Modern Intellectual History, 6, 3 (2009), pp. 539–568
doi:10.1017/S1479244309990175

LIBERALISM WITHOUT HUMANISM: MICHEL FOUCAULT AND THE FREE-MARKET CREED, 1976–1979*

MICHAEL C. BEHRENT
Department of History, Appalachian State University
E-mail: behrentmc@appstate.edu

This article challenges conventional readings of Michel Foucault by examining his fascination with neoliberalism in the late 1970s. Foucault did not critique neoliberalism during this period; rather, he strategically endorsed it. The necessary cause for this approval lies in the broader rehabilitation of economic liberalism in France during the 1970s. The sufficient cause lies in Foucault's own intellectual development: drawing on his long-standing critique of the state as a model for conceptualizing power, Foucault concluded, during the 1970s, that economic liberalism, rather than "discipline," was modernity's paradigmatic power form. Moreover, this article seeks to clarify the relationship between Foucault's philosophical antihumanism and his assessment of liberalism. Rather than arguing (as others have) that Foucault's antihumanism precluded a positive appraisal of liberalism, or that the apparent reorientation of his politics in a more liberal direction in the late 1970s entailed a partial retreat from antihumanism, this article contends that Foucault's brief, strategic, and contingent endorsement of liberalism was possible precisely because he saw no incompatibility between antihumanism and liberalism—but only liberalism of the economic variety. Economic liberalism alone, and not its political iteration, was compatible with the philosophical antihumanism that is the hallmark of Foucault's thought.

For some time now, Michel Foucault has been a familiar figure in American academic life. Graduate students in the humanities and social sciences are expected to master his dense tomes. His works have become staples of undergraduate courses, where their strange themes and cryptic formulations—the "death of the author," "power/knowledge," "bodies and pleasure"—can still elicit a frisson of intellectual subversion from the unsuspecting sophomore.

* Helpful insight on earlier drafts of this article was provided by Eric Boehme, Catherine Cole, Scott Johnson, Samuel Moyn, Jerrold Seigel, the History and Philosophy departments of Denison University, and the Carolina Seminar on French cultural studies. I am also grateful to Tony La Vopa and to three anonymous readers for *MIH*.

Foucault's thought, moreover, has launched fleets of new disciplines and methodologies. His insights concerning the relationship between power and the human body have, for instance, been debated by a generation of feminist thinkers.[1] In queer theory, he has become so canonical a figure that a prominent scholar once remarked that "if Michel Foucault had never existed, queer politics would have had to invent him."[2] His shadow looms equally large over postcolonial studies: writing in 1995, Anne Stoler noted "that no single analytic framework has saturated the field of colonial studies so completely over the last decade as that of Foucault."[3] Guided by his signature concept of "discourse," historians negotiated the cultural and linguistic "turns" of the 1980s.[4] In Europe and the United States, an entire subdiscipline has arisen around a single term that Foucault coined in the late 1970s: "governmentality."[5] Two scholarly journals have devoted themselves exclusively to his thought.[6]

Needless to say, not every word dedicated to Foucault has been hagiographic, or even sympathetic. Some feminists have detected overtones of misogyny in his work, while postcolonial theorists find his unreconstructed Eurocentrism troubling. No doubt he still has the capacity to enrage, as he did during the culture wars of the 1990s, when Camille Paglia could accuse Foucault of displaying the "same combination of maniacal abstraction with lust for personal power that led to the deranged orderliness of the concentration camps."[7] Yet, one suspects, those who can still summon up such vitriol are fighting the last academic war. Though it remains controversial, Foucault's voice has become, in the end, familiar: one, like

---

1 See J. Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (New York, 1991); M. A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany, NY, 2002); and L. McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender, and the Self* (Boston, MA, 1993).

2 D. M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York, 1995), 120. On Foucault and queer theory see also J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990); and T. Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory* (Duxford and New York, 1999).

3 A. L. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, 1995), 1. See also E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); and R. Guha and G. C. Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York, 1988), especially the section entitled "Developing Foucault."

4 See P. O'Brien, "Michel Foucault's History of Culture", in L. Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA, 1989), 25–46; and J. Goldstein, ed., *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1994).

5 The foundational text of "governmentality studies" is G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago, 1991).

6 *The History of the Present*, edited by P. Rabinow of the University of California at Berkeley, appeared between 1985 and 1988. The online journal *Foucault Studies*, founded in 2004, is available at www.foucault-studies.com.

7 C. Paglia, "Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf", in *idem*, *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (New York, 1992), 224.

that of Marx or Freud, which we recognize and accommodate, however radically it challenges our picture of the world.

Part of the reason for Foucault's familiarity is that we immediately grasp the political force of what he has to say. By unveiling the subtle but pervasive webs of powers that ensnare us, Foucault also suggested how we might disentangle ourselves from them. He offers, one may plausibly surmise, a politics of freedom—an initiation, as he once put it, to the "art of not being . . . governed."[8] We sense, intuitively, that his politics are emancipatory: though we know that he is no more a Marxist than a social democrat, we turn to him not so much to challenge as to enrich the palette of leftist social criticism. For Michel Foucault, as we imagine him, is most certainly a man of the left. True, we have heard it rumored that he is a "young conservative";[9] we remember, perhaps, that a great philosopher once called Foucault "the last barrier that the bourgeoisie can still raise against Marx."[10] But most of us find such charges hard to take seriously. Could a thinker who divulged the repressive agenda lurking within well-meaning projects of social reform, who unmasked the exclusionary mechanisms of Enlightenment-inspired rationality, and who enjoined us to overcome our inner fascist be anything other than a left-wing intellectual—albeit a brilliantly original one?

Yet the American academy's warm embrace of Foucault has come at a cost: that of a certain indifference to the historical contexts that shaped his work. The failure to consider the intimate relationship between Foucault's thought and the twists and turns of postwar French history has rendered his American audience occasionally tone-deaf to the character of his evolving political commitments. To be sure, the episodes in Foucault's career that most easily align with expectations concerning his political radicalism—one thinks, for instance, of his involvement in the "Prison Information Group" (Groupe d'information sur les prisons, or GIP) in the early 1970s—are relatively well known. Those junctures when Foucault defied these assumptions have received, however, far less attention. This is true of one critical moment in particular. In the late 1970s, the same Foucault whom academic radicals have lionized flirted with an outlook anchored on the political right: the free-market creed known as neoliberalism. For his defenders, the notion that Foucault might have taken seriously a school of thought embraced by Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Alan Greenspan defies credibility. Yet Foucault's attraction to neoliberalism was real, and the logic of this interest understandable—provided that we grasp precisely what attracted him to it. This requires, however, a far more contextualized reading of his work than

---

8 M. Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que la Critique? (Critique et *Auflklärung*)", *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie* 84/2 (1990), 38.

