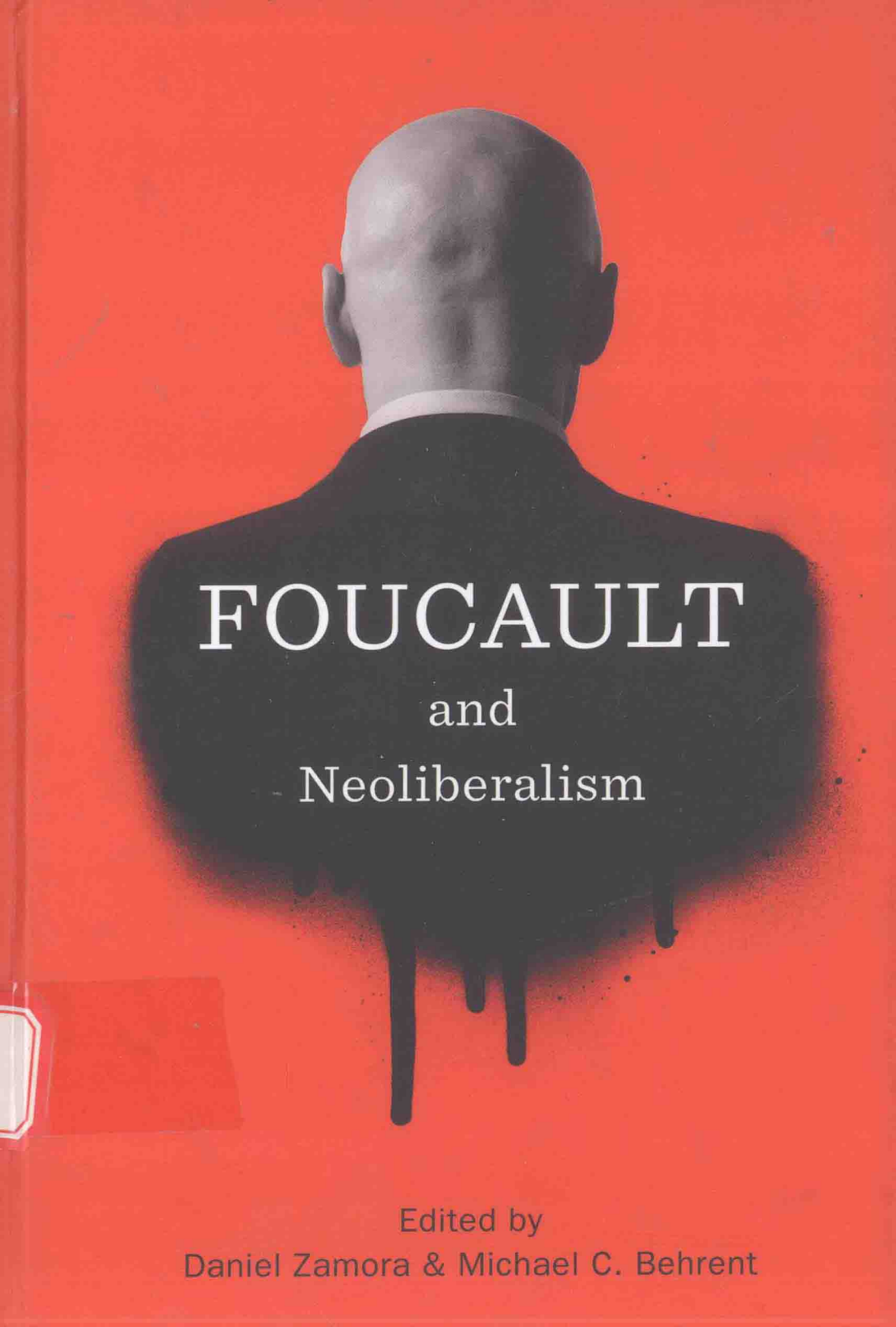
FOUCAULT
and
Neoliberalism
Edited by
Daniel Zamora & Michael C. Behrent

Foucault and Neoliberalism

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polity

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Contents

Introduction

Foucault, the Left, and the 1980s

Daniel Zamora

In an interview with Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault observed, in 1984, shortly before his death:

> I think I have in fact been situated in most of the squares on the political checkerboard, one after another and sometimes simultaneously: as anarchist, leftist, ostentatious or disguised Marxist, nihilist or secret anti-Marxist, technocrat in the service of Gaullism, new liberal, etc. ... None of these descriptions is important by itself; taken together, on the other hand, they mean something. And I must admit I rather like what they mean.[1]

This wide array of labels, which are as contradictory as they are unsuited for describing this giant of twentieth-century French thought, are nevertheless consistent with his reputation. In his rich body of work, and through his ability to conceptualize and even anticipate the central questions of his time, Foucault always seemed able to interrogate major contemporary issues in exciting and innovative ways. As a member of the French Communist Party, during his Gaullist phase, and even when he gravitated toward Maoism, he always remained critical of the movements to which he adhered. As a "fellow traveler" in a period that he shook up, intellectually speaking, Foucault always seemed one step

ahead of his contemporaries. This is why the wide variety of receptions and readings his work has received is understandable. As the outcome of the varied and contradictory schools of thought that influenced him, his work cannot, fundamentally, be reduced to a single label.

