, Arendt and Marx. Secondly, neither juridical law, nor economic theory, nor the law of the market are capable of reconciling this heterogeneity. A new domain needs to be constituted, a new field, a new point of reference that is neither the totality of the subjects of rights, nor that of economic subjects. The ones and the others can only be governable in so far as a new group can be defined, which will incorporate them by making visible not only their relations and combinations, but also a whole series of other elements and interests.

In order for governmentality to preserve its global character, in order for it to not be separated in two branches (the art of economics and juridical government), liberalism invents and experiments a series of techniques (of government) which are exerted on a new level of reference that Foucault calls civil society, society or the social. But here civil society is not the space for the making of autonomy from the state, but the correlative of certain techniques of government. Civil society is not a first and immediate reality, but something that belongs to the modern technology of governmentality. Society is not a reality in itself or something that does not exist, but a reality of transactions, just like sexuality or madness. At the crossing of these relations of power and those which continue to escape them emerge some realities of transaction that constitute in a way an interface between the governing and the governed. At this junction and in the management of this interface liberalism is constituted as an art of government and biopolitics is born.

Thus, according to Foucault the homo oeconomicus is not an atom of the indivisible freedom of sovereign power nor an element that can be reduced to juridical government, but rather “a certain type of subject” that will allow the self limitation and self regulation of an art of government according to economic principles and defined by the aim to govern “as little as possible”. The homo oeconomicus is the partner, the vis-à-vis, the basic element of the new governmental reason as it is formulated from the C18th.

Liberalism is first and foremost neither an economic theory nor a political theory ; it is rather an art of government that assumes the market as the test and means of intelligibility, as the truth and the measure of society. Society must be understood as the totality of juridical, economic, cultural and social relations, woven together by a multiplicity of subjects (of which classes are a part). By market we do not mean “commodification”. According to Foucault with the C18th we do not return to the first book of Capital, with alienation and the reification of human relations determined by commodity exchange etc. So the market is not defined by the human instinct to exchange. It is no longer the market Braudel speaks of, which as such can never be reducible to capitalism. According to Foucault, by market we must always understand competition and inequality, rather than equality of exchange. Here, the subjects are not merchants but entrepreneurs. The market is therefore the market of enterprises and of their differential and non-egalitarian logic.

Liberalism as the government of heterogeneous dispositifs of power

Foucault explains the mode of functioning of governmental rationality in an equally original way. It does not function according to the opposition of public regulation (State) and the freedom of the entrepreneurial individual, but according to a strategic logic. The juridical, economic and social dispositifs are not contradictory, they are heterogeneous. For Foucault heterogeneity means tensions, frictions, and mutual incompatibilities, successful or unsuccessful adjustments between these different dispositifs. Sometimes the government plays one dispositif against another ; sometimes it relies on one, sometimes on the other. We are confronted with a kind of pragmatism that always uses the market and competition as a measure of its strategies. The logic of liberalism does not aim to take over, in a reconciled totality, the different conceptions of law, freedom, right and the processes that the juridical, economic and social dispositifs imply. According to Foucault, the logic of liberalism is opposed to the logic of dialectics. The latter considers contradictory terms in a homogeneous element that promises their resolution in a reconciliation. The function of the strategic logic is to establish the possible connections between disparate terms that remain disparate.

Foucault describes a politics of multiplicity that is well opposed to the primacy of politics defended by Arendt and Schmitt, and to the primacy of the economy of Marx. Foucault substitutes the proliferation of devices that constitute substantial unities, as much as degrees of unities contingent in each instance, for the totalising principle of the economy or the political. For the majoritarian subjects (subjects of rights, the working class etc.) he substitutes “minoritarian” subjects that operate and constitute the real by the enactment and the addition of bits, pieces, parts each time singular. The “truth” of these parts and these bits and pieces cannot be found in the political or the economic “whole”. Through the market and society the art of government is deployed with an increasing capacity of intervention, intelligibility and organisation of the whole of juridical, economic and social relations from the standpoint of the entrepreneurial logic.

Populations/Classes

Government is always exercised on a multiplicity that Foucault names, in the language of political economy, population. According to Foucault, government as the global management of power has always had the “multitude” as its object, of which classes (economic subjects), the subjects of right, and social subjects are parts. In the analysis of capitalism a line of discrimination is drawn between those techniques and knowledges (savoir) that take as their object the multiplicity-population and those which focus on the classes.

