

Featured Essay

The Reception and Evolution of Foucault's Political Philosophy

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Abstract: With the benefit of the complete publication of Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France, the reception of his work by political philosophers in the English-speaking world during the late 1970s and early 1980s appears extremely confused. This reception was based on the English translations of work published in the mid-1970s, chiefly *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, along with collections of interviews from the same period. The misunderstandings of those works were compounded by ignorance of developments in his approach to politics and his understanding of power worked out in lectures from 1976 to 1979. The aim of this paper is not simply to defend Foucault against critics from that period, but to show how a more complete understanding of the evolution of his political thought might enable a better understanding of the similarities and differences between his genealogical approach to power and government and the concerns of normative political philosophy.

Keywords: Foucault, power, government, political philosophy

In 1971, amidst the social turmoil of post-1968 France, Michel Foucault founded an organization called the *Prisons Information Group* and published a long interview with Gilles Deleuze entitled "Intellectuals and Power."¹ This interview presented his work as that of someone driven by a desire to find new ways for intellectuals to contribute to struggles against oppression. The book that grew out of this activity, *Discipline and Punish*, was widely read as a political text about punishment, power and associated forms

¹ Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and Power" in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1977); Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953–1974*, ed. by David Lapoujade, trans. by Michael Taormina. (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).

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of knowledge.² However, it has always had a somewhat strained relationship to the discipline of political philosophy, especially in the English-speaking world. Coincidentally, the book that has been widely credited with reviving the field of political philosophy from the doldrums of ordinary language philosophy and conceptual analysis, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, was also published in 1971.³ For many critics of Foucault, the difference between these two books was perceived as that between political philosophy and something else, a confused historical or sociological approach to penal policy, the politics of prisons and the nature of discipline as a specific technology of power. In contrast, my aim is to see whether it is possible to regard both Foucault's work and that of Rawls as contributions to political philosophy; that is, as different but no less legitimate philosophical approaches to politics in the twentieth century. I argue that this requires a more comprehensive and nuanced appreciation of the evolution of Foucault's political philosophy after 1976.

Responses

Initial receptions of Foucault's work were not promising. Political philosophers tended to see his work as fatally flawed, confused or, in Habermas' critique, a renewed form of anti-modernist and anti-intellectual conservatism.⁴ Michael Walzer's response was in some ways more sympathetic—he saw Foucault as a fellow leftist—but, in other ways, no less critical. He drew attention to the absence of normative standards in Foucault's work in a manner that echoed similar claims made by Nancy Fraser and later repeated by Habermas, Charles Taylor and others. He characterized Foucault as a nihilist who endorsed no values that might provide grounds for moral or political evaluation. As such, Walzer argued,

² See Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). For the English translation, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1977).

³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁴ See among other initial responses: J. Minson, "Strategies for Socialists? Foucault's Conceptions of Power," *Economy and Society*, 9:1 (1980), 1-43; Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions," *Praxis International*, 3 (1981), 272-287; reprinted in Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 17-34; Mark Philp, "Foucault on Power: A Problem in Radical Translation?" *Political Theory*, 11:1 (1983), 29-52; Michael Walzer, "The Politics of Michel Foucault," *Dissent*, Fall (1983), 481-90; reprinted as Michael Walzer, "The Politics of Michel Foucault," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. by David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 51-68 (references are to this edition); also reprinted in slightly revised form as Michael Walzer, "The Lonely Politics of Michel Foucault," in *The Company of Critics* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 191-209; Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Political Theory*, 12:2 (1984), 152-183; also reprinted as Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, 69-102; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. by Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

Foucault gave us no reason to expect that new forms of power would be any better than old ones and, more importantly, failed to address the normative principles that underpin such judgments: “Nor for that matter, does he give us any way of knowing what ‘better’ might mean.”⁵

The centrality of the concept of power to Foucault’s work during the early 1970s—not only in *Discipline and Punish* but also in *The History of Sexuality Volume One*,⁶ where he outlined a project the whole point of which, as he said in a 1977 interview, lay “in a re-elaboration of the theory of power”⁷—meant that he gave frequent summaries, theses and responses to questions from interviewers about the nature of power and how it should be studied: power was dispersed throughout the social body; it should be studied at the periphery, in its effect on bodies, from the ground up, and so on.⁸ Walzer took this to imply that

Citizenship and government alike have been superseded. And yet the whole point of modern political theory, since the absolutist state provided the ground on which it was constructed, has been to account for these two things.⁹

Walzer’s conception of the “whole point” of modern political theory underpins his conclusion that, in the end, Foucault did not have a political theory, or, if we persist in calling his work political theory, then it suffers “catastrophic weakness” by virtue of the absence of any consideration of democratic citizenship or the liberal state.¹⁰

Political Philosophy and Approaches to Power

A first point to make about this kind of criticism is that, while representative of many responses from English-speaking political philosophers, Walzer relied on a view of the nature and history of political

⁵ Walzer, “The Politics of Michel Foucault,” 61.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley, (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, trans. by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), 187.