9 J. Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity", trans. S. Ben-Habib, *New German Critique* 22 (1981), 13.

10 J.-P. Sartre, "Jean-Paul Sartre répond", *L'Arc* 30 (1966), 88.

American Foucauldians are generally prepared to abide. Foucault's "neoliberal moment" must be situated in the broad shift of allegiances that transformed French intellectual politics in the 1970s—a topic that has recently attracted the attention of historians. The 1970s were a historical watershed in France, when many former radicals critiqued Marxism for its latent totalitarianism, nurtured a newfound admiration for liberalism, and professed their opposition to an electoral alliance uniting socialists and communists.[11] Yet while it is well known that Foucault publicly supported the so-called "new philosophers" in their assault on Marxism, the extent to which this shift impacted his own thinking has been underestimated. Foucault did not limit himself to placing his *imprimatur* on the new political outlook. He also innovated—a fact that becomes evident when one considers the lectures that he delivered between 1976 and 1979 at the Collège de France, in which Foucault presented his audiences an idiosyncratic appraisal of economic liberalism.[12]

This crucial episode in Foucault's thought has been neglected in part because these lectures have only recently appeared in print. But an equally important factor is the unwillingness of many of his readers to hear what he is saying. This deafness takes several forms. Some of Foucault's critics assume that his thought is fundamentally incompatible with liberalism of any kind. This appreciation rests, in the first place, on the various ways in which his work purported to unveil the subtle forms of repression lurking within allegedly liberal societies. But the greatest obstacle on the Foucauldian path to liberalism is usually considered to be his philosophical antihumanism. And with good reason: antihumanism is in many respects the leitmotif of Foucault's entire intellectual enterprise, though it received its sharpest formulation in his famous prophecy of the "death of man" in 1966's *The Order of Things*. "Our task," Foucault once declared, "is to emancipate ourselves definitively from humanism."[13] Far from being Western culture's defining preoccupation, the problem of "man" (which

---

[11] M. S. Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: The Anti-Totalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York, 2004). See also J. Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal and Ithaca, 2007); and A. Jainchill and S. Moyn, "French Democracy between Totalitarianism and Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography", *Journal of Modern History* 76 (2004), 107–54.

[12] By "economic liberalism" I mean the school of thought that holds the free market to be the most efficient of economic systems. Though in practice they are often related, I distinguish it from "political liberalism," understood as the philosophy that advocates representative governments grounded in law and guaranteeing fundamental human rights. "Neoliberalism" will refer, as it does for Foucault, to the twentieth-century forms of economic liberalism associated with German Ordoliberalism and the Chicago School.

[13] Foucault, "Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal", in *idem*, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, *1954–1969*, ed. D. Defert, F. Ewald, and J. Lagrange (Paris, 1994), 516.

he held to be synonymous with "humanism") was, Foucault contended, of recent vintage, dating only to the end of the eighteenth century (and thus had nothing in common, for instance, with Renaissance humanism). Far from being a moral affirmation of the inherent worth of human life and experience, humanism thus conceived is primarily epistemological: "man," he claimed, has become knowledge's ultimate horizon. Foucault's prediction of this paradigm's imminent demise was above all an assertion that the philosophical primacy given to the human subject—heretofore knowledge's transcendental condition—had exhausted itself. "Man is disappearing in philosophy," he explained in 1968, "not as an object of knowledge, but as the subject of liberty and of existence."[14] This concerted assault on humanism, "man," and the human subject would seem to preclude any affinity between Foucault and liberalism, a political philosophy that is usually taken to rest upon these very principles. On such grounds, the political philosopher Michael Walzer has argued, for instance, that Foucault's failure to offer an "an account . . . of the liberal state and the rule of law" contributes to "the catastrophic weakness of his political theory."[15] A different argument portrays Foucault as a liberal in denial: if he denounced Franco, defended the Vietnamese boat people, and spoke out for the trade union Solidarity when it was outlawed by the Polish government, was it not because he subscribed, *sotto voce*, to some form of crypto-liberalism? A number of historians maintain that, in the 1970s, Foucault did indeed become a happy convert to the philosophy of human rights. In this vein, Richard Wolin remarks, "At the time of Foucault's death in 1984, prominent observers noted the irony that the ex-structuralist and 'death-of-man' prophet had played a pivotal role in facilitating French acceptance of political liberalism."[16] Along similar lines, Eric Paras paints the portrait of a Foucault who, under the sway of "new philosophers," abandoned his philosophical antihumanism once it suddenly appeared insufficiently inoculated against totalitarianism. In a 1979 letter to the Iranian prime minister, Paras points out, Foucault mentioned "human rights" no less than four times, and "rights" an additional seven.[17]

Rather than parsing his words for some kind of secret conversion, others have seen Foucault as engaged in a critical dialogue with liberalism. Richard Rorty, for instance, suggested that Foucault's defense of autonomy was all the more liberal in that it was antifoundationalist—that is, that it did not claim to be

---

14 Foucault, "Foucault répond à Sartre" (interview with J.-P. Elkabbach), in ibid., 664.

15 M. Walzer, "The Politics of Michel Foucault", *Dissent* 30 (Fall 1983), 490.

16 R. Wolin, "From the 'Death of Man' to Human Rights: The Paradigm Change in French Intellectual Life, 1968–1986", in *idem*, *The Frankfurt School Revisited, and Other Essays on Politics and Society* (New York, 2006), 180. For a similar argument see F. Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*, vol. 2, *Le Chant du cygne. 1967 à nos jours* (Paris, 1992), 392–4.

17 E. Paras, *Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge* (New York, 2006), 97.

derived from an underlying anthropological or metaphysical truth.[18] According to John Rajchman, while Foucault demonstrated that liberal freedoms belong to "a disciplinary power figuration," the critical practices that he brought to bear on power structures—including nominally liberal ones—were motivated by emancipatory instincts. "Our real freedom," Rajchman contends, "is found in dissolving or changing the polities that embody our nature."[19] Foucault shows us, in short, that liberalism's main problem is that it is not liberal enough.

In France, particularly since the publication of his lectures from the late 1970s, one finds greater awareness of Foucault's interest in economic liberalism. But even those who are familiar with these views often remain skeptical of the idea that Foucault betrayed any sympathy for the forms of liberalism he discussed. If they do refer to his views on neoliberalism, they assume that he could only have intended to denounce it as a new and sinister form of power. Thus Jeannette Colombel, for instance, asserts that in his 1979 lectures, Foucault demonstrated that neoliberalism "constituted a dual society, in which the excluded, who are ever more numerous, remain passive."[20] Frédéric Lebaron asserts that Foucault "resisted the neoliberal turn, even if he did not truly perceive its depth and radicalism."[21] Judith Revel, a leading French Foucault scholar, makes a more nuanced case for the claim that Foucault's appraisal of neoliberalism was ultimately critical. While acknowledging the existence of "neoliberal readings" of Foucault, Revel, too, suggests that Foucault ultimately sought to conceptualize strategies for resisting the neoliberal order.[22] The view that Foucault staked out a largely negative position on neoliberalism is, of course, perfectly understandable, given that one of the most striking tendencies of his *oeuvre* is an effort to smoke out the hidden mechanisms of power afflicting modern societies. Yet these readings ultimately ask us to believe that Foucault meant something quite different from what he was saying—at least when he spoke of neoliberalism. We should begin, rather, by asking if Foucault's pronouncements make sense on their own terms.

---

18 R. Rorty, "Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: the Case of Foucault", in *idem*, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge and New York, 1991).

