

SECURITY, TERRITORY AND POPULATION PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Security, Territory and Population is a collection of lectures given by the French thinker Michel Foucault at the College of France in 1977-8. Foucault describes the lectures as a work of philosophy, defined as “the politics of truth” (p. 3), a term which itself seems to require a definition. This creates two difficult problems for the reader. First, philosophy is hard. It involves carefully picking things apart, examining each element, putting the pieces back together, and then picking them apart from some other perspective, examining the new set of pieces and reassembling. It’s hard work, and it makes for difficult reading.

Second, these are lectures, not a polished work prepared for publication with the aid of editors and the time it takes to smooth out analysis. Foucault says that these lectures are part of a long program of study, of which other books and sets of lectures are parts. The earlier books include *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* for certain, and others as well. These are polished works, and they give an idea of the general program.

In this book, Foucault wants to talk about what he calls “bio-power” which he describes as “... the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power...” Note that I did not use the word “define”, but the word describe. We should understand this book and *The Birth of Bio-Power* which I plan to take up next, as tentative explorations, and not as a formal philosophical explication.

I haven’t written about *Discipline and Punish* or *The History of Sexuality* (except briefly), but I don’t think that will be a problem. The last

three books I've written about, *The Great Transformation*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Theory of Business Enterprise*, raise a similar set of issues. In each one of these books, we saw a massive change in the lives of the working people in Western Europe and the US beginning with the Industrial Revolution. These changes have produced amazing wealth for a few people, and have completely revamped the day-to-day lives of the vast group of working people. How exactly did these changes happen? Was there some great clamor for 12 hour work days in deep-pit mines? Did working people spontaneously decide to put their children to work in spinning mills at the age of 8? Was the demand for coal and cheap shirts so great that these things seemed like fair exchanges to the people whose lives were affected?

Polanyi seems to suggest that the changes were driven by economic duress both from the early capitalists and from the government. Arendt talks about the collapse of earlier social structure, and a combination of economic insecurity and random violence coupled with an appeal to nationalism and scape-goating of the Jews. Veblen doesn't directly discuss the mechanisms of change but he does say that the industrial age demanded new structures to achieve maximum efficiency. Polanyi says that society resists these massive changes, and Veblen seems to agree. Arendt says that the people can be changed by a combination of force and rhetoric. I realize these are gross simplifications, but they are offered to show that these writers lead us to the problem Foucault wants to talk about. Foucault says that he is not interested in a theory of power, but that his investigations have the potential to expand into a discussion of major social trends.

Third, the analysis of these power relations may, of course, open onto or initiate something like the overall analysis of a society. The analysis of mechanisms of power may also join up with the history of economic

transformations, for example. P. 2.

Human beings are a species, and in large groups can be understood and manipulated by those who have studied the species. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault gives us an early example:

[T]he ideas of crime and punishment must be strongly linked and '... follow one another without interruption.... When you have thus formed the chain of ideas in the heads of your citizens, you will then be able to pride yourselves on guiding them and being their masters.' Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, at 102, quoting J. M. Servan, *Discours sur l'administration de la justice criminelle*, 1767.

It reads just like Ivan Pavlov's theory of classical conditioning. We are much more refined than that now, of course. Almost every day we read a new theory about ourselves as a species. These insights are used by business to boost sales, by politicians to gain their own ends, and by each of us for our own purposes. For some of us, it is enough to know that. For Foucault, it was a signal that we need to think more clearly about power.

One good question might be, how did neoliberalism become the dominant discourse, not just of general societal power but of control over the self. Freedom is the most important thing in neoliberal rhetoric, but if we have to work to live, how free are we? If we have to take whatever is on offer as wages and employment, how free are we? People have internalized neoliberalism as a tool of self-discipline, and at such a deep level that they cannot even recognize it as an ideology. They think it is the natural way life should be, and anyone who questions it is anathema. This leads us to think about governmentality, which I discussed very briefly here, and which Foucault discusses in some detail in this book.

I believe that theory is important. The right wing is winning because so many people believe in neoliberalism, including a large number of Democrats. Kuhn points out that scientists can't even do analysis without a theory with which to understand the observations they are making. I don't think theories about societies or individual human behavior can ever have the kind of certainty we can get in the physical sciences, because as humans, any theory becomes an object of study and then of change. Even so, we can't understand our society without some kind of theory. Foucault says that philosophy is about the politics of truth. Is neoliberalism a truth? What are the points about it where we can push back against the idea that it is a truth? Identifying those points is one of the goals of this series of lectures and of the next set, collected as *The Birth of Bio-Politics*.

In this post, I suggested the beginnings of a theory for the left. The same kind of analysis can and should be applied to that proposal. But that's for the future. As I work my way through these books, I will try to remember that every proposal has points of struggle, as Foucault calls them, points that are contested. Let's start with the recognition that for many people, neoliberalism has successfully concealed the points of struggle from the people whose minds it has colonized.