⁸ See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, 94-97; Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended”: *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, ed. by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. by David Macey, (New York: Picador, 2003), 29-34. Hereafter cited as *Society Must Be Defended*.

⁹ Walzer, “The Politics of Michel Foucault,” 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

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philosophy that Foucault acknowledged, but only in order to distinguish it from his own approach. He repeatedly contrasted his own approach to power with the 'juridico-political' theory that sought to explain the origin and legitimacy of sovereign power. Criticism of what he called the 'juridico-discursive' conception of power was a persistent theme of his analyses during this period. By 'juridico-discursive' he meant a conception of political power that is focused on the figure of the sovereign, the Leviathan in Hobbes's work of that name, who was the legitimate ruler of the body politic and the source of all its laws.

In a 1976 lecture, Foucault offered several historical reasons why political philosophers should have been preoccupied with this form of power: first, the imposition of law played a crucial role in the establishment of absolute, secular authority in the European middle ages and second, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, political struggles were fought in relation to the sources of law: "the theory of sovereignty became a weapon that was used both to restrict and to strengthen royal power."¹¹ Finally, he noted that after the democratization of political authority in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the legal and constitutional apparatus of sovereignty remained the institutional framework of political power in the West.

During the early 1970s, Foucault objected that this conceptual focus on the formation and legitimation of political authority was not adequate to account for other ways in which power came to be exercised in modern European societies. In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, he showed that over the same period, a new mechanism of power with different objects and objective was invented. This *disciplinary* mechanism of power is applied primarily to bodies and what they do, rather than to land and what it produces. It was a mechanism of power that made it possible to extract time and labor, rather than commodities and wealth, from bodies. It was a type of power that was exercised through constant surveillance, rather than in discontinuous fashion through chronologically defined systems of taxation and obligation. It was a type of power that presupposed a closely meshed grid of material coercions, rather than the physical existence of a sovereign. As such, it defined a new economy of power based upon the principle that there had to be an increase in the subjugated forces of bodies, and an increase in the force and efficacy of that which subjugated them. Foucault later suggested that this new mechanism of power was "absolutely incompatible with relations of sovereignty" as well as being "one of bourgeois society's

¹¹ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 34.

great inventions. It was one of the basic tools for the establishment of industrial capitalism and the corresponding type of society."¹²

Discipline and Punish traced the development of this disciplinary power and the adoption of its techniques in most of the key institutions of modern society: armies, factories, schools, hospitals, and eventually, prisons. The analysis of this kind of power relation, exercised over individual bodies and small groups of people, and involving the detailed ordering of movements, activities, and dispositions in space and time, called for a quite different 'micropolitical' understanding of power. However, contra Walzer, Foucault never argued that the juridico-political conception of sovereign power disappeared in favor of disciplinary techniques. Rather, Foucault argued that it persisted alongside disciplinary power, not merely as ideology, but as organizing principle for the juridical and political institutions of modern European societies:

From the nineteenth century until the present day, we have then in modern societies, on the one hand, a legislation, a discourse, and an organization of public right articulated around the principle of the sovereignty of the social body and the delegation of individual sovereignty to the State; and we also have a tight grid of disciplinary coercions that actually guarantees the cohesion of that social body. Now that grid cannot in any way be transcribed in right, even though the two necessarily go together. A right of sovereignty and a mechanics of discipline. It is, I think, between these two limits that power is exercised.¹³

Foucault's diagnosis of the continued existence and function of the theory of sovereignty from the end of the eighteenth century onwards provides a context for his reluctance to pursue the standard questions and approach of modern political philosophy. In defense of his focus on disciplinary power, he famously wrote in *The History of Sexuality Volume One* that "[in] political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king."¹⁴ By this, he meant that thought about political power remained bound up with the perspective of the sovereign, focused on the supposed universal principles that justify the exercise of sovereign power and set limits to its legitimate exercise. In contrast, Foucault described his own approach as directed at other, non-sovereign mechanisms, and as descriptive rather than normative,

¹² Ibid., 36.