19 J. Rajchman, *Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York, 1985), 123.

20 J. Colombel, *Michel Foucault: La Clarté de la mort* (Paris, 1994), 210.

21 F. Lebaron, "De la Critique de l'économie à l'action syndicale", in D. Eribon, ed., *L'infréquentable Michel Foucault. Renouveaux de la pensée critique. Actes du colloque Centre Georges-Pompidou, 21–22 juin 2000* (Paris, 2001), 163.

22 J. Revel, *Expériences de la pensée: Michel Foucault* (Paris, 2005). Revel maintains (unpersuasively, in my view) that Foucault distinguished between "biopower," the political technology associated with economic liberalism, and "biopolitics," the means through which biopower is resisted.

For what these assessments of Foucault's relation to liberalism overlook is *what* he actually said about liberalism, and *how* his pronouncements on liberalism were a response to a very particular political moment. Liberalism, for Foucault, was hardly a marginal concern. It became—however briefly—the primary focus of two lecture series delivered at the Collège de France: one in 1978, entitled Security, Population, and Territory, and another the following year, on The Birth of Biopolitics. What both Foucault's critics and his defenders have failed to consider is a deep affinity between Foucault's thought and neoliberalism: a shared suspicion of the state. Foucault's antistatism was, in the first instance, theoretical. He famously complained that "in political thought and analysis, the king's head has still not been cut off."[23] What he meant was that political theorists too often understand power on the model of the state, viewing it as flowing top-down from a transcendent authority, rather than as a force disseminated across the social space through complex and open-ended relations, involving a wide range of actors and institutions. This position was a logical consequence of Foucault's antihumanism: the main fallacy of state-based models of politics is that they anthropomorphize power by viewing it as the conscious expression of a will. The theoretical antistatism implicit in Foucault's thought required, however, a specific configuration of circumstances to be actualized. In the 1970s, however, Foucault's theoretical antistatism became increasingly normative: his claim that we should abandon the state as our model for understanding power evolved, in other words, into an argument that the state should cease to be the primary focus of engaging in politics. The context in which this shift occurred is both significant and underappreciated. The economic crisis that struck France in 1973, accompanied by the implosion of the statist assumptions that had driven the country's remarkable postwar growth, suddenly made economic liberalism far more relevant to public discourse than it had been for decades. Spurred by these events, Foucault seems to have recognized the affinity between his theoretical objection to state-based conceptions of power and the economic liberalism that was the subject of contemporary debates. The onset of prolonged economic malaise in the early 1970s, I argue, proves to be as critical a factor in the intellectual transformations of the 1970s as antitotalitarianism or the so-called "death of Marx."

Thus Foucault did indeed have a liberal moment—but it was inspired not by the *political* liberalism of Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, or François Guizot, whom other intellectuals were busily dusting off at the time, but by *economic* liberals like Adam Smith, Wilhelm Röpke, and the Chicago School. In his 1978 and 1979 lectures, the antistatism latent in Foucault's theory of power was nurtured by the resurgence of neoliberal ideas that the

[23] Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris, 1977), 117.

1973 economic crisis precipitated. In this climate, Foucault found economic liberalism to be intellectually appealing for two crucial reasons. First, at a juncture when he, like a number of his contemporaries, was attempting to free French intellectual life from the headlock of revolutionary leftism (or *gauchisme*), economic liberalism proved to be a potent theoretical weapon for bludgeoning the left's authoritarian proclivities. Second, Foucault could endorse economic liberalism because, unlike its political counterpart, it did not require him to embrace philosophical humanism—the outlook that Foucault had, from the outset of his career, contested with all the energy that his intellectual skills could muster. The theoretical condition of possibility of Foucault's neoliberal moment was his insight that economic liberalism is, essentially, a liberalism without humanism. The limitation of state power that defines the practice of economic liberalism does not occur, Foucault maintained, when "subjects" are recognized as having "rights." Of such hypotheses it has no need. Rather, economic liberalism justifies itself on the basis of its greater efficiency: it is a practice that arises when power realizes that it has an interest *as* power in *limiting* power. Far from being grounds for denouncing it, this is precisely why Foucault found economic liberalism so appealing: it offered a compelling terrain upon which his practical aspiration for freedom might merge with his theoretical conviction that power is constitutive of all human relationships. Once this is grasped, moreover, it becomes possible to preempt the tendency to see Foucault's fascination with liberalism as anticipating or accompanying his burgeoning interest in subjectivity (to which the final volumes of *The History of Sexuality* bear witness), a view which rests on the premise that liberal politics and the human subject necessarily imply one another.[24] In these ways, Foucault's liberal moment confounds the assumption, shared by both his defenders and his detractors, that liberalism and humanism are philosophically inseparable. Paradoxical though it may sound, one merit of examining how Foucault engaged with the vagaries of contemporary politics is that it throws into relief how unwaveringly committed he remained to his core philosophical beliefs. Thus his exploration of economic liberalism, a matter on

[24] Those who would see Foucault's interest in liberalism and his turn, in the early 1980s, to subjectivity as qualifications or even rejections of his earlier antihumanism overlook the fact that Foucault considered both projects to be examinations of "governmentality," a concept by which he endeavored to replace the juridical model of power and its humanist underpinnings with a conception of power as a practice and as a relationship through which subjects are constituted. Thus in 1981 Foucault claimed that his "history of subjectivity" was part and parcel of the "question of 'governmentality,'" insofar as the "government of the self by oneself" raises the issue of its "articulation in relation to others." Foucault, "Subjectivité et vérité", in *idem*, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, *1980–1988*, ed. D. Defert, F. Ewald, and J. Lagrange (Paris, 1994), 214.

which he had previously said next to nothing,[25] ended up revealing just how deep his antihumanism ran. That precisely these commitments led him to succumb to economic liberalism's charms should give pause to his friends and foes alike.

THE 1970S WATERSHED: THE DISCREET CHARM OF ECONOMIC LIBERALISM

Foucault's late 1970s flirtation with economic liberalism was one sign among many of the broad realignment in French intellectual politics under way in that decade. Like many of his contemporaries, Foucault was finding it increasingly difficult to hide his exasperation with the toll that Marxism had taken on intellectual and political life. In 1978 he denounced the tendency of intellectuals of the post-1968 era towards "hyper-Marxism"; that is, "the pulverization of Marxism into little bodies of doctrine" with less and less to say about vital political issues.[26] The writer Claude Mauriac recalls that during a demonstration in 1975, the philosopher was invited to say a few impromptu words about the founder of modern socialism. Foucault impatiently replied, "Don't talk to me about Marx any more. I never want to hear of that gentleman again. Go and talk to the professionals. The ones who are paid to do that. The ones who are his civil servants. For my part, I'm completely through with Marx."[27] Meanwhile, Foucault was effusive in his praise of the anti-Marxist "new philosophers," the most vocal spokespersons of the emerging political sensibility.[28]

Yet Foucault's liberal turn was not only directed against Marxism. It also occurred in the midst of one of the decisive turning points of contemporary French history: the economic crisis of the early 1970s. Though the crisis was sparked by OPEC's decision to triple (and later quadruple) oil prices in October 1973, historians now agree that industrialized nations had been teetering on the edge of a precipice at least since August 1971, when Richard Nixon abruptly ended the gold convertibility of the dollar, felling one of the main pillars of the international financial system established at Bretton Woods in 1944. The result was more than a temporary downturn: as Jeffrey A. Frieden puts it, nothing less than

---

25 It is, however, worth recalling that Foucault had studied the works of Adam Smith and David Ricardo in *The Order of Things*, albeit from an epistemological rather than a political perspective.

