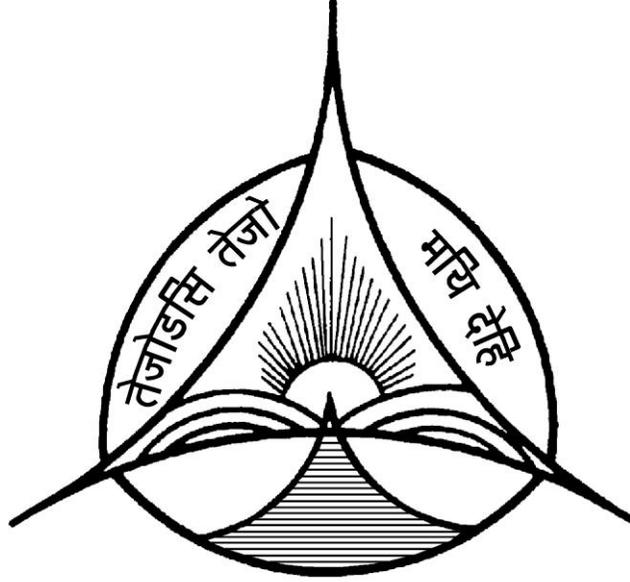


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Foucault and Neoliberalism, edited by Daniel Zamora and Michael C Behrent, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016; paperback edition

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Michel Foucault, the subject of the book under review, is without doubt one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century. Referring to his compatriot, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, Foucault once suggested that, in time to come, the 20th century would come to be known as ‘the Deleuzian century’. This is arguably a description that could fit Foucault himself, more than Deleuze or any other French thinker, for that matter. To describe the last century as ‘the Foucauldian century’, at least with regard to the social sciences, would certainly register the enormous and wide-ranging impact of Foucault’s thought on his peers and successors. But to understand the reasons for that impact, one would have to look at (among other things) the sweeping, cross-disciplinary scope and range of Foucault’s intellectual canvas—from philosophy, through history, sociology, psychology, linguistics, politics, law, religion, literature, to economics (and possibly several more)—along with the magisterial erudition and command he displayed over each of these disciplines. One would have to note the rigour, passion and force with which he articulated his ideas and arguments, while yet retaining an unparalleled elegance and fluency of enunciation. And (in some ways most importantly) one would have to take account of his active, unsparing, intense involvement in the politics of his time—whether of the quotidian and everyday variety, in academia, or of the national and international kind, i.e., the politics of sexuality, identity, economy, ethnicity, rights, international relations, etc.—that were fought on the streets and in homes, in studios and demonstrations and the media.

But perhaps the most striking index of his stature lies in the intensity and variety of responses to him and his work, and in the ensuing controversies. These range from the almost worshipful adulation of scholars like François Ewald, his student, to the hostile, scathing observations from some of his contemporaries, including giants like Jean Paul Sartre who called Foucault’s *The Order of Things* ‘the last barrier that the bourgeoisie can still erect against Marx’; or the philosopher and theorist of postmodernity, Jean Baudrillard, who infamously attacked the entire Foucauldian oeuvre in his tellingly titled monograph, *Forget Foucault*. Even Deleuze, who had been close to Foucault, later chose to break from him, citing deep differences with Foucault’s later thinking and work. In fact, much of the controversy around Foucault is concerned with his later work, when, as many commentators believe, Foucault turned from being a relentless critic of neoliberalism and its policies, to becoming a sympathiser, if not an advocate. It is this phase in Foucault’s intellectual career that is the focus of the book under review.

The pieces in this collection are of varying density and length, and demonstrate a variety of approaches, but engage with one common question. This question is well put by one of the editors, Michael Behrent (the other being Daniel Zamora), in the ‘Conclusion’: ‘How is it that the man who is arguably the most

discussed thinker of our era seems simultaneously essential and woefully inadequate to conceptualizing...the hegemony of globalized neoliberalism?’ (p. 183). Part of the answer to this apparent paradox, according to Zamora’s introductory piece, ‘Foucault, the Left, and the 1980s’, is in the fact that Foucault engaged with neoliberalism at a time when, on the one hand, the organised Left in France was hit by allegations of corruption, ideological and organisational failure, as well as of being indifferent to a variety of ‘other’ marginalisations and oppressions—of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality; and on the other, neoliberalism itself was just emerging, in the late 1970s and early 1980s—perhaps precisely as a consequence of the crumbling of the Left. He died shortly thereafter, in 1984, without a real sense of the ways in which neoliberal hegemony was to unfold globally. His writings on neoliberalism therefore (according to Zamora) could inevitably and only suggest that he welcomed the transition to neoliberalism.