¹³ Ibid., 37.

¹⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, 88-89.

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concerned not with *why* but with *how* power is exercised, by what mechanisms, and to what ends.¹⁵

This brief characterization of Foucault's differences with the 'juridico-discursive' conception of power suggests a response to those critics who castigate him for not providing a normative criteria: are not these critics reproducing the standpoint, the speaking position and the approach of the theory of sovereignty? They call for global principles that would underpin the law, justify, and at the same time, establish limits to the exercise of legitimate power. Walzer is explicit in his defense of the traditional standpoint of political theory. On his view, no political theory can ignore the sovereign state that "establishes the general framework within which all other disciplinary institutions operate."¹⁶ It must provide an account of "the liberal state and the rule of law," which implies "a kind of knowledge – political philosophy and philosophical jurisprudence – that regulates disciplinary arrangements across our society."¹⁷ Foucault refuses to provide this kind of jurisprudential knowledge. The response of Walzer and other political philosophical critics amounts to criticizing Foucault from the standpoint of a 'sovereignist' and normative approach to power from which Foucault explicitly sought to distance himself.

The Evolution of Foucault's Analysis of Power

A second point to make in response to Walzer's criticism is that it illustrates, in dramatic fashion, a weakness shared by much of the criticism of Foucault's work published in English in the early 1980s (and by many of the defenses of his approach), namely that it was founded on complete ignorance of his political philosophy after 1976. In particular, the lectures of 1977–1978 (*Security, Territory, Population*) and of 1978–1979 (*The Birth of Biopolitics*) played no role in these evaluations. This is not surprising since these lectures were not published in French until 2004, and then in English in 2007 and 2008. It is in these lectures that Foucault began to focus on the exercise of sovereign power as this was theorized from the sixteenth through the eighteenth and nineteenth century. As in his earlier work on discipline and 'micropower,' he remained focused on the descriptive analysis of power, but at the level of its exercise over populations. This involved different objects and different techniques but still focused on the question of 'how' power is exercised rather than why. Eventually these lectures came to concentrate on the distinguishing features of liberal government as it emerged in the course

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Power*, vol. 3 of Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984, ed. by James D. Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley and Others (New York: The New Press, 2000), 336–337.

¹⁶ Walzer, "The Politics of Michel Foucault," 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

of the eighteenth century. This was a modality of government informed by the study of political economy and concerned to allow for the operation of a market economy.

Walzer's ignorance of these developments in Foucault's thought, long before the article published in *Dissent* in 1983, leads him to infer a theory of liberalism as "nothing more than discipline concealed."¹⁸ Foucault's lectures in 1978 and 1979 develop a rather more sophisticated account of liberalism as a novel form of government that sought to accommodate the practice of government with the operation of a market economy. The significant changes in Foucault's conceptualization of power, along with his explicit attention to the forms of exercise of state power, provide a direct rebuttal to Walzer's claim that Foucault pays no attention to the state, in particular, the liberal state. He does address the nature of the modern democratic state and citizenship, although not in terms of the search for jurisprudential principles of just or legitimate government.

I do not propose to dwell on the reasons for Foucault's re-examination and critique of his earlier approach to power, but simply to draw attention to the opening lecture in 1976 that begins with the statement of an intellectual crisis. Foucault says that he has had enough and would like to bring to a close the "mere fragments of research" that he has pursued in preceding years and that have become very repetitive, "always falling into the same rut, the same themes, the same concepts."¹⁹ He connects this intellectual crisis to "changes in the conjuncture" but does not spell out the nature of these changes. It is worth noting that 1975 and 1976 were the years in which the Marxist orthodoxy that had sustained radical political movements in France since the 1960s began to fall apart: Soviet dissidents, "new philosophers," but also a turn towards armed struggle on the part of some elements of the extreme left.²⁰

Whatever the reasons for this crisis in his own political thought around this time, for the remainder of his 1975 – 1976 lecture course, Foucault embarks on a self-critical examination of the nature of power. There are several dimensions to this: First, he poses a diagnostic question about the nature of power in modern society. He asks: what are the distinguishing features of power in modern European societies? In these and in subsequent lectures between 1976 and 1979, he offers a number of responses to this question, suggesting that it is fundamentally a form of biopower, of pastoral power, that it is characterized by the deployment of mechanisms of security

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁹ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 3.