26 Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault" (interview with D. Trombadori conducted in 1978), in *idem*, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, *1980–1988*, 80, 81.

27 Quoted in D. Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York, 1993), 348.

28 See Foucault, "La grande Colère des faits" (a review of A. Glucksmann's *Les Maîtres penseurs*), *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, *1976–1979*, ed. D. Defert, F. Ewald, and J. Lagrange (Paris, 1994), 277–81.

the "postwar era ended in the early 1970s."[29] This certainly was the case in France. For much of the period between 1944 and the early 1970s, unprecedented growth, high levels of employment, and a dramatic rise in living standards had been propelled by a perfect storm of demographic expansion, American reconstruction aid, European integration, and state planning, among other factors.[30] By late 1973, however, the *trente glorieuses* (or "thirty glorious years")—as the economist Jean Fourastié dubbed them in an eponymous obituary for this age—were grinding to a halt.[31] Defaulting to the Keynesian axioms that had served Western economies so well since the war, the French government sought in 1974 to curtail the rising tide of inflation, but managed only to stall growth. Switching gears, the government attempted, the following year, to stimulate the economy, but still found itself faced with nearly a million unemployed.[32] As Fourastié observed in late 1973, the "easy times" of the postwar years had come and gone.[33]

Even as stagflation and mass unemployment disrupted French society—strikes prompted by layoffs proliferated between 1974 and 1975—they also confounded the economic orthodoxies that had prevailed during the postwar period, notably the "stop-and-go" policies (that is, using fiscal policy to rein in inflation and stimulate growth during a recession) associated with Keynesian theory. In 1976, Jacques Rueff, perhaps France's most distinguished liberal economist, hailed in *Le Monde* "The End of the Keynesian Era." According to Rueff, it was the "Cambridge magician" himself who was ultimately responsible for the contemporary turmoil: by persuading postwar governments that, through investment, they could end unemployment and expand their economies, Keynes's doctrine "opened wide the floodgates of inflation and unemployment"—scourges, he presaged, that are "destroying before our eyes what remains of Western civilization."[34]

In this crisis atmosphere, liberal economists, who had been sidelined by Keynesians in many industrial countries for much of the postwar period, were given a second look. Nor would they have long to wait for electoral victory: Margaret Thatcher would triumph in Britain's 1979 general election, while in the United States Ronald Reagan was gearing up the campaign that would win him the presidency. In France, free-market liberals got an even earlier crack at resolving

---

29 J. A. Frieden, *Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2006), 359.

30 See, for instance, M. Parodi, *L'Economie et la société française depuis 1945* (Paris, 1981), 12–61.

31 J. Fourastié, *Les Trente glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris, 1979).

32 See J.-J. Becker and P. Ory, *Crises et alternances (1974–2000)* (Paris, 2002), 63–74.

33 J. Fourastié, "La Fin des temps faciles", *Le Figaro*, 20 Dec. 1973, 1, 26.

34 J. Rueff, "La Fin de l'ère keynésienne", in *Oeuvres complètes de Jacques Rueff*, vol. 3, *Politique économique I* (Paris, 1979), 178. This article, originally a lecture delivered to the Mont Pèlerin Society, appeared in *Le Monde* on 19 and 20–21 Feb. 1976.

the crisis. Seeking a way out of the country's economic impasse, President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (himself a former finance minister of liberal proclivities) turned to Raymond Barre, a liberal economist and translator of Friedrich Hayek, the Austrian guru of neoliberalism,[35] appointing him prime minister in August 1976. After his initial anti-inflation plan achieved only moderate results, Barre seized on the right's unexpected victory in the 1978 parliamentary elections to pursue a more ambitious agenda—one specifically inspired by liberal principles. The centerpiece of Barre's plan was the elimination of long-standing price caps on a wide range of goods and services, many of which had existed since 1945. Of greatest symbolic importance was the deregulation of prices on bread, notably the hallowed baguette.[36] These measures notwithstanding, Barre's economic liberalism was hardly extreme. Appraising his policies, the economist André Fourçans observed in 1979 that Barre's policies did not represent a "return to the 'savage capitalism' of the nineteenth century," but rather an effort "to run counter to the French state's tradition of *dirigisme* and niggling interventionism in order to give an important place back to market mechanisms."[37] Indeed, purists have derided Barre's liberalism as half-baked, as he also presided over significant increases in social spending to placate those constituencies that the crisis had hit hardest.[38] His experiments were, moreover, short-lived: just as free-marketeers were sailing to power in Britain and the United States, the French elected, in 1981, a socialist president promising a "rupture with capitalism." Even so, it is remarkable that in a country well known for its statist traditions, a French prime minister proved something of a trailblazer in the broad reorientation of economic policy under way in industrialized nations at the time. By ushering in what has been described as "pragmatic" or "proto-" neoliberalism,[39] Barre's tenure, it has been argued, spelled in many ways "the end of the 'French model.'"[40] This was not lost on contemporaries: in 1979, the prime minister's ideas reportedly found an admiring audience in Thatcher's new government.[41]

---

35 F. A. Hayek, *Scientisme et sciences sociales: Essai sur le mauvais usage de la raison*, trans. R. Barre (Paris, 1953).

36 Becker and Ory, *Crises et alternances*, 78–81.

37 A. Fourçans, "France. La Politique du gouvernement Barre et le néo-libéralisme," in *Universalia 1979: Les Evénements, les hommes, les problèmes en 1978* (Paris, 1979), 279.

38 T. B. Smith, *France in Crisis: Welfare, Inequality, and Globalization since 1980* (Cambridge and New York, 2004), 91–4.

39 See, respectively, M. Fourcade-Gourinchas and S. L. Babb, "The Rebirth of the Liberal Creed: Paths to Neoliberalism in Four Countries," *American Journal of Sociology* 108/3 (2002), 562–8; and M. Prasad, "Why Is France so French? Culture, Institutions, and Neoliberalism, 1974–1981," *American Journal of Sociology* 111/2 (2005), 366, 370.

40 Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb, "Rebirth of the Liberal Creed", 564.