After Foucault's death in 1984, Paul Veyne went as far as saying that his work marked "the most important event of thought of our century." Thirty years after his death, it is clear that he has well and truly become one of the most influential thinkers of the last 40 years, both in French intellectual life and abroad. His work is widely disseminated, translated, and taught around the world, well beyond educational institutions. His ideas, moreover, have been used in fields as diverse as history, philosophy, anthropology, political science, and sociology. His work has greatly inspired many contemporary thinkers in the fields of gender studies, postcolonial studies, and what is more generally known as postmodernism. His influence on intellectual life is vast and has significantly shaped the terms of intellectual debates of the second half of the twentieth century. Foucault has, for better or worse, become a central intellectual reference of our time.

This intellectual hegemony is particularly pronounced in the realm of academic critical theory. He has acquired an almost saint-like stature, as much for his work as for his conception of intellectual engagement, which he embodied in his many political battles. At present, there is no longer any university or group of critical reflection that has not, directly or indirectly, been affected in some way by Foucault's work.

This association of the man who gave us the "specific intellectual" with the contemporary critical Left should nevertheless be examined in the light of his positions and the movements with which he was associated in the final decade of his life. Indeed, if his Maoist period or his brief membership in the Communist Party are relatively uncontroversial among his leftist disciples, the same cannot be said of his later commitments.

Whether it be his support of the "new philosophers," his analysis of governmentality, or his ambiguous relationship to neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, these later positions make many Foucault scholars uneasy. Indeed, Foucault did not content himself merely with questioning certain

aspects of neoliberal thought: he seems, rather, to have been seduced by some of its key ideas. These issues, far from simply embodying the development of an intellectual, illustrate more generally some of the shifts that occurred in the Left post-1968, its disillusionment, and a profound transformation of the French intellectual field.

The 1980s were, after all, a decade of renunciation: first on the part of the Socialist government (as it largely abandoned the program on which it rode to power), then of intellectuals. François Mitterrand's 1981 victory paved the way for many a disappointment and failure, particularly the abandonment of the project of "transforming the world" for that of accommodating neoliberalism. Yesterday's fellow travelers became neoliberalism's facilitators and passionate opponents of any attempt to transform society. All they had once celebrated was now seen as part of a problematic that inevitably led to the "totalitarian temptation." In this way, the state, social security, redistribution, public property, and nationalization came to be seen as outdated and conservative ideas.

How should we interpret Foucault's radical position on social security, which he essentially saw as the culmination of "biopower?" Or his support – stronger than we would like to think – of the "new philosophers"? How should we view his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* and his presumed sympathy for the emerging and very social-liberal "Second Left"? One might, finally, question his illusory belief that neoliberal forms of power would be less disciplinary and that prisons would ultimately disappear. These questions pertain not only to Foucault himself, but also to the ambiguities inherent in the Left (or at least a part of it), and especially some of its intellectual spokespersons, in light of neoliberalism's rising tide.

Whether on the question of the State, social security, "care of the self," prison, autonomy, or power, it is clear that criticisms traditionally made by the "libertarian" Left have been profoundly destabilized in the wake of the neoliberal offensive. Indeed, far from opposing these key libertarian ideas, the neoliberal movement, on the contrary, mobilized them in the (largely successful) symbolic *coup d'état* that it has launched against the defenders of the welfare state. The conception of social security as a system of "social control" and

the Left's defense of individual autonomy during the "Thirty Glorious Years" of postwar growth, in opposition to the worker's alienation in the capitalist system of mass production, was recycled into a critique of the state and its "bureaucracy." More generally, the freedom of individuals was celebrated, over and against the social structures which enslaved them, in what became a general critique of the state, unions, parties, the family, and all other intermediate structures that were being undermined to make way for neoliberal policies.

This intellectual recycling, which is the heart of capitalism's "new spirit," should lead us to question retroactively the theoretical moves made by a number of leading left-wing intellectuals in the late 1960s, particularly the often astonishing trajectories of former Maoists who converted so suddenly to the dogma of the market economy. We should also ask whether this "conversion" is even all that surprising.