²⁰ For a longer discussion of this re-examination and the reasons for it, see Paul Patton, "From Resistance to Government: Foucault's Lectures 1976-1979" in *A Companion to Foucault*, ed. by C. Falzon, T. O'Leary, J. Sawicki (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 172-188.

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and, finally, a succession of different forms of liberal government. Second, he poses a conceptual question about the nature of political power: how it operates. This is the most directly self-critical dimension since Foucault questions the 'war-repression' schema in terms of which he had earlier conceptualized the operation of power:

I would like to try to see the extent to which the binary schema of war and struggle, of the clash between forces, can really be identified as the basis of civil society, as both the principle and motor of the exercise of political power. Are we really talking about war when we analyze the workings of power? Are the notions of 'tactics,' 'strategy, and 'relations of force' valid? To what extent are they valid? Is power quite simply a continuation of war by means other than weapons and battles?²¹

Third, he undertakes a change of perspective that, in one respect, challenges the regicidal declaration cited above. He no longer insists on the importance of studying power from below or at the capillary extremes of its exercise in the social body, but instead returns to the exercise of power by the figures of sovereign authority that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From 1978 onwards, he embarked on an ambitious study of the different ways in which power was exercised (or supposed to be exercised) at the level of society as a whole. In this manner, he outlined in his 1978 and 1979 lectures a history of some of the major forms of 'governmentality,' by which he meant not so much the actual exercise of state power but the manner in which it was theorized and written about. In short, he proposed to study "the rationalization of governmental practice in the exercise of political sovereignty."²² It was this project that led him to focus on the emergence of liberal governmentality from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, and then in his 1979 lectures, on the outlines of neoliberal governmentality as this emerged during the latter part of the twentieth century.

These dimensions of Foucault's reconsideration of political power are not unrelated. Consider the movement from 'war-repression' to government as models of the exercise of power. The 'micro-physics' of disciplinary power outlined in *Discipline and Punish* presupposed that power relations are grounded in relations of force and that "one should take as the model for

²¹ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 18.

²² Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, ed. by Michel Senellart, trans. by Graham Burchell (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

power relations a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory.”²³ *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* famously argued that “power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate” and that the condition of possibility of all power relations must be sought in “the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power.”²⁴ At the same time, this passage offered a more nuanced view of the usefulness of battle as the model for power relations, suggesting that the difference between war and politics was not a difference in kind but a difference of strategy whereby the force relations present in a given society could be played out either in the forms of war or politics. Foucault’s discussion of power here draws a distinction, that is obscured in the English translation, between power in general, as it is exercised in local relations throughout society, and ‘the power’ understood as the overall system of domination and control: “power insofar as it is permanent, repetitive, inert and self-reproducing.”²⁵ Foucault’s nominalist understanding of the latter relies on the military metaphor: “‘the’ power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength with which some are endowed; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.”²⁶

At the beginning of the 1976 lectures, “Society Must Be Defended,” Foucault explicitly questioned the applicability of concepts such as antagonism, rivalry or confrontation, and struggle between contending parties to the analysis of power. Similarly, a number of comments in interviews recorded around this time allude to his doubts about the war-repression schema. For example, in the “Truth and Power” interview, which took place in June 1976, he commented that “it’s astonishing to see how easily and self-evidently people talk of warlike relations of power or of class struggle without ever making it clear whether some form of war is meant, and if so what form.”²⁷ In “The Eye of Power” interview conducted around the same time, he commented on the frequency with which people use the term ‘struggle’ without questioning what is implied by this term: “Is the relation of forces in the order of politics a warlike one? I don’t personally feel prepared to answer this with a definite yes or no.”²⁸

²³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 26.

²⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, 92-93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁶ *Ibid.* (translation modified)

²⁷ Foucault, *Power*, 124.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, Jean-Pierre Barou, and Michelle Perrot, “The Eye of Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, 164.

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This dissatisfaction with the war-repression schema was only partly expressed in *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* published at the end of 1976. As noted above, the language of forces and strategies continued to provide the conceptual frame for the analysis of power. There was, however, a chapter devoted to criticizing the 'repressive hypothesis' in relation to sexuality.²⁹ The reason Foucault continued to rely on the war model of the operation of power is that, at this point, he had not settled on any alternative. Instead of providing an alternative, the 1975-1976 lectures only repeat and reformulate the conceptual question:

To what extent can a relationship of domination boil down to or be reduced to the notion of a relationship of force? To what extent can the relationship of force be reduced to a relationship of war?³⁰

Power and Government

The closest Foucault came to a definitive response to the conceptual questions posed in his 1976 lectures was in the essay, "The Subject and Power," published for the first time in English in *Critical Inquiry* in 1982, and as an appendix to Dreyfus and Rabinow's *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*.³¹ It is unclear precisely when this essay was written. Arnold Davidson suggests that "there is compelling internal evidence that parts of it were written several years earlier."³² What is clear is that the key sections of the essay that provide a definition of power could only have been written after Foucault's discovery of the rich theme of government and governmentality in 1978.