41 Prasad, "Why Is France so French?", 366.

However one judges his success, Barre in any case contributed to the rehabilitation of economic liberalism as a plausible theoretical framework. Writing for *Le Monde* in October 1978, Pierre Drouin observed that "the notion of the market has recovered a luster that it has not known for a long time."[42] This liberal renaissance drew on France's often unacknowledged but nonetheless robust tradition of economic liberalism, which the French affinity for state intervention has often occluded.[43] Monica Prasad argues that, while far from dominant, neoliberalism emerged as "an important minority position in 1970s France."[44] It had, for instance, infiltrated the inner circles of France's academic elite. Students at the École nationale d'administration (ENA), the premier institution for top civil servants, were taught by Jean-Jacques Rosa, a staunch neoliberal economist who was convinced that "bulimic states" were to blame for the illnesses afflicting Western economies. His ideas struck a chord, as one authority has argued: "The high bureaucrats rising from the ENA or from the École Polytechnique [the top engineering school] believe that there is a limit to the state's intervention and to the tax burden. The state can't do everything, it has already done too much, it should stop."[45] Nearby, at the prestigious Institut d'études politiques, Jacques Rueff, the dean of French economic liberalism, taught alongside a group known as the "new economists" (including Jean Fourastié, Jean-Marie Benoist, Lionel Stoléru, Jean-Pierre Fourcade, and André Fourçans), who shared his commitment to free markets.[46] A number of essays touting liberal solutions to the economic turmoil appeared in the mid- to late 1970s, particularly to dissuade voters from opting for the Socialist–Communist alliance in the 1978 elections.[47] At the same time, publishers hurriedly translated the works of Milton Friedman and Hayek into French,[48] while in 1980 Presses Universitaires de France launched a series entitled *Libre Échange* (Free Trade), which introduced Thomas

---

42 P. Drouin, "La France est-elle libérale?", *Le Monde*, 7 Oct. 1978, 32.

43 For instance, the Walter Lippmann Colloquium, which met in Paris in 1938, has recently attracted the attention of scholars, who have identified it as a foundational moment of modern neoliberalism. See S. Audier, *Le Colloque Lippmann. Aux Origines du néolibéralisme* (Latresne, 2008); and F. Denord, "Aux Origines du néo-libéralisme en France: Louis Rougier et le Colloque Walter Lippmann de 1938," *Le Mouvement social* 195 (2001), 9–34.

44 Prasad, "Why Is France so French?", 375.

45 J.-F. Kesler, quoted in ibid., 375. See the volume that Rosa coedited with F. Aftalion, *L'Economique retrouvée: Vieilles Critiques et nouvelles analyses* (Paris, 1977).

46 Prasad, "Why Is France so French?", 375.

47 See, for instance, G. Elgozy, *Le bourgeois Socialiste, ou pour un post-libéralisme* (Paris, 1977); P. Malaud, *La Révolution libérale* (Paris, New York, Barcelona, and Milan, 1976); and A. Sauvy, *La Tragédie du pouvoir: Quel Avenir pour la France?* (Paris, 1978).

48 F. A. Hayek, *Prix et production* (Paris, 1975); *idem*, *Droit, législation et liberté: Une nouvelle Formulation des principes libéraux de justice et d'économie politique*, trans. R. Audouin (Paris, 1980); *idem*, *Le Mirage de la justice sociale*, trans. R. Audouin (Paris, 1981); M.

Sowell, Irving Kristol, and Robert Nozick to the French public. The same year, Hayek himself regaled a French audience with his wisdom in an address at the National Assembly.[49] Thus when Foucault noted that "American neoliberalism" had, by 1979, become a tad cliché ("une tarte à la crème"), he was only slightly exaggerating.[50]

A particularly prominent spokesman for a liberal solution to the crisis was a young economist named Henri Lepage, who seized the public's attention in 1978 with an essay entitled *Demain le capitalisme* (Tomorrow, Capitalism). The book was a pithy primer to recent American economic theory, including the work of University of Chicago economists Gary Becker and Milton Friedman, "public-choice" economists such as James M. Buchanan, "human-capital" theorists, and libertarians—many of the same economists that Foucault would consider in his lectures the following year. But the essay was also a vigorous polemic targeting the entrenched prejudice against economic thought, particularly in its liberal form, that pervaded French intellectual culture.[51] An aversion to economics, he suggested, was ultimately responsible for the absurdities that, on the left, passed for a political agenda. "The true danger" that France faces, Lepage warned, "comes less from the discourse and the palinodes of François Mitterrand and [Communist Party leader] Georges Marchais, than from this deep-seated intellectual intoxication which, little by little, habituates an entire sector of the intelligentsia and of French opinion to think, often without realizing it, in 'Marxian' terms."[52] At a time when disillusionment with Marxism was spawning interest in political liberalism, Lepage, sensing the time was ripe, sought to persuade his readers that human rights logically implied free markets:

> those who defend liberalism on a political level [must become] conscious of the tight bonds that unite liberal philosophy to the scientific foundations of *capitalist* society. Those who adhere to a liberal philosophy must cease to have a guilty conscience because of this connection between liberalism and capitalism and devote sufficient effort to rediscovering

---

Friedman, *Inflation et systèmes monétaires*, revised edn, trans. D. Caroll (Paris, 1977); *idem*, *Contre Galbraith* (Paris, 1977); M. and R. Friedman, *La Liberté du choix*, trans. G. Casaril (Paris, 1980).

49 F. A. Hayek, "L'hygiène de la démocratie", *Liberté économique et progrès social. Périodique d'information et de liaison des libéraux* 40 (1980–81), 20–37.

50 Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France, 1978–1979* (Paris, 2004), 221.

51 On this issue see W. Gallois, "Against Capitalism? French Theory and the Economy after 1945," in J. Bourg, ed., *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France* (Lanham, MD, 2004), 49–72. The present essay seeks to qualify Gallois's claim that Foucault partook in French theory's neglect of economic thought.

52 H. Lepage, *Demain le capitalisme* (Paris, 1978), 11.

the theoretical and scientific arguments as to why this guilty conscience has no reason to exist.[53]

In other words, no Tocqueville without Milton Friedman. But Lepage took his argument a step further: not only are economic and political liberalism inseparable, but the former guarantees freedom far more securely than the latter. Why? Because markets wean us from the belief that freedom's primary locus lies in politics. The prospect that the state—or at least, the mindset that privileges the state—could wither away is, Lepage contended, perhaps the most exhilarating implication of the new American economics, which demonstrates that "the State is not, as one has too often the tendency to see it, a divine construction, endowed with the gift of ubiquity and infallibility."[54]

Antistatist sentiment of this kind was not, however, confined to the right. Lepage's arguments found an unlikely echo from a current that one would not typically suspect of sympathizing with economic liberalism: the so-called "Second Left." An important minority current in French socialism, closely associated with the Parti socialiste unifié (PSU), a small party led by Michel Rocard, and the Confederation française démocratique du travail (CFDT), a major trade union, the Second Left (as it has become known) was also profoundly antistatist—though its immediate target was mainstream socialism's (i.e. the "First Left's") fixation on the state, rather than interventionism as such. Thus in a 1975 manifesto, Edmond Maire, the CFDT's leader, and the journalist Jacques Julliard outlined their vision of a society that would "decompose and redistribute" the functions of the capitalist state, transforming its "shackles" into a "voluntary institution."[55] Critical to the Second Left's outlook was its concept of *autogestion* ("self-management"), which articulated its conviction that society could govern itself without the mediation of oppressive institutions, of which the modern state was the most glaring instance. Though much of the PSU fused with François Mitterrand's newly reconstructed Socialist Party in 1974, the Second Left's antistatist alternative to traditional socialism continued to resonate with the post-1968 mood. By the mid-1970s it had blossomed into a major intellectual force, with its own journal, *Faire*, and a principal theorist, Pierre Rosanvallon. The Second Left's ascendancy was also a reflection of the political context: at a time when Mitterrand's socialists seemed constantly on the verge of electoral victory (including near misses in 1974 and 1978), the Second Left's partisans strove to free the party from what they called "social statism," lest a victory of progressive forces result in a reassertion of knee-jerk *dirigisme*.