According to Foucault, since the beginning of capitalism, the problem of population has been conceived of as a bio-economic problem, until Marx tried to confine the problem of population (of the “multitude”, in the language of power) and to evade the very notion of population, in order to find again its proper form, no longer bio-economic, but the historical and political confrontation of classes and class struggle. (1)

The population must be grasped in a double aspect. On one side lies the human species and its biological, economic and social conditions of reproduction (regulation of birth and mortality, the management of demography, risks linked to life etc.), but on the other there lies the Public and public opinion. As the French philosopher notes, economists and marketing agents emerge at the same time. From the C18th the object of government is to act on the economy and on Opinion. Thus the action of government extends from the socio-biological rooting of the species as far as the surface of capture offered by the public, as dispositifs of power - and not as “ideological State apparatuses”. From the species to the public, there is a whole field of new realities and new ways of acting on behaviours, opinions, and subjectivities in order to change the ways economic and political subjects say and do things.

Discipline and security

We still have a disciplinary vision of capitalism, whereas according to Foucault those that take precedence are the dispositifs of security. The tendency that affirms itself in Western societies and that comes from a long time ago, from Polizeiwissenschaft, is that of the society of security that incorporates, uses, exploits and perfects the dispositifs of discipline and sovereignty without suppressing them, following a strategic logic of heterogeneity that we talked about above. We have sketched out the difference between discipline and security. Discipline confines, fixes limits and borders, so that security safeguards and ensures circulation. The former prevents whilst the latter leaves it to make, incites, favours, and solicits. The former limits freedom, the latter fabricates and produces it (freedom of enterprise or of the individual entrepreneur). Discipline is centripetal, it concentrates, centres and confines ; the latter is centrifugal, it widens and continuously integrates new elements to the art of government.

There is the example of a disease. A disease can be treated in a disciplinary way or according to the logic of security. In the first case (that of leprosy) measures are taken to try and prevent contagion by separating the diseased from the non diseased, confining and isolating the former. In the second case dispositifs of security support new techniques and new knowledges (vaccination) and aim to take into account the whole of the population without discontinuity or ruptures and separations between the diseased and the non diseased. Through statistics (another indispensable knowledge for security devices) a differential cartography of normality can be designed by calculating the risk of contagion for each age group, profession, city, and in every city for each neighbourhood etc. Thus there can even be a table with different curves of normality starting from the location of risks. The technique of security consists in the attempt put a lid on the most unfavourable curves, the ones that deviate the most from the most normal curve.

Thus there are two techniques that produce two different types of normalisation. Discipline arranges the elements on the basis of a code, a model and norms that determine what is forbidden and what is allowed, what is normal and what is abnormal. Security is a differential management of normalities and risks that are regarded as neither good nor bad, but as natural and spontaneous phenomena. It designs a cartography of this distribution and the normalising operation consists of playing one differential of normality against another.

“The moment sovereignty capitalises a territory and discipline creates architecture for a space where the essential problem is the hierarchical and functional distribution of the elements, security starts managing a field according to the events or the series of possible events, series that it needs to regulate within a multivalent and transformable frame”.

Security intervenes in possible events rather than facts. It therefore refers to what is aleatory, temporal and in course of development. Finally, security, unlike discipline, is a science of details. To adapt a citation from “Security, territory and population”, we could say that the things that concern security are those of each instant, whilst what concern the law are definitive and permanent things. Security is concerned with small things, whilst the law deals with the important issues. Security is always concerned with the details.