Foucault begins by distinguishing power relations from relations of communication, and from the power exercised over things through the

²⁹ Arnold Davidson's Introduction to "*Society Must Be Defended*" acknowledges Foucault's questioning of the war model of power in interviews, but then curiously disregards this critical dimension of the 1976 lectures by suggesting that "Foucault's preoccupation with the schema of war was central to this formulation of the strategic model of power, of force-relations, a strategic model that would allow us to reorient our conception of power" (Arnold I. Davidson, Introduction to Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, xviii). In fact, Foucault's preoccupation with the schema of war was rather the beginnings of a shift in his thinking about power away from the strategic model.

³⁰ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 46.

³¹ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Critical Inquiry*, 8:4 (1982), 777-795. Reprinted as Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," Afterword to H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 208-226. Also reprinted in Foucault, *Power*, 326-348.

³² Arnold Davidson, "In Praise of Counter-Conduct," *History of the Human Sciences*, 24:4 (2011), 39, note 4.

exercise of particular physical, technical or organizational capacities. All of these may be involved in a given social institution or activity, but the specificity of power relations is that they involve action upon the actions of others:

In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions.³³

This understanding of power relations is significantly different from Foucault's earlier conception of power relations as conflict or struggle between opposing forces. The most important difference is the fact that the parties to relations of power are now conceived as agents endowed with a degree of freedom. The exercise of power presupposes that those on whom power is exercised are subjects capable of action, and that they are, in fact, free to act in a number of ways: "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are 'free'."³⁴ The scare quotes around 'free' here indicate that this is not a natural freedom but rather specific kinds of freedom that are required for certain kinds of government, or for the government of certain kinds of subjects.

The definition of power as action upon the actions of others confirms Foucault's rupture with the war model and the juridical conception of power. Power is not something possessed that can be exchanged or transferred. It does not essentially involve either contracts or violence, which does not mean that the exercise of power cannot, in particular cases, involve the obtaining of consent or the threat of violence. Nor does it essentially involve struggle between contending forces. Rather, power acts on the 'field of possibilities' that circumscribes the actions of others. It is a way of directing or governing the actions of others:

Basically, power is less a confrontation between two adversaries or their mutual engagement than a question of 'government'... The relationship proper to power would therefore be sought not on the side of violence or of struggle, nor on that of voluntary contracts (all of which can, at best, only be the instruments of power)

³³ Foucault, *Power*, 340.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 342.

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but, rather, in the area of that singular mode of action, neither warlike nor juridical, which is government.³⁵

So how did Foucault get from power as the effect of conflicting forces to power as government? The breakthrough in his conceptual analysis of power occurred two years after those questions were first raised, in his 1977-1978 lectures *Security, Territory, Population*.³⁶ It was here that he began to analyze the technologies of state power that he called mechanisms of security. These do not involve direct confrontation between contending forces, but are forms of action on a population, where this is considered as a natural phenomenon subject to various kinds of regular behavior: economic, demographic, epidemiological, and so on. These mechanisms of security, and the forms of knowledge associated with them represented a shift from a political order characterized by the exercise and maintenance of sovereignty to one characterized by government. From this point onwards, Foucault's analyses of the exercise of power became focused on government rather than war.

The theme of government is explicitly introduced in the fourth lecture in 1978. However, an earlier lecture devoted to the study of 'mechanisms of security' introduced the basic elements of the new form of governmental power that emerged in Europe in the course of the eighteenth century. Foucault's lecture on 18 January 1978 was devoted to proposals put forward in the middle of the eighteenth century to deal with the problem of grain shortage. *La disette* (meaning 'dearth,' or 'scarcity') was defined as "the present insufficiency of the amount of grain necessary for a nation's subsistence."³⁷ Grain shortage was a threat to governments because it could quickly lead to revolt on the part of urban populations deprived of food. Previously, it had been dealt with by regulations intended to prevent such shortages from occurring:

price control, and especially control of the right to store; the prohibition of hoarding with the consequent necessity of immediate sale; limits on export, the prohibition of sending grain abroad with, as the simple restriction on this, the limitation of the extent of land under cultivation, because if the cultivation of grains is