Did their opposition to all that the "old" Left and its institutions embodied not foreshadow their subsequent "betrayal"? This question, while perhaps provocative, is no less legitimate and stimulating. Understanding the 1980s and the triumph of neoliberalism requires an exploration of the most ambiguous redoubts of the intellectual Left during this period, and not least one of its most important figures. Many recent studies return to this period. Some see Foucault as enamored of neoliberalism,[2] while others have maintained that he was critical of it and, more recently, have argued that he used neoliberalism to question social theory.[3] These very different (and even contradictory) readings are reflective of the ambiguities and tensions that have troubled the Left since 1968.

While it is impossible to know what path Foucault would have taken, it is nevertheless interesting to consider several episodes that show some of his lesser-known views. While the renunciation and "conversion" to neoliberalism of key figures of the intellectual Left is often emphasized, relatively little is said about how certain developments in Foucault's later work, which would seem to be beyond reproach, paradoxically functioned to legitimate a neoliberal common sense. Though they are frequently overlooked or dismissed by his supporters as "details" or "misunderstandings" of the

author's real intentions, the ambiguities they reveal raise very stimulating questions about the period.

The purpose of this book is thus to examine Michel Foucault's work and commitments during his final years through various lenses – yet ones that nonetheless capture the key debates of the period, in which a Left that was victorious at the polls saw its intellectual foundations seriously weakened. Our intention is thus not to attempt to answer the wrong question: namely, whether Foucault became neoliberal at the end of his life. As an alternative to this question, which is sterile and limits the debate to very narrow considerations, we will consider a range of questions. It is not a matter of being "for" or "against" Foucault, but rather of discussing, engaging with, and critiquing him to better grasp the extent of his influence and the issues he opened up in the intellectual field.

This book thus seeks to open historical and theoretical inroads at junctures where it seemed stimulating to interrogate the choices and thinking of this superstar of twentieth-century French thought – not only to better understand a moment in time, but also to question our own assumptions about what a critical theory must be.

Notes

1 M. Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," trans. Lydia Davis, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 383–4.

2 See, notably, J. L. Moreno Pestaña, *Foucault, la gauche et la politique* (Paris: Textuel, 2011).

3 See G. de Lagasnerie, *La dernière leçon de Michel Foucault* (Paris: Fayard, 2012).

1

Foucault and New Philosophy: Why Foucault Endorsed André Glucksmann's *The Master Thinkers**

Michael Scott Christofferson

In 1977, "new philosophy" took French intellectual and political life by storm. In their runaway best-selling books, "new philosophers," the most notable of whom were André Glucksmann and Bernard Henri Lévy, offered a radical critique of Marxism and revolutionary politics by linking them both to the Gulag. Further, they argued that transformative politics in general and, at the limit, reason and science were dangerously affiliated with totalitarianism. The only safe politics, they suggested, was the defense of human rights. This was a crucial moment in French intellectual and political life that marked the end of the revolutionary upsurge begun by 1968 and the transition to more moderate liberal and republican political options. Making sense of it is crucial for understanding both recent French history and, more specifically, the trajectories of the intellectuals engaged in it. This is notably the case for Michel Foucault, a central figure in the ideological–political debates of the 1970s.

Foucault intervened in the debate over new philosophy with a laudatory review of Glucksmann's *The Master Thinkers* in the May 9–15, 1977 issue of the mass-circulation weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Foucault's intervention was important for himself, for Glucksmann, and for "new philosophy" in general. For Foucault, it was not a minor matter. His support for Glucksmann resulted in irreparable breaks

with old friends, such as Claude Mauriac and, most notably, Gilles Deleuze, who had broadly shared Foucault's Nietzchean inspiration and post-1968 philosophical and political trajectory, but was sharply critical of new philosophy and remained, unlike Foucault, more generally supportive of post-1968 radicalism.[1] For Glucksmann and new philosophy, Foucault's endorsement was even more important because, as I have argued elsewhere,[2] new philosophy, although a mass-media phenomenon, would have been much less successful if it had not received support from leading intellectuals.

