
CONSIDERING FOUCAL'T'S LAST DECADE

Austin Sarfan

From the history of modern sexuality to ancient ethics, with a detour through neoliberalism, Foucault's work during his last decade (1974-1984) opens onto a variety of new domains that continue to resonate with the concerns of critical theory. Though Foucault did not publish a book for eight years after *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* in 1976, his theoretical output hardly diminished in this span of time; his yearly lectures, given publically at the Collège de France from 1970-1984, reach for the same impact as his well-known monographs, while occasional lectures, interviews, and essays continue to be published and translated. As the publication of the Collège de France lectures reaches completion, and academic interest consequently shifts to Foucault’s ethics spanning this period, his final thoughts present numerous interpretative difficulties: on the one hand, the history of sexuality project is inserted into a more or less developed history of truth, sketched in terms of ancient techniques of the self; while, on the other hand, Foucault’s social and political circumstances find new reflection and expression, for example in his turn to neoliberalism through the study of biopolitics.

In *Foucault's Last Decade*, Stuart Elden offers a comprehensive guide to Foucault’s trajectory during this period. Elden’s study is notable for the finesse with which he elucidates Foucault’s approach to the multi-volume history of sexuality series occupying the majority of his last decade. Grounded in a complete review of the pertinent lectures from the Collège de France, Elden’s study amounts to an advanced introduction to Foucault’s late work for those unacquainted, and highlights key, understudied archival material for those already familiar. Elden contends, in a modestly-advanced thesis, that confession is a “major thread of continuity” between the study of sexuality and the study
of ancient ethics, and charts Foucault’s changing interpretation of confession throughout.¹ For readers already familiar with Foucault’s last decade, at times Elden’s attention to Foucault’s meticulous planning slows the book down. However, Elden’s extraordinary handling of the archive, including his attention to uncollected sources, makes the study stand out for its ability to pass through the tangled fields of dogma.

Constitutive of the book’s strengths and its limits, Elden approaches Foucault’s work in terms of authorial intention. Elden writes, “[T]he aim here is to reconstruct as best as possible what Foucault himself was trying to do” in his last decade.² Elden’s study examines Foucault’s own statements about, and plans for, his last decade and carefully establishes the various causes and effects of Foucault’s reconsiderations of his prior work. As such, Foucault’s conception of the history of sexuality series, the demise of the original plan following an altered research agenda, and his subsequent turn to antiquity are the primary topics in Elden’s investigation.

To a large extent, each of the eight chapters of Foucault’s Last Decade reflect the principal focus of the corresponding years of lectures given between 1974-1984. Elden’s first chapter provides an overview of The Abnormals, lectures given 1974-1975, with some attention to the ways in which the conceptualization of normality in those lectures compares to the earlier Psychiatric Power lectures and prefigures claims in The History of Sexuality: Volume One. The second chapter follows Foucault’s next year of lectures, “Society Must Be Defended,” given 1975-1976. Elden productively compares these lectures with Discipline and Punish, written around the same time. These two chapters, in a style characterizing the book more generally, primarily consist in paraphrase of lecture content with supplementary comparison to sections of contemporaneous works by Foucault, whether published books or archival documents.

The next two chapters display the strengths of this style, split between a hermeneutics of intention and examination of evidence, as Elden enters probably the most theoretically and textually confusing period in Foucault’s career, between 1976-1980. During this time Foucault begins to study both elements of ancient confession and modern liberalism. Perhaps the strongest chapter of the book is the third, which presents a reading of the The History of Sexuality project, in terms of both its genesis and completion, and where Elden considers Foucault’s uncertain views regarding the relationship between confession and modernity at length. Moreover Elden considers the
different plans Foucault elaborated for the originally six-volume *History of Sexuality* project. The following chapter covers the years between 1976–1978, during which Foucault took a year-long sabbatical and then returned to give his infamous lectures on neoliberalism. In addition to the usual material of interest here (governmentality and pastoral power), Elden considers a number of virtually unknown collective projects regarding health and policing which Foucault contributed to during these years. These two chapters exhibit Elden’s acumen as he deftly marshalls his unparalleled knowledge of the documentary archive in order to illuminate the intricacies of Foucault’s more well-known concepts and the basis of their emergence.