³⁵ Ibid., 341.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, ed. by Michel Senellart, trans. by Graham Burchell. (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

³⁷ "La disette, c'est-à-dire l'insuffisance actuelle de la quantité des grains nécessaire pour faire subsister une Nation," Louis-Paul Abeille, *Lettre d'un négociant sur la nature du commerce des grains* (1763) (Paris: Institut Coppet, 2014), 13. As quoted in Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 30.

too extensive, the surplus from this abundance will result in a collapse of prices, so that the peasants will not break even.³⁸

At the end of the seventeenth century, some economic advisors to the French monarchy argued that the free circulation of grain along the lines of the English model was a better mechanism to ensure food security. This was a key proposition defended by Physiocrats, such as Quesnay, who became influential in French economic policy in the 1750s. Foucault examines the defense outlined by Louis-Paul Abeille in the 1763 text, *Letter from a trader on the nature of the grain trade*. Abeille was involved in French economic policy during the 1760s when he served as Secretary to the Bureau of Commerce. Foucault proposes to consider this indicative text “from the perspective of a genealogy of technologies of power.”³⁹ Edicts in 1763 and 1764 resulted to a radically new policy for dealing with the problem of grain shortage that amounted to

a complete change, or rather a phase in a major change in the techniques of government and an element in the deployment of what I will call apparatuses of security. In other words, you could read the principle of the free circulation of grain as the consequence of a theoretical field and also as an episode in the mutation of technologies of power and an episode in the installment of this technique of apparatuses of security that seems to me to be one of the typical features of modern societies.⁴⁰

The new policy sought to take into account, not just the market price of grain, but the whole economic cycle of production and circulation that produced more or less grain. Rather than artificially set a low price, it sought to allow for, and even favor, a higher price, so that more investment would be made in production. It recommended the removal of restrictions on hoarding, on the export and import of grain, and on the extent of land devoted to its production in order to rely on market mechanisms to stabilize the price and the supply of grain. It involved a conception of market mechanisms that was “not just the analysis of what happens. It is at once an analysis of what happens and a program for what should happen.”⁴¹ In order to develop this program, Foucault pointed out, the analysis of the production of grain had to

³⁸ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 32.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

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be broadened in several respects: First, on the side of production, it had to consider the entire cycle from the initial actions of producers up to the final profit. Second, on the side of the market, the analysis had to consider not just the domestic market but all of the international sources of grain. Third, the analysis had to be broadened on the side of the protagonists in order to understand

how and why they act, what calculation they make when, faced with a price rise, they hold back grain, and what calculation they make when, on the other hand, they know there is freedom, when they do not know how much grain will arrive, when they hesitate so as to know whether there will be a rise or fall in the amount of grain. All of this, that is to say that completely concrete element of the behavior of *homo oeconomicus*, must also be taken into account ...⁴²

The new measures aimed at the security of food for the population at large, but they worked through the decisions of individual producers, merchants, and consumers by allowing the free circulation of goods. They did not involve the direct confrontation and struggle of contending forces, as suggested by the schema of war. Nor did they involve direct action upon the forces of individuals and groups in the manner of disciplinary techniques. Rather, they established conditions under which market incentives would cause individuals to act in ways that would address the problem of shortage. In this manner, the new measures act indirectly on the actions of others. They do not seek to directly regulate the production and circulation of grain, but rather, to achieve the desired result by allowing the natural mechanisms of the economic cycle to operate. Foucault notes that this manner of exercising power

is profoundly linked to the general principle of what is called liberalism. The game of liberalism—not interfering, allowing free movement, letting things follow their course; *laissez faire, passer et aller*—basically and fundamentally means acting so that reality develops, goes its way, and follows its own course according to the laws, principles, and mechanisms of reality itself.⁴³

⁴² Ibid., 41.

⁴³ Ibid., 48.