---

53 Ibid., 13; original emphasis. A similar argument was made by F.-P. Bénoît in *Démocratie libérale* (Paris, 1978).

54 Lepage, *Demain le capitalisme*, 422.

55 E. Maire and J. Julliard, *La CFDT aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1975), 185.

Though firmly anchored in the left's vision of social progress, the Second Left's outlook overlapped in significant (if limited) ways with that of the newly strident economic liberals, insofar as both identified an overdependence on the state as one of French society's primary weaknesses. At times, the Second Left and economic liberals appeared to be cautiously courting one another. Thus in 1976 Rosanvallon wrote, "The *autogestionnaire* proposition . . . resonates with the liberal project of limiting the state's power and of a power that belongs to civil society."[56] Two years later, Lepage toyed with recruiting the very audiences that Rosanvallon was addressing when he mused, "Liberals will have succeeded when they have convinced some of those who, on the left, reject collectivism as much as contemporary capitalism that the solution to the ills they denounce depends precisely on Capitalism."[57] In the inaugural issue of *Commentaire* (a journal destined to become a leading voice of the liberal resurgence), Jean Baechler confessed, upon completing a thorough analysis of Rosanvallon's ideas, "I am unable to perceive the slightest difference between a pure liberal system and a pure self-managed [*autogéré*] system; they clearly share the same project, the presentation and coloration of which vary in relation to the historical references [offered]."[58] In the end, however, critiquing the state did not prove a broad enough basis for achieving a lasting rapprochement between these tendencies. Rosanvallon went out of his way to stress that *autogestion*'s deep ties were to political, not economic, liberalism;[59] Lepage authored a detailed refutation of *autogestionnaire* economics.[60] Even so, at a time when the state-centered policies of the Keynesian era were under attack, an at least partial convergence between the liberal right and the *autogestionnaire* left was occurring under the banner of antistatism.

Foucault's interest in neoliberalism appears to owe much to his attraction to the Second Left. In 1977, Rosanvallon sent Foucault a copy of *Pour une nouvelle Culture politique* (For a New Political Culture), an essay in which he and Patrick Viveret explored *autogesionnaire* alternatives to both contemporary capitalism and statist socialism. Foucault replied with an enthusiastic letter, praising the authors for their "remarkable perception" of the present and for proposing an analysis that

---

56 P. Rosanvallon, *L'Age de l'autogestion* (Paris, 1976), 45.

57 Lepage, *Demain le capitalisme,* 420–21.

58 J. Baechler, "Libéralisme et autogestion," *Commentaire* 1 (1978), 32. Rosanvallon replied to Baechler's complaint, to which he was clearly sensitive, in "Formation et désintégration de la galaxie 'auto'," in P. Dumouchel and J.-P. Dupuy, eds., *L'Auto-organisation: De la Physique au politique* (Paris, 1983), 456–65. I am grateful to S. Moyn for sharing these references.

59 Rosanvallon, *L'Age de l'autogestion,* 41–5.

60 H. Lepage, *Autogestion et capitalisme: Réponses à l'anti-économie* (Paris, 1978).

was trenchant without being "immobilizing."[61] The same year, Rosanvallon (who later participated in Foucault's research seminars at the Collège de France) organized a conference on "The Left, Experimentation, and Social Change," which Foucault attended, along with some two hundred other participants, including intellectuals like Ivan Illich and Alain Touraine, and sympathetic socialists such as Jacques Delors and Michel Rocard. After attending a workshop on neighborhood medical services, Foucault, in an interview, approved the participants' grassroots politics, as well as the noticeable absence of Marxist cant, which he welcomed as evidence of the "disappearance of terrorism, of theoretical monopolies, and of the monarchy of accepted thinking."[62] The critique of statism was, moreover, clearly an integral part of the participants' vision of social change. In an article about the conference written for *Le nouvel Observateur*, Rosanvallon announced that the time had come "to de-stateify [*désetatiser*] society" and to abandon mainstream socialism's "centralist conception of social transformation."[63] Foucault's interest in economic liberalism, it would seem, was spurred more by his interest in left-wing alternatives to "social statism" than by overt sympathy for Thatcher, Reagan, or Barre. Yet, over time, the critique of French socialism meant that some of the Second Left's adherents could, if not accept, at least entertain liberal economic arguments to a degree that would have been unthinkable in other sectors of the left. Thus Rosanvallon, disputing the claim that contemporary economic liberals were merely spouting "traditional bourgeois ideology," observed in 1981, "These works have their coherence. In a context in which economic and social thought of Marxist origin has run out

---

61 Unpublished letter from Foucault to Rosanvallon, dated 17 Dec. 1977. This letter was kindly made available to me by S. Moyn. See also Rosanvallon, "Un Intellectuel en politique" (interview with S. Bourmeau), available at http://www.college-de-france.fr/media/his_pol/ UPL57428_ Un_Intellectuel_en_ politique.pdf. This interview originally appeared in *Les Inrockuptibles* 566 (3 Oct. 2006).

62 Foucault, "Une Mobilisation culturelle," *Le nouvel Observateur* 670 (Sept. 1977), 49. Foucault would subsequently collaborate with the CFDT on a number of issues, including opposition to the repression of the Polish trade union Solidarity in 1981 and efforts to rethink the French social security system. For the latter, see R. Bono, B. Brunhes, M. Foucault, R. Lenoir, and P. Rosanvallon, *Sécurité sociale: L'Enjeu* (Paris, 1983). Foucault's archives testify to further projects. See notably a letter on CFDT stationary from A. Bihous, addressed, in addition to Foucault, to Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Julliard, Claude Lefort, Kryztof Pomian, Pierre Rosanvallon, Paul Thibaud, Alain Touraine, and Patrick Viveret, entitled "Propositions de travail commun intellectuels—Conféderation française démocratique du travail". Fonds Foucault, Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC) (Saint-Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe, France), FCL 6.11.

63 P. Rosanvallon, "L'Etat en état d'urgence", *Le nouvel Observateur* 670 (Sept. 1977), 49, 48.

of steam, they do not lack a force of conviction. They have a real capacity of intellectual seduction."[64]

Thus in the 1970s, while some intellectual paradigms were on their way out, others were on their way in. At the very moment when intellectuals were airing their grievances with Marxism, the economic crisis, by exposing the limitations of postwar economic orthodoxies, handed free-market liberals their biggest soapbox in decades. In the debates accompanying these shifts, a recurring motif was the critique of French statism—a concern shared by free-market liberals and Second Left socialists, despite otherwise profound disagreements. Yet while context goes a long way in explaining why Foucault lectured on economic liberalism in 1978 and 1979, the sufficient cause lies in his own evolving philosophical position. For the various forms of antistatism emerging in the 1970s resonated in provocative ways with a central plank of his theoretical program: the effort to conceptualize power without reference to the state.

