

SECURITY TERRITORY AND POPULATION PART 3: SECURITY AS THE BASIS FOR GOVERNING

In the second lecture in *Security, Territory and Population*, Michele Foucault takes up the problem of food scarcity; this follows his examination of the problems of criminal law and epidemics in the first lecture. Foucault discusses two ways of thinking about problems like scarcity. One idea is that they are misfortunes, in the classical Greek sense, obstacles for humans to overcome. In the other story, they are the result of “man’s evil nature”. These two ideas lead to the basic forms of governmental response. If problems arise from man’s evil nature, then solutions must limit freedom of action and control the exercise of that evil nature. If they are just inevitable facts of life, the ideal solutions come from allowing the greatest freedom to find and test solutions.

Through the mid-18th Century the second idea dominated in Europe. The reaction in France to the problem of food scarcity was an increasingly complex and detailed set of regulations and prohibitions, designed to limit and control the evil behavior that caused scarcity. Foucault identifies a second reason for the adoption of discipline besides man’s evil nature:

The objective is of course for grain to be sold at the lowest possible price so that peasants make the smallest possible profit and townspeople can thus be fed at the lowest possible cost and are consequently paid the lowest possible wages.

This idea is identified with mercantilism. Then in the mid-1700s, the French Physiocrats brought

dramatic changes with their emphasis on freeing up trade in grain and letting markets deal with the problems of supply. The government began to allow greater freedom to the market for food. The role of the government shifted from control to supervision and occasionally some assistance to those damaged.

Foucault points out that the problem of scarcity is that it hit everyone in the territory, rich and poor, urban and country. The universality of pain is why scarcity was considered a curse. But with the new arrangement, the problem of universality of damage was ended. Those who could pay were safe, and the problem became one of dealing with those who could not pay. Under the new arrangement the problem of scarcity disappears as a problem for the population as a whole, and becomes a problem only for a comparatively few.

This is another example of what we saw in the first lecture. The goal of security is to deal with the population as a whole, even knowing that some are not protected.

This lecture closes with a discussion of some of the differences between discipline and security as a theory of government.

1. Discipline encloses and contracts. Security opens and increases circulation, and increases the range of tools of production and control.
2. Discipline focuses on the smallest detail, while security looks at the end results, and ignores details that do not detract from the desired outcome.
3. Discipline divides everything into the categories of permitted and forbidden. Security tries to grasp the "effective reality" of events and processes, The point is to "respond to reality in such a way that this response cancels out the reality to which it responds –nullifies it, or limits, checks, or regulates it."

Security is connected to liberalism as a form of government. This last difference helps us see

the nature of liberalism as a political ideal. It promises more freedom of action, more freedom of response to reality.

The idea of a government of men that would think first of all and fundamentally of the nature of things and no longer of man's evil nature, the idea of an administration of things that would think before all else of men's freedom, of what they want to do, of what they have an interest in doing, and of what they think about doing, are all correlative elements. A physics of power, or a power thought of as a physical action in the element of nature, and a power thought of as a regulation that can only be carried out through and by reliance upon the freedom of each, is, I think, something absolutely fundamental. It is not an ideology First of all and above all it is a technology of power...

Commentary

1. The idea Foucault is grasping at in that last paragraph is almost defiantly abstract. It isn't obvious how a government which considers first "the nature of things" and then works through and with "men's freedom" is a "technology of power" in the normal usage of those words. It seems to me that the choice of outcomes to be sought constitutes the exercise of power. This suggests that by technology, Foucault means merely the choice of methods of reaching the goals of power. Technology of Power sounds more imposing, though.

2. The nature of security becomes quite clear in this lecture. Foucault says that government doesn't try to provide absolute safety. Instead, it tries to provide an acceptable level of safety while allowing the greatest possible degree of freedom to individuals. He explicitly says that under a security regime people will die of hunger, they will die from inoculations,

and there will be murders and property crimes. The government does not attempt to eradicate these problems. Foucault doesn't even argue that the role of government is to ameliorate the ills visited on the few.

a. This is descriptive, not normative. Foucault doesn't say what should be, merely what is.

b. Professional experts use this framework as the basis for their analysis. Obama apologist Paul Krugman is a good example. He points to various statistics that say that the economy is functioning well, including low unemployment and the stock market, and he argues heatedly that Sanders' ideas for change would be bad. It's certainly true that things are better for many, but Donald Trump is succeeding by arguing that it isn't working for a huge group of people.

c. The experts who operate within this intellectual framework have consistently refused to deal with the left-behind, the superfluous people. That's just as true of liberals as it is of the congenitally vicious conservatives. Worse, politicians constantly say that the first job of the politician is to assure our safety. Foucault says the President and all politicians are only going so far to provide that safety. And people will be killed by terrorists; and babies will be born microcephalic because the Congress thinks Zika research is not worth doing.

3. Foucault discusses the notion of man's evil nature as the cause of social problems. This idea has its origins in Christian religious doctrine. For example, in response to plagues, Medieval Christians engaged in penitential rites seeking mercy from the Almighty. In *Evil in Modern Thought*, Susan Nieman says that this nonsense only died out in the aftermath of the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, a horrible disaster in which an earthquake started a fire driving people to the seashore just in time for a tidal wave to kill them. Malagrida, a Jesuit cleric, blamed the disaster on the sinful people of Lisbon, and demanded that they scourge

themselves and fast and pray instead of rebuilding. The chief minister Pombal was able to get rid of him and focus on healing the sick, feeding the hungry and rebuilding that great city. According to Nieman, that was the beginning of the end of sin as an explanation of natural disaster.

4. Foucault dismisses the idea of man's evil nature as the cause of social issues, but wait. There are plenty of aspects of human reality that cause social problems: religious hatred, racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and a host of others. These are real parts of us as primates. We shouldn't just dismiss man's evil nature as a fantasy. It kills people too, and it isn't obvious how government can or should or does respond in Foucault's description.