Foucault returns to this problem of grain scarcity and the different ways of dealing with it in his final lecture in 1978, suggesting, with characteristic hyperbole, that he has done little more over the course of these lectures than comment on the texts dealing with this issue. The intervening lectures devoted to ‘police’ government allow him to situate the debates over grain scarcity in the broader context of criticism of this style of government. He rehearses key theses of the criticism of the mercantilist inspired policy of police in relation to grain production, and suggests that the market solution to the problem of grain shortage embodies a new rationality of government, one that no longer supposes that government regulation can ensure the being and well-being of people. This new rationality also involves a new conception of the subjects of government that further specifies their nature as ‘free’ agents. They are subjects supposed to have certain irreducible interests, and supposed to be able to calculate optimal ways of satisfying those interests. In effect, this form of government is exercised neither over subjects of power or force—as the analysis of disciplinary power supposed—nor over juridical subjects of right, but over subjects of interest. This is the government of *homo oeconomicus*. Henceforth:

The state is envisioned as the regulator of interests and no longer as the transcendent and synthetic principle of the transformation of the happiness of each into the happiness of all. I think this is a crucial change that brings us face to face with an essential element of the history of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and also twentieth century, that is to say: What should the state’s game be, what role should it play, what function should it perform in relation to that fundamental and natural game of private interests?⁴⁴

In this manner, Foucault suggests, by virtue of its reliance on the individual governed as a subject of interest, and by virtue of its mode of acting indirectly on the actions of the governed, “the governmentality of the eighteenth century *économistes* introduces some of the fundamental lines of modern and contemporary governmentality.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., 346-347.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 348.

The Relationship between the Conceptual and the Diagnostic Questions

There is more to say about Foucault's analysis of liberal governmentality and its relation to the concerns of normative political philosophy, but it is worthwhile to return for a moment to the different dimensions of his reconsideration of power from 1976 onwards, in order to see how these were related to one another. Foucault's answer to the conceptual question was a direct consequence of the shift of focus from micropower to power exercised by the state over entire populations, and of the answer that he eventually gave to the diagnostic question, namely that the exercise of state power in the West, from the latter half of the eighteenth century onwards, was predominantly liberal.

Foucault's 1979 lectures point to some of the fundamental features of the liberal art of government: (1) the transformation of the relation between government and economy involved in the shift from market as a site of jurisdiction to the market as a site of veridiction: "The market must tell the truth (*dire le vrai*); it must tell the truth in relation to governmental practice,"⁴⁶ (2) the idea that government should promote the welfare and well-being of individuals. The concept that connects the idea of the market as site of veridiction and the idea of (public) utility is the concept of interest:

Governmental reason in its modern form, in the form established at the beginning of the eighteenth century ... is a reason that functions in terms of interest ... [this involves] a complex interplay between individual and collective interests, between social utility and economic profit, between the equilibrium of the market and the regime of public authorities, between basic rights and the independence of the governed.⁴⁷

Note the correspondence of this characterization modern governmentality with the characterization of power as action on the actions of others that Foucault gave in 'Subject and Power.' This is a manner of exercising power that acts indirectly. Government, he says,

no longer has a direct hold on things and people; it can only exert a hold, it is only legitimate, founded in law and reason, to intervene, insofar as interest, or interests,

⁴⁶ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

the interplay of interests, make a particular individual, thing, good, wealth, or process of interest for individuals.⁴⁸

The definition of power as action on the action of others corresponding to the liberal mode of exercise of power points to another feature of Foucault's approach to the analysis of power that was often overlooked by his English language critics, namely its resolute historicism. 'The Subject and Power' reiterates his insistence, in *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* and elsewhere, that the analysis of power relations and the forms of its exercise requires not so much a theory of power as an 'analytics' that, as he says, would provide the concepts required for the analysis of particular modalities of power.⁴⁹ The bare object of study, namely power, does not provide a sufficient basis for an adequate conceptualization: "We have to know the historical conditions that motivate our conceptualization. We need a historical awareness of our present circumstances."⁵⁰ In particular, Foucault adds, we need to check "the type of reality with which we are dealing," which means the type of power that operates in our present circumstances. In other words, there is a direct relationship between answers to the diagnostic and the conceptual questions about power.

In this sense, Foucault's approach to the analysis of power is thoroughly historicist. He is not interested in a conceptual analysis of power in general, or in the abstract, but rather, in a conceptual analysis that responds to the present, to the particular form or forms of power by means of which we are now governed. In 'The Subject and Power,' he suggests that this is a form of power that 'individualizes' or that makes people subjects of certain kinds. The eighteenth century saw the introduction of a new organization of the pastoral power that had previously developed in the context of the Church's responsibility for the salvation of souls, one in which the material, rather than the spiritual, well-being of individuals became the concern of government. In this way, he suggested that "we can see the state as a modern matrix of individualization or a new form of pastoral power."⁵¹ Making individuals into certain kinds of subjects, or treating them as certain kinds of subjects, is a way of acting on their actions. In these terms, we can read the second part of this text entitled 'How is Power Exercised?' as setting out the conceptual requirements for the study of this modern, individualizing form of governmental power.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, 82.