Vitalpolitik

Foucault makes relative the spontaneous “ontological” power of the enterprise, the market and labour and the constitutive force of “majoritarian” subjects (entrepreneurs and workers). Instead of making the sources of the production of wealth (and of the production of the real) in a mirroring fashion as Marxists and political economy have done, he shows how they are rather the results of the action of a group of dispositifs that activate, solicit and invest “society”. Enterprises, the market and labour are not spontaneous powers, but rather constitute what liberal government must make possible and real. The market, for instance, is an economic and social general regulator, yet it is not a natural mechanism found at the foundation of society, as Marxists and classical liberals had thought. On the contrary, the mechanisms of the market (prices, laws of demand and supply) are fragile. Favourable conditions must be continuously created for these fragile mechanisms to function. Governmentality assumes the market is the limit of state intervention : this is not in order to neutralise its interventions, but rather to requalify them. The relation between the State and the market is clarified by the theory and practice of German Ordo-liberals. In fact, liberal interventions can be as numerous as Keynesian ones (The freedom of the market needs an active and extremely vigilant politics), but their aims and objects are different. The goal of these interventions is the very possibility of the market. The objective is to make competition, the action of prices and the calculation of supply and demand possible. As the Ordo liberals say, intervention not on the market, but for the market. There is no need to intervene in the market since the measure of interventions is the principle of intelligibility, the place of veridiction. What needs intervention then ? According to the German liberals action must not be taken on what is directly economic, but on the conditions that make market economy possible. The government must intervene on society itself in its web and thickness. The “politics of society”, as they call it, has to take charge and account for social processes, and within them make room for the market mechanism. In order for the market to be possible, the general framework must be acted upon : demography, techniques, property rights, social and cultural conditions, education, juridical regulations etc. The economic theory of liberals manages to conceive of a politics of life (Vitalpolitik) in order to allow the market to exist : “A politics of life is not essentially oriented, as traditional social politics, towards the augmentation of wages and the reduction of labour time ; rather, it becomes aware of the life

situation of the totality of workers, its real, concrete situation, from morning to evening to morning". It looks like the "Third Way" of Tony Blair is more inspired by this continental liberalism than American neo-liberalism.

Work and workers

The need to "move outside the market" is accompanied by that of "moving outside" of labour in order to seize its "power" (puissance). And to move to the outside implies moving through "society" and life". To make labour possible, liberal government must invest in the worker's subjectivity, that is to say, their choices and decisions. As the economy becomes the economy of conduct, the economy of the souls, the first definition of government by the fathers of the Church becomes actuality again !

The American neo-liberals address a paradoxical critique to classical political economy, especially to Smith and Ricardo : political economy has always pointed out that production depends on three main factors (land, capital and labour), but in these theories "labour always remains unexplored". On the contrary, says Foucault, it could be said that Adam Smith's economics begins with a reflection on labour, in so far as the latter is the key to economic analysis, but classical political economy "has never analysed labour in itself, or rather it has been employed to neutralise it constantly and to neutralise it by exclusively folding back on the time factor".

Labour is a factor in production, but at the same time it is passive in itself and only finds employment and activity thanks to a rate of investment. Foucault widens the critique and asserts that it could also be applied to Marxian theory. Why have both classical economists and Marx paradoxically neutralised labour ? Because their economic analysis limits itself to the study of the mechanisms of production, exchange and consumption and thus glides over the qualitative modulations of labourers, their choices, behaviour and decisions. Neo-liberals, on the other hand, want to study labour as an economic conduct that operates, is rationalised and calculated by those who work.

This is the theory of "human capital", elaborated between the 1960s and 1970s, and Foucault uses it to illustrate this passage and deepening of the logic of government. From the standpoint of the worker, wages are not the sale price of his labour power but his income. An income of what ? Of its capital, that is to say a human capital that cannot be separated from its bearer, a capital that is one and the same as the worker. From the standpoint of the worker, the problem is the growth, accumulation and amelioration of his/her human capital.

What does it mean, to form and better capital ? To make and manage investments in school education, in health, mobility, affects and relations of all sorts (marriage for instance). In reality we are not seeing the worker through the classical lenses of the term (Marx), since the problem is to manage one's life time rather than one's labour time. And that starts from birth, since these future performances also depend on the quantity of affect that is given to the worker by relatives, capitalised by income for him or her and in "psychic income" for the relatives. In order to turn a worker into an entrepreneur and an investor, one needs to "step to the exterior of labour". Cultural, social, educative policies define the "wide and moving" framework within which choosing individuals evolve. And choices, decisions, conducts and behaviours are events and series of events that must be precisely regulated by the dispositifs of security. There is a shift from the analysis of structure to the analysis of the individual, from the analysis of economic processes to an analysis of subjectivity, its choices and the conditions of production of its life. Which system of rationality should this activity of choice

obey to ? To the laws of the market, the model of supply and demand, the model of costs/investment that are generalised to the social body in its totality, to turn them into “a model of social relations, a model of existence itself, a relation of the individual to him/herself, to time, surroundings, the future, groups, the family”, which means that “economics is the study of the manner in which rare resources are allocated to alternative aims”.