However, as Foucault’s projects grow increasingly distant from the conceptualization of sexuality governing the original *History of Sexuality* series, Elden’s organization of the remaining five years of material concerning antiquity also becomes less compelling. For readers familiar with Foucault’s late work some of Elden’s later chapters may seem redundant, since they often remain at the level of paraphrase and risk less interpretive originality here. In the fifth chapter, “The Return of Confession,” Elden provides an overview of *On the Government of the Living*, lectures given 1979–1980, and a series of lectures given in America in 1980. These years mark Foucault’s full expansion of interest to antiquity. The chapter includes a helpful analysis of Foucault’s conceptualization of confession as he begins to investigate monastic spirituality, only marginally considered in earlier years. The following chapter provides an overview of the lectures between 1980–1982, *Subjectivity and Truth* and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Next, the seventh chapter offers a critical perspective on how Foucault arrives at the decision before his death to publish the extant two volumes of the *History of Sexuality* series, *The Usage of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. Elden here consults numerous drafts for the two volumes and the surrounding lectures, again disclosing the value of the available archive. The final chapter, “Speaking Truth to Power,” takes stock of Foucault’s last two years of lectures and the work interrupted by his death.

A consequence of Elden’s concern for detail is that, at times, Foucault’s own confusions are reflected too immediately in Elden’s analysis, so that the book, in its final chapters, like the unwinding projects of Foucault that it studies, seems incapable of recovering a clear sense of unity. When does studying Foucault’s last decade in isolation distort the clarity of Foucault’s vision, considering the continuities between madness, biopolitics, and
neoliberal risk for example, or modernism and monasticism, for another? As Foucault says, referring his study of ancient techniques of the self to his earlier work on literary aesthetics: “Since literature is in a way a sacrifice of the self, or is both sacrifice of the self and the transposition of the self in the order of things ... the modern writer is in a sense related and linked and similar to the first Christian ascetics.” Due to this typical convolution of conceptual progress, which turns back in an act of reinterpretation, Elden’s decision to isolate the last decade of Foucault’s thought diminishes the sense of Foucault’s remarkable self-understanding.

At the same time, the category of intentionality, which motivates Elden’s ambition to determine “what Foucault himself was trying to do,” harbors its well-known limits. Not only does the continuity of Foucault’s work between his early and late texts pose a problem for interpretation; so too does the relationship Foucault’s work enjoys with contemporary Europe. Is intention illuminated by the biographical, or does it demand the archeological concept of a discourse? Preferring the biographical to a certain extent, Elden’s work is captivated by Foucault as the last and only judge, constantly cross-examining Foucault according to Foucault. This approach is key to the book’s strongest sections, which consolidate vast amounts of archival material. Nonetheless, structural factors rather than personal decisions account for not only the perspicuity of Foucault’s analysis, but also the widespread recognition his work has gained. Foucault considers his own work to be produced by “the relationship of our age and its epistemological configuration with that whole mass of statements” comprising contemporary discourse; Foucault’s work reflects relations “not present in anyone’s mind” at the time. According to this perspective, the winding trail of Foucault’s last decade is most intelligible through the major social and political contemporary problems of his day, particularly the emergence of neoliberalism in France. In this case Foucault’s late work reveals significant homologies with contemporary neoliberal discourse.

As is well known, Foucault’s lectures given between 1977-1979 outline a genealogy of neoliberalism as it is emerging in Europe, yet Foucault could not have foreseen the ways in which his ethics, as a whole, increasingly resonates with the neoliberal structuration of society. Faithful to his vision of the confluence of knowledge and power, however, Foucault’s thought during his last decade might not have escaped its own neoliberalization, at least becoming occupied with its own formalization of neoliberal practice. Indeed, during this
period one finds cause, too, to remember Jürgen Habermas’s description of Foucault as a “young conservative.”