⁵⁰ Foucault, *Power*, 327.

⁵¹ Ibid., 354.

Conclusion

Let me try to draw together the main threads of this overview of developments in Foucault's political philosophy as outlined in lectures after 1976, and comment on what it tells us about Foucault's relation to normative political philosophy. First, his discovery of governmentality is a development of his earlier descriptive analysis of power, albeit one that is increasingly directed at the state and its manner of governing populations and the conditions of their life, well-being and prosperity. As a consequence, the criticism of Walzer and others that Foucault ignores the state is redundant.

Second, his analysis of governmentality becomes increasingly focused on the liberal mode of government that emerged in Europe from eighteenth century onwards. Foucault's 1978-79 lectures, then, discuss elements of the neoliberal governmentality that emerged towards the middle of the twentieth century, first in Germany, and then in United States. One reviewer suggests that these lectures represent Foucault's one and only 'diversion into contemporary political philosophy', so long as we understand that his interest does not involve the juridical tradition of contractarian and natural rights philosophy associated with Rawls and Nozick but rather the political economic tradition: "Think of the tradition that goes from Hobbes, Hume and Adam Smith to Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, David Gauthier, and contemporary evolutionary game theory."⁵² To the extent that neoliberal conceptions of the proper business of government came to inform specific policy proposals, they became part of the public political reason. In this sense, Foucault's outline of a genealogy of modern governmentality may be read as a contribution to an historical conception of public reason.⁵³

Thirdly, the analysis of governmentalities involves a historical approach to contemporary forms of the exercise of state power that seeks neither to justify nor to set limits to legitimate power—it is not explicitly normative in the way that much liberal political philosophy is—but it does, nevertheless, develop a historical perspective on the kinds of normativity that concern political philosophers. For example, the 1979 lectures misleadingly titled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, describe a fundamental duality at the heart of the modern exercise of state power that is also reflected in normative political theory, namely, the sense in which it refers to two quite different subjects of government: *homo oeconomicus* as opposed to *homo juridicus*. They point to the

⁵² F. Guala, "Critical Notice of Michel Foucault," *Economics and Philosophy*, 22 (2006), 429, 431. See also, Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France, 1978-1979* (Seuil/ Gallimard, 2004).

⁵³ For a detailed discussion of this claim, see Paul Patton, "Foucault and Rawls: Government and Public Reason" in *The Government of Life: Foucault, Biopolitics, and Neoliberalism*, ed. by Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 141-162.

emergence of a modern, bipolar political normativity that resulted in “two ways of constituting the regulation of public authorities by law, two conceptions of law, and two conceptions of freedom.”⁵⁴ The thought of normative political philosophers, such as Rawls, is shaped by this duality, even though it is not an explicit topic for most of them. Consider the manner in which Rawls’s theory of justice combines the economic and juridical subjects of government. Unlike earlier contractarians such as Locke, Rawls does not begin with individuals endowed with rights by God or nature. Rather, he begins from a conception of a rational person with a capacity to form a conception of the good and a life plan “designed to permit the harmonious satisfaction of his interests.”⁵⁵ Rawls relies on an ideal or hypothetical form of original contract in which parties would decide on principles of justice behind a veil of ignorance that deprived them of all but the most basic knowledge about the kind of society in which they would live. The first principle that would be accepted under such conditions states that each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others. This principle establishes the basic rights associated with the juridical subject of earlier liberalisms. However, the subjects of the original position supposed to endorse this principle are subjects of interest. He draws an explicit analogy between the situation of choice in the original position and the situation in competitive markets, where price equilibrium is attained on the basis of exchanges among individuals seeking to advance their own interests. In Rawls’s words, the principles of justice are those that “rational persons concerned to advance their interests would accept.”⁵⁶

Finally, I am not suggesting that the lectures from 1976 to 1979 present the ‘real’ political thought of Foucault that Walzer and many other critics and commentators ignored, for good reason since it was unavailable to them. Rather, my point is that a more fruitful treatment of Foucault as a political philosopher needs to take into account the whole body of work on power and government produced in the 1970s and 1980s. An informed appreciation of Foucault as a political philosopher has yet to occur. I hope I have provided some indication of what this might entail and how it might be carried out.

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⁵⁴ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 42.

⁵⁵ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 93.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

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