Contrary to the opinion of Polany and the Regulation School, the regulation of the market is not a corrective to its disordered development ; it is its institution. Why this reversing of such a standpoint ? Because what needs to be taken into account is something relatively neglected by economics : the problem of innovation. If there is innovation, if something is created anew, when new forms of productivity are discovered, “this is nothing other than the result of a whole of investments that have been made at the level of man himself”. A politics of growth cannot simply point to the problem of material investment, of physical capital on the one hand, and of the number of workers multiplied by the hours of labour on the other. What needs to be changed is the level of content of human capital and to act on this “capital” a whole series of dispositifs are needed, to mobilise, solicit, incite and invest “life”.

Foucault redefines Biopolitics as a politics of “society” and not only as a “regulation of the race” (Agamben), where the heterogeneity of dispositifs intervene on the totality of conditions for life, aiming to constitute subjectivity through a soliciting of choices and individual decisions. It is in this sense that power is an “action on possible actions”, an intervention in events. “There is an image of the ideas or the theme-programme of a society where the optimisation of systems of difference reigns, within which the field for oscillating processes is left open, where there is an agreed tolerance granted to individuals and to minoritarian practices, and an action not on the players, but on the rules of the game and finally in which there will be an intervention that is not of the kind of internal subjugation of individuals, but an intervention of the environmental kind”.

The dispositifs of security define a frame that is “loose” (since it deals precisely with actions on possibilities) ; within this frame, on the one hand the individual will be able to exercise its “free” choices on the possibilities determined by others and, on the other hand, there will be enough scope for the government and handling of responses to the hazards of the changes of its environment, as required by the situation of permanent innovation of our societies.

After reading these two courses we could think that Foucault has a certain fascination for liberalism. In fact, it seems that what interests him in liberalism is a politics of multiplicity ; the management of power as a management of multiplicity. These telluric texts, where the functioning of Foucault’s cerebral circuits is visible, seem to invite us to not consider power as something that is, but as something that makes itself (and also unmakes itself !). What exists is not power, but power in the course of its making, in direct contact with events, through a multiplicity of dispositifs, actions, laws and decision that do not make up a rational and preconceived project (“a plan”), yet can make up a system, a totality ; a system and a totality that are always contingent. Whilst the French philosopher has long been, in his most interesting developments, a philosopher of multiplicity, French politics has also long been a politics of totality, of the one, of unity. Here the French Right and the Left (Marxist and socialist) are reunited. We have had a further confirmation of this during the referendum campaign on Europe. Not only the results themselves, the Right and the Left have immediately withdrawn in the all “reassuring” totality of the Nation, where they had never exited, but they appealed, the same evening, to another whole, as ineffective as reassuring, to resolve the problem of unemployment : labour/employment. The politics of totality knows no

“outside”. The impotence of the advocates of the “yes” and of the “no” refers to a real impossibility : that of thinking and practicing a politics of multiplicity that passes through the exterior of all the substantial “wholes” : labour, market, State and Nation.

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Translated by Arianna Bove and Erik Empson

(1) Translator’s note : In his 1976 course to the College de France, ‘Il faut défendre la société’ , M. Foucault compares the philosophical and juridical discourse on sovereignty - the foundation of the political theory of a universal rights bearing subject - with the historical political discourse on politics as war, characterised by an ensuing perspectivism, where ‘truth functions as a weapon to be used for a partisan victory’ (p. 270) and concerned with the ever-present war in society that lies underneath and outside of political institutions. Of the latter discourse, he says that “although this discourse speaks of races, and although the term “race” appears at a very early stage, it is quite obvious that the word “race” itself is not pinned to a stable biological meaning. And yet the word is not completely free-floating. Ultimately, it designates a certain historico-political divide. One might say - and this discourse does say- that two races exist whenever one writes the history of two groups which do not, at least to begin with, have the same language or, in many cases, the same religion. The two groups form a unity and a single polity only as a result of war, invasions, victories and defeats, or in other words, acts of violence. [...] The revolutionary discourse of C17th England, and that of C19th France and Europe, was on the side of history-as-demand, or history-as-insurrection. [...]” In this context, Lazzarato is referring to a passage where Foucault quotes Marx : "After all, it should not be forgotten that toward the end of his life, Marx told Engels in a letter written in 1882 that : 'You know very well where we found our idea of class struggle ; we found it in work of the French historians who talked about race struggles'. The history of the revolutionary project and of revolutionary practice is, I think, indissociable from the counter history that broke with the Indo-European form of historical practices, which were bound up with the exercise of sovereignty ; it is indissociable from the appearance of the counter history of races and the role played in the West by clashes between races” (M. Foucault, “Society must be defended” , London : Penguin 2003, p. 76-79)

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