_Foucault and Neoliberalism_, edited by Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent, articulates in a collection of highly compelling essays the historical relations between France’s own neoliberalization and Foucault’s theoretical production, particularly in his last decade, when neoliberalism executed a “coup d’état” against the French welfare state. While organized around Foucault’s work on neoliberalism, the essays differ from the approach of “governmentality studies” in their divergence from the former’s sociological and positivist methods. Mostly originating in French, the essays historicize Foucault’s reflections on neoliberalism and ethics through detailed analyses of contemporary progressive and neoliberal politics, with attention to the ideological context of French and Anglophone theory.

The essays of the volume are effectively split into two groups: first, those which engage in historical reconstructions of Foucault’s thought, often referring to contemporary social and political movements, and second, those intervening in the theoretical-critical dialogue growing around central concepts of Foucault’s study of neoliberalism, for example governmentality and self-management.

The former historical studies concentrate roughly on the first half of Foucault’s last decade, i.e., 1974-1979. Michael Scott Christofferson, author of _French Intellectuals Against the Left_, in his essay, “Foucault and New Philosophy: Why Foucault Endorsed André Glucksmann’s *The Master Thinkers*,” writes with passionate discontent about Foucault’s rejection of French communism, and the homology of this refusal with popular French anti-communist philosophy of the mid-1970s. In the following essay, “Liberalism Without Humanism: Michel Foucault and the Free-Market Creed, 1976-1979,” Michael C. Behrent considers Foucault’s interest in neoliberalism by focusing on the basic philosophical foundations of his thought, for example in the case of autonomy, which, far from grounding any opposition to neoliberalism, provides a welcome basis for the neoliberal deregulation of the market: in both cases what Foucault values is an anarchic conception of praxis. An essay by Daniel Zamora focuses on Foucault’s conception of power in terms of exclusion in the context of a more popular style of “moral Marxism,” whose social and political concern for the marginalized manages to avoid any structural analysis of the economy. In maybe the most original essay of the volume, Jean-Loup
Amselle, in “Michel Foucault and the Spiritualization of Philosophy,” offers a view on how Foucault’s ethics participate in the New Age dimensions of neoliberalism. Ultimately, this essay by Amselle, and Behrent’s piece, together illuminate most strikingly the significance of neoliberalism for Foucault’s last decade.

The second group of essays, considering the reception of Foucauldian concepts with attention to their ideological context, largely opposes the endorsement that Foucault’s work on neoliberalism has received in contemporary Anglophone theory. Mitchell Dean’s essay, “Foucault, Ewald, Neoliberalism, and the Left,” illuminates François Ewald’s claim that Foucault’s work amounts to an “apology for neoliberalism.” Dean demonstrates here that Foucault’s progressive commitments to the “Second Left” in France leads Foucault to the sympathetic adoption of neoliberal views. Next, correcting Foucauldian interpretations of punishment, Loïc Wacquant’s piece provides an overview of his own book *Punishing the Poor*, enlisting Pierre Bourdieu in a study of neoliberalism’s class-based dressage. Jan Rehmann, in one of the most theoretically ambitious essays (“The Unfulfilled Promises of the Late Foucault and Foucauldian ‘Governmentality Studies’”) argues that theorists including Judith Butler misinterpret the significance of domination in Foucault’s concept of subjectivation. Subsequently, Rehmann posits the need for future Foucault scholarship to elaborate an accompanying critical-ideological theory of neoliberalism in order to account for the positive constitution of subjectivity. Altogether, the essays in this group establish distance from the usual treatment of Foucault, primarily by inserting his thought into systems of social and political discourse which transcend yet vastly illuminate his occasional theorization of the contemporary.