Another somewhat apologetic position is taken by Michael Scott Christofferson (‘Foucault and the New Philosophy: Why Foucault Endorsed Andre Glucksmann’s *The Master Thinkers*’): he suggests that Foucault endorsed Glucksmann’s diatribe against Leftist theory and philosophy for personal reasons—because Glucksmann had celebrated Foucault’s work, and he felt obliged to return the favour. This in turn pushed him into endorsing the neoliberal politics implicit in Glucksmann’s work. Behrent’s other piece (‘Liberalism without Humanism: Michel Foucault and the Free-Market Creed, 1976-1979’), while covering the same period in Foucault’s work, makes two important philosophical points: he notes, first, that Foucault’s fierce anti-humanism led him to reject any state-centric conception of politics (insofar as the state is understood as an expression of the collective will). Since anti-statist politics is at the heart of neoliberalism too, the convergence was inevitable. Second, Behrent notes, Foucault distinguished between political and economic liberalism, and while his anti-humanism led him to reject the former, it also led him to embrace the latter, insofar as (what he saw as) the impersonal forces of the market constituted a more efficient form of politics. This, Behrent notes, also ties in with the turn away from ‘discipline’ (referring to individual bodies) in Foucault’s thought, and towards ‘bio-power’ (which administers large populations), and his seminal work on ‘governmentality’. Zamora’s second piece (‘Foucault, the Excluded, and the Neoliberal Erosion of the State’) similarly observes how this also marks a shift in emphasis, in Foucault’s work, from the ‘redistribution of wealth to the redistribution of power’ (p. 67ff.); consequently from inequality to exclusion (p. 70ff.); and thus, from ‘class’ to ‘identity’.

The following piece by Mitchell Dean (‘Foucault, Ewald, Neoliberalism, and the Left’), advances some of these arguments. Dean examines in particular the role of Foucault’s student, Francois Ewald, in promoting the perception that Foucault had himself turned towards neoliberalism, but makes the additional important point that, a fatal weakness in Foucault’s conception of economic liberalism was that ‘he is unable to think about economic relations per se and the mediation of relations of power through money and value’ (p. 107). This is brought out starkly in Lois Wacquant’s strongly empirical study (‘Bourdieu, Foucault and the Penal State in the Neoliberal Era’) of the relation between wealth, criminality and the penal administrative system in the neoliberal regime of the USA. Wacquant’s piece marks a change in tone in the critique of Foucault. Where the earlier pieces tended to be more apologetic—as if looking to find rationalisations, if not justifications, for Foucault’s endorsement of

neoliberalism—Wacquant’s and the piece that follows, by Jan Rehmann (‘The Unfulfilled Promises of the Late Foucault and Foucauldian “Governmentality Studies”’) are uncompromising in their critique.

Rehmann, in fact, offers perhaps the most nuanced analysis in the book, to show how, even as Foucault seems to be moving away from a focus on the individual subject, and towards ‘bio-power’ and the administration of masses, he returns repeatedly to the theme of the ‘care of the self’, as the way in which power calls in the self to regulate itself. This is achieved through ‘governmentality’ which Foucault understands as ‘conducting conduct’—i.e., concerned not with the conduct of the individual subject, directly, but with the process of ‘subjectivisation’, or the making of the subject. Rehmann draws out the affiliations of this conception to Gramsci’s ‘hegemony’ and Althusser’s ‘ideology’, and then notes how ‘governmentality studies’ nevertheless claim to have left these behind. Finally, Rehmann notes how Foucault’s conception of liberalism—as not a theory or an ideology, but as a ‘practice’ built on continuous critical reflection—is entirely coincident with liberalism’s ideological self-representation of itself. This ideological point is elaborated by Jean-Loup Amselle (‘Michel Foucault and the Spiritualization of Philosophy’) in the penultimate piece preceding the conclusion. Amselle shows how Foucault’s ‘care of the self’ programme is, in principle, no different from the common tendency towards spiritualism found among many ex-Leftist thinkers as a compensatory act for the failure of their political objectives.

The last piece preceding Behrent’s ‘Conclusion’ is Foucault’s own endorsement of Glucksmann, titled ‘The Great Rage of Facts’. It is a strange choice, since it says nothing at all about either liberalism or neoliberalism, and appears to be included solely as an illustration of Foucault’s anti-Marxist, anti-statist position. It has little more than decorative value, in a volume that otherwise raises important questions, not just about Foucault and his politics, but more generally, about how to understand a whole range of concepts and ideas—from ‘liberalism’ and ‘neoliberalism’ to ‘discipline’ and ‘governmentality’. In his Introduction, Zamora writes that, ‘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’ (p. 5). In fact the strength of Foucault’s influence—the long shadow he casts—is evident already, in the slightly wary note adopted by the editors, as well as by almost all the other contributors. It is evident also perhaps in the very Foucauldian indifference to feminist agendas: considering that some of the most trenchant critiques of Foucault have come from feminists, the complete absence of one in this volume—apart from passing mention in a few of the pieces—is somewhat astounding. And the same goes for the complete absence of any postcolonial critique.

For the rest, the essays are informative, occasionally provocative, very readable, and aside from the shortcomings noted above, fairly well-organised. It is neatly produced, and the price—at almost 17 USD for a paperback—is a bit steep, but not unexpected for a non-Indian edition. It would certainly be a useful addition to any college or university library.