1976–1978: REVISING THE "DISCIPLINARY HYPOTHESIS"

By 1976, Foucault was increasingly concerned that the views he had defended in *Discipline and Punish* were in need of revision. In his genealogy of the modern prison, Foucault cautioned that the seemingly humanitarian attitudes motivating nineteenth-century penal reform represented, in reality, an insidious new form of power that he called "discipline," which individualizes subjects the better to survey their bodies, normalize their behavior, and regulate their movement. In disciplinary society, the prison is, if not the dominant institution, then certainly the exemplary one, both because other institutions (such as schools, the military, and hospitals) emulate its procedures, and because, by systematically reproducing the very criminals that it is charged with reforming, it continually reinforces the disciplinary regime's *raison d'être*. Yet shortly after the book's publication in 1975, Foucault began to question his core assumption that discipline is political modernity's signal trait. A close reading of his Collège de France lecture courses of the late 1970s leaves little doubt that he believed his views on discipline were in need of significant qualification. Ultimately, this enterprise would dovetail with his exploration of economic liberalism.

Foucault's first step in revising the "disciplinary hypothesis" (to use Eric Paras's apt phrase) was taken in the 1976 course, in which Foucault divested discipline of its status as power's most contemporary form. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault had argued that with the modern carceral system, disciplinary power reaches a high-water mark. He describes, for instance, the Mettray prison, which opened in

64 Rosanvallon, *La Crise de l'état-providence* (Paris, 1992 ; first published 1981), 97.

1840, as inaugurating "an art of punishing that is still more or less our own."[65] In the book's famous concluding footnote, Foucault proposed that his study might "serve as a historical background to various studies of the power of normalization and the formation of knowledge in modern society," thus confirming his belief that the prison system and contemporary power were closely intertwined.[66] Yet by early 1976, Foucault had begun to question his earlier position. On 17 March he argued that during the eighteenth century, a new form of power appeared, which, without completely replacing discipline, nonetheless operated on considerably different principles. He proposed to name it "biopolitics" or "biopower." In this lecture, which is in many respects a rough draft of the final chapter of *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*,[67] Foucault distinguishes biopower from two earlier forms: sovereignty and discipline. According to early modern theories of sovereignty, power is never more itself than when it takes the life of its subjects. Yet by the nineteenth century, power defines itself less by ending life than by advancing it—through the production of wealth, the promotion of public health, and, in general, the maximization of a population's life forces. The latter—which is biopower—seeks, as Foucault famously puts it, to "make live and let die," where the earlier form strove to "let live and make die." Yet this transition from sovereignty to biopower involves, Foucault claims, an intermediary step: discipline. Discipline, Foucault reminds his audience, targets individual bodies, organizing them into "a field of visibility" through technologies of surveillance and inspection, while optimizing their utility through practices of exercise and "training" (*dressage*).[68] Yet barely a year after the publication of the book in which he presented these ideas, Foucault now limited discipline's reign to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, rather than making it coterminous with modernity itself. For with the development of biopower in the eighteenth century, Foucault explains, "something new" was happening: the emergence of a "nondisciplinary" technology of power.[69] Where discipline governs "the multiplicity of men" insofar as it can be "resolved into individual bodies,"

---

65 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York, 1977; first published 1975), 296. The original passage is in the interrogative form.

66 Ibid., 308. In his translation, Sheridan makes this footnote the book's final paragraph.

67 J. Miller points out, on D. Defert's testimony, that Foucault started writing what became the final chapter of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*—"The Right of Death and Power over Life"—on the very day that he completed *Discipline and Punish*. This suggests that Foucault's reservations about the scope of the "disciplinary hypothesis" may date back as far as 1975. See J. Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York, 1993), 240–1.

68 Foucault, *"Il faut défendre la Société." Cours au Collège de France, 1975–1976* (Paris, 1997), 215.

69 Ibid.

biopower administers the "mass as a whole," aggregated into a "population."[70] Moreover, unlike discipline, biopower's concern is not with individual conduct, but with general "states of equilibrium [and] of regularity" in the population as a whole.[71] Foucault does, it is true, acknowledge that discipline and biopower frequently overlap: the latter does not so much replace the former as "envelop" and "integrate" it, transforming discipline by "implanting itself . . . within it."[72] Because they operate on different levels—one being aimed at individuals, the other at populations—they can, moreover, "articulate themselves on one another"—witness the power mechanisms at work in urban management and sexuality.[73] Yet even as he stressed their compatibility, Foucault, by introducing biopower, stepped back from the expansive claims that he had previously made for discipline, opening himself up to an alternative understanding of contemporary politics.

Yet Foucault's revision of the disciplinary hypothesis did not stop here. In his 1978 lectures series (he did not teach in 1977), Foucault began to emphasize the relationship between biopower and liberalism—an insight that undermined his claim that discipline was merely "enveloped" by biopower. At the very moment when free-market ideas were influencing economic debates—and as Barre was competing against socialists and communists for control of the National Assembly—Foucault came to the conclusion that many of biopower's most exemplary traits were exhibited by economic liberalism. In 1978, however, he opted to consider the Physiocrats, a school of proto-liberal French economists from the eighteenth century, rather than economic liberalism's more contemporary avatars. What the Physiocrats demonstrate, Foucault maintained, is that whereas power directed at individuals (i.e. discipline) can expand almost ad infinitum, power aimed at populations (i.e. biopower) must learn to limit itself. Far from enveloping discipline, Physiocratic biopolitics stands in striking contrast to it: where discipline "regulates everything," Physiocracy, as much as possible, "laisse faire"—it lets things be.[74] "Letting things be"—or *laissez-faire*, as the Physiocrats themselves called it, coining a phrase that would become the mantra of economic liberals everywhere—is another way of saying "freedom": for the Physiocratic art of governing is inconceivable in a society that lacks it, at least insofar as freedom is understood as noninterference. Freedom was, for instance, indispensable to the Physiocrats' approach to ending grain shortages. Cautioning

---

70 Ibid., 216, 218–19.

71 Ibid., 220.

72 Ibid., 216.

73 Ibid., 223–4.

74 Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France, 1977–1978* (Paris, 2004), 47.

against the disciplinary instinct that would impose price caps and force peasants to bring their grain to market, they proposed to abolish price controls across the board: tempted by the profits that they hoped to make from an ensuing spike in prices, hoarders and foreign exporters would flood the market with grain—which, in turn, would lower prices and feed the hungry. What Physiocracy's approach to managing grain shortages revealed, in short, was the basic insight of liberalism: one governs best by governing least. In his 1978 lectures, Foucault thus distanced himself even further from the disciplinary hypothesis: first, in claiming that economic liberalism is a paradigmatic form of biopower, he increasingly contrasted biopower to discipline, while highlighting the latter's archaic character; second, he suggested that, contrary to the thesis of *Discipline and Punish*, modern forms of power must give ample room to freedom. In Foucault's reasoning, these two claims are in fact connected: it is precisely because economic liberalism is not primarily concerned with individuals that, paradoxically, it offers individual freedom greater scope.