Foucault's praise for *The Master Thinkers* has presented something of a mystery to scholars of Foucault because Glucksmann arguably simplified and twisted Foucault's ideas beyond recognition. Evaluations of it have consequently differed greatly. Didier Eribon, Foucault's first biographer, downplays its importance by holding that Foucault's support for *The Master Thinkers* was "dictated more by political than by philosophical considerations."[3] By contrast, Michael C. Behrent argues in his contribution to this volume that "the extent to which this shift [the anti-totalitarian one in new philosophy] impacted his own thinking has been underestimated" (p. 26). Here I will address the problem of Foucault's support for Glucksmann as a point of departure for understanding Foucault's politics and conception of power in the early to mid-1970s. While complicating Eribon's picture of Foucault taking a primarily political position, I also seek to demonstrate that Foucault's endorsement of Glucksmann was hardly accidental, but rather a reflection of Foucault's philosophical practice, its relationship with politics and the mass media, and shortcomings in his conception of power that limited its effectiveness for thinking about the twentieth century. It may be from Behrent's downstream perspective that the moment of new philosophy was a turning point for Foucault, but looking upstream toward 1977 Foucault's endorsement of Glucksmann was less of a break with Foucault's past than it may seem.

André Glucksmann's *The Master Thinkers* was the culmination of Glucksmann's disaffection with post-1968 revolutionary politics and his effort to turn a broader public away from it and other efforts at radical political transformation such as that represented by the Union of the Left, which

seemed likely to win the March 1978 legislative elections when Glucksmann's book was published in 1977. Glucksmann, who had been a member of the Maoist Gauche prolétarienne in the early 1970s, had already tried to justify and explain his disillusionment with the revolutionary Left in his 1975 book *La cuisinière et le mangeur d'hommes: essai sur l'État, le marxisme, et les camps de concentration* [*The Cook and the Cannibal: Essay on the State, Marxism, and the Concentration Camps*]. Taking as his point of departure Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* and the French response to it, Glucksmann argues that the Gulag is a culminating point of Western historical development, the great moments of which are "Platonism (and its slaves), classical Reason (and its inmates), Marxism (and its camps)."[4] The Gulag and its Marxist theoretical foundation are but the latest effort by elites to build up state structures and ideologies to dominate the masses, which Glucksmann calls "the pleb." This link between the Gulag and the West explains, Glucksmann argues, why French intellectuals have not been more indignant in the face of the Gulag. Considering theory and the state to be instruments of domination, Glucksmann calls for a politics of resistance by the pleb in both East and West. These populist and anarchist conclusions find sustenance in Foucault's work. Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961) is used by Glucksmann to establish the link between Western historical development and the Gulag, as it was in his view "the general hospital," "crowning achievement of the new Reason," that "prefigures the concentration camp."[5] For Glucksmann, the twentieth century "innovates little" in relation to this earlier precedent, "even the idea *of deporting* is not its own; the general hospital already served as the warehouse for the unfortunate that one rounded up [*raflait*] to send them 'to the Islands'."[6] Foucault was central not only to Glucksmann's historical analysis, but also to his political response to it. Politics, Glucksmann stated in 1975, should take a Foucauldian turn, focusing its aim on micropowers, the disciplines that are at "the root of the state power."[7]

Glucksmann's *The Master Thinkers* of 1977 follows the same line of argumentation as his earlier *The Cook and the Cannibal*. Joining Marx in infamy are Hegel, Fichte, and

Nietzsche, also presented by Glucksmann as philosophers of a coercive and normalizing state. Glucksmann argues that these "master thinkers" systematized and justified the modern state's project of domination, itself put on the "order of the day" by the French Revolution. They promoted an interiorization of the law that smothers the pleb's protest at its inception. While not directly responsible for the Gulag and Auschwitz, they "systematized and rendered strategically malleable ideas and tactics largely diffused before them in societies in the process of becoming rationally disciplinary." They are guilty for having "under the cover of knowledge ...put together the mental apparatus indispensable to the launching of the great final solutions of the twentieth century."[8]

Glucksmann's book is constructed around a number of homologous oppositions: the state versus the pleb, anti-Semitism versus Judaism, revolution and power versus resistance, and reason and science versus ignorance. The state seeks to dominate the pleb, submit it to its will and force it to internalize its subordination. This project leads directly to anti-Semitism, the camps, and genocide:

> *All that wanders*, that is the question. Under the cloak of the Jew one condemns an entire little world that threatens to elude the state in crossing frontiers, and that, in transgressing them, upsets disciplinary society. The Europe of states seeks to exclude the marginal. The master thinkers step down for the master purgers who mix Jews and homosexuals in the Nazi camps and all that deviates in the Russian camps. Liberal Europe wanted to assimilate and normalize more calmly; cultural genocide substitutes for physical genocide.

Although the project of domination is that of the state, intellectuals, science, and reason are all essentially complicit in it. Science and the texts of the master thinkers are simply strategies of domination, and "to think is to dominate." Conversely, behind Nazism and Stalinism lie texts and science. Neither of them is a phenomenon circumscribed to a particular time or place: they are located in the texts that form the cultural heritage of Europe. Sociological explanations of socialist regimes are, like explanations of Nazism by German