Finally, Behrent contributes a concluding essay which persuasively describes Foucault’s conceptualization of neoliberalism in terms of a “strange failure” which obtains “peculiar success” by way of critics’ mystifications and abstractions. In its diagnosis of insufficiently historical-materialist interpretations of Foucault, Behrent’s concluding piece especially compliments Rehmann’s earlier essay, which addresses the failures of contemporary scholarship by way of critical-ideology theory. Yet it is also Foucault, not his interpreters, that come up lacking in Behrent’s piece. Behrent writes: “The tragedy of Foucault’s thought is that the conceptual tools he had so skillfully deployed to shine a withering critical light on postwar society proved distinctly less trenchant when directed at the emerging neoliberal
order.” In other words, Foucault’s genius is certainly tied to the horizon of liberalism, but not necessarily to the horizon of our own neoliberalism.

Foucault: a creature of his age, but what age, and what kind of creature? A young conservative, an elitist, an aesthete, a “specific intellectual”? That one finds evidence for so many intersecting ideologies and identities in Foucault’s late work reveals not just the ambiguity of his political commitments but the density of his intellectual interests. Foucault’s odd, and in some sense overdetermined, place in the history of modern intellectual politics has long captivated critics for this reason. Simultaneously, Foucault is imagined (with no shortage of good reason) to be a beacon for both leftist and conservative thought. Yet, does not Foucault’s valuation of individual creativity, in the end, simply accelerate the disintegration of collectivist social life often attributed to the emergence of neoliberalism? After all, as Amselle notes of self-fashioning in *Foucault and Neoliberalism,* “‘spiritual exercises’ and ‘concern for the self’ can be seen as extremely conservative techniques for psychological maintenance, in the sense that they refer individual expression or grievances back to individuals themselves, thus averting any condemnation of the society in which they live.”

More immediately, in the context of ethics, is not Foucault’s advocacy for a kind of self-stylization which diverges from social convention a mere reflection of neoliberal market ideology, which organizes itself around a theory of individual choice? Or, to the contrary, does an “aesthetics of existence” name a new avant-garde strategy for the destruction of social values, aimed directly at the bourgeois ideology of psychological responsibility?

In *Foucault and Neoliberalism,* only Amselle’s essay ventures a dialogue between Foucault’s aesthetics and bourgeois spiritual economy, reaching beyond ideological reflections of the political to the level of cultural expression. In this regard, and recalling Julian Bourg’s thesis in *From Revolution to Ethics,* Foucault’s work ultimately reflects not simply the emergence of neoliberalism but also the “spiritual revolution” achieved by New Age identity societies, at the real cost of a politicized sense of class or collective struggle. Foucault’s opposition to codified morality finds positive realization in an aesthetics of existence, but realistically, does this ethics differ significantly from the neoliberal discourse that recommends unending work on oneself as the primary means to success? Foucault says: “From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art”; we “should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity.”
At this point, rather than tabulating Foucault’s avant-garde or conservative sentiments, a more productive approach could consider how the biopolitical concept of risk always orients Foucault’s thought toward liberal interpretations of governance. Not only is insurance against risk “at the heart of Foucault’s conception of modern governance,” but also risk founds Foucault’s early valorization of madness and his interest in the history of truth-telling. The parrhesiast “is the courageous teller of a truth by which he puts himself and his relationship with the other at risk.” At this level, the presence of risk as an aesthetic and epistemological category in Foucault’s thought predicts and sustains his dialogue with neoliberalism. Does this reveal the embedded liberalism of Foucault’s final thought? Madness “constitutes the only risk that interpretation really runs.” At least, Foucault could recognize a home for his aesthetics in the form of “the motto of liberalism ... ‘Live dangerously’.”

NOTES

1 Stuart Elden, *Foucault’s Last Decade* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 4-5.
2 Ibid., 5.
3 Ibid., 62-81.
4 Ibid., 83-92.
5 Ibid., 127-130.
6 Ibid., 164-172.
15 On the destruction of the psychological in Foucault’s thought, see Arnold I. Davidson, “Foucault, Psychoanalysis, and Pleasure,” in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago:


19 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Marx, Freud,” *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 278.


22 Frédéric Gros has written that for Foucault “thinking is to convey singular and risky force relations.” “Deleuze’s Foucault: A Metaphysical Fiction,” in *Between Deleuze and Foucault*, eds. Nicole Morar, Thomas Nail, and Daniel W. Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 135.