But could Foucault really have intended that his audience take the Physiocrats at their word? Is "freedom" not the product of an internalization of power's imperatives, and thus a form of *assujettissement*—that is, a process whereby one becomes a *subject* (an "I") only through being *subjected* to an external force? In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault certainly suggested as much. He presented the panopticon as the archetype of disciplinary power precisely because it minimizes recourse to physical constraint, in ways fully compatible with liberal conceptions of freedom. Freedom under discipline, he had suggested, is not the real thing: because it "never intervenes," because it is "exercised spontaneously and without noise," the panopticon creates an illusion of liberty, even as it wields power more effectively than any form preceding it.[75] Panoptic power does this by "creating" subjectivity: the individual placed within its "field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; . . . he becomes the principle of his own subjection [*assujettissement*]."[76] These are, of course, the very claims that are invoked to argue that Foucault could not be a liberal in any conventional sense. Yet in his 1978 course, Foucault makes a startling confession. He had once argued, he admitted,

> that one could not understand the establishment of liberal ideologies and politics in the eighteenth century without keeping in mind that this same eighteenth century, which had demanded these liberties so forcefully, had nonetheless weighed them down with a disciplinary technique which, taking children, soldiers, workers where they were, limited liberty considerably and in a sense gave guarantees to the very exercise of this liberty.[77]

---

75 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 206.

76 Ibid., 202–3.

77 Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population*, 50.

But now, he adds, "Well, I believe that I was wrong." This was no minor correction: Foucault had, in effect, disowned a central argument of *Discipline and Punish*. That work, he recognized, had failed to take full measure of liberty's place in the modern economy of power. Liberty is not just a sleight of hand allowing power to operate with greater stealth, nor is it a form of false consciousness arising from *assujettissement*. What biopower in the form of economic liberalism demonstrates is that liberty is power's necessary correlate—its very condition of possibility.

Foucault's reasons for taking liberty seriously are thus hardly designed to satisfy most liberals—and are, by the same token, remarkably consistent with his own philosophical commitments. Liberty matters politically, Foucault contends, once power ceases to target individuals (i.e. by creating "subjects"), and begins instead to manage populations. While Eric Paras is right to argue that Foucault abandoned his disciplinary hypothesis, it is misleading to suggest, as he does, that Foucault did so by rehabilitating the individual. It was Foucault's turn to biopolitics, particularly once he grasped its relation to economic liberalism, which led him to revise the disciplinary hypothesis, not his interest in ancient arts of living. Recognizing this is critical for resolving the thorny question of Foucault's relationship with liberalism. Foucault's critics—and many of his apologists—assume that his position on liberalism could only evolve in tandem with his views on individuality. Whatever such an assumption's inherent merits, Foucault simply did not agree: his increasingly positive appraisal of liberalism in no way entailed a rehabilitation of the "individual," the "subject," or—a fortiori—the "human." Foucault was fascinated by economic liberalism because, in his mind, it made far fewer anthropological claims than political liberalism, which he was happy to snub for the rest of his life. This is not to say Foucault was indifferent to the philosophical question of individuality; his more perceptive readers make it abundantly clear that he was not.[78] But in 1978, Foucault arrived at the position that when power targets populations, it can be significantly more accommodating of individual freedom than when, as with discipline, it places the individual squarely within its cross hairs. Consequently, far from representing power's ultimate tendency in modern society, the panopticon, Foucault now argued, is "the oldest dream of the oldest sovereign."[79] The disciplinary ideal of a completely visible social space that created subjects complicit in their own subjection belonged to the past—replaced by a form of power that aspires not to exhaustive knowledge of each individual, but to an understanding of the broad regularities governing a population.

---

78 See Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, as well as J. Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 2005), 603–31.

79 Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population*, 68.

THE 1979 COURSE: ANTIHUMANIST LIBERALISM AND THE CRITIQUE OF SOCIALISM

Despite being entitled The Birth of Biopolitics, Foucault's 1979 course was entirely devoted to liberal economic thought. Striking an apologetic tone, Foucault, in his opening lecture, confessed, "I had thought I would be capable of giving you this year a course on biopolitics." But in keeping with his arguments from the previous year, he nevertheless intended to show that it is only by understanding the "governmental regime called liberalism that one will be able . . . to grasp what biopolitics is."[80] In the 1979 course, Foucault never satisfactorily explained how he understood liberalism to be related to biopolitics. In his course summary, he claimed that he had intended to consider liberalism merely as an introduction to the broader question of biopolitics, since liberalism is the "framework" to which biopolitics presented its "challenge."[81] This would suggest that liberalism was opposed to biopolitics, and indeed to the task of governing as such. Yet Foucault nonetheless insisted on defining liberalism—as he had in his 1978 lectures—as a "technology of government," albeit one founded on the presumption of its own superfluity.[82] No doubt as a result of this ambiguity, the term "biopolitics" is largely absent from a course that is explicitly dedicated to it. Foucault's reasons for eliding it were, it would seem, twofold. First, he appears to have concluded that it is in economic liberalism, rather than in what he had previously called biopower, that the modern practice of power finds its most coherent expression. Second, at a time of economic crisis, shifting political allegiances, the emergence of a left critique of statist socialism, and a broader rehabilitation of free-market economics, economic liberalism suddenly appeared extremely topical. "The problem of liberalism," Foucault explained in the year's first lecture, "finds itself actually posed in our immediate and concrete present."[83] But Foucault's lectures were more than glorified journalism. They constituted a significant intervention in contemporary intellectual politics, in which Foucault sought, on the one hand, to challenge the philosophical basis upon which the liberal resurgence was occurring, and, on the other, to use economic liberalism

---

80 Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 23, 24. Foucault uses the term *libéralisme*, not "economic liberalism," but clearly means the latter, and not liberalism's political form. In the opening lecture, for instance, he speaks in one breath of "liberalism, of the Physiocrats, of Adam Smith, of Bentham, of the British utilitarians" (ibid., 25). I use the term "economic liberalism" in the interest of clarity.

81 Ibid., 323.

82 Ibid., 325.

83 Ibid., 25.

as a vantage point from which to attack French socialism's unreconstructed statism.

Foucault's efforts to distance himself from the liberal renewal then under way are evident in a startling claim made in his 17 January 1979 lecture. Liberalism is historically significant, he asserts, because it dispenses with the notion that political authority must be founded in law. In the late 1970s this assertion presumably struck many as absurd: liberalism's appeal lay precisely in its efforts to subordinate political authority to the rule of law and the respect of human rights. In refuting law's centrality to liberalism, Foucault was challenging the project of François Furet and his collaborators (including Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, Pierre Manent, Marcel Gauchet, and Pierre Rosanvallon[84]), who at the time were fashioning a non-Marxist account of the French Revolution, while using the categories of liberalism and democracy to build a novel theory of political modernity. According to Foucault, those who associate liberalism with law and rights fail to see that liberalism has developed along two distinct paths. The first, rooted in natural law, does indeed deduce the liberal state from the axiomatic assertion of inalienable individual rights. This path ultimately leads to the French Revolution. This form of liberalism rests, he notes, on the problematic assumption that where there is a law, there is a will: law is understood as the "expression of a will," particularly of a "collective will" which decrees (among other things) which rights individuals refuse to cede to the state. Law, in this tradition, is thus inextricably bound up with subjectivity (insofar as law is taken as expressing a will). The second path to liberalism is, however, grounded in utilitarianism: rather than deducing an ideal state from metaphysical principles, it takes the existence of government as a given, and, on the basis of purely inductive considerations, concludes that liberalism—that is, the self-limitation of power—simply makes the most administrative sense. This type of liberalism has no truck with the anthropological principles upon which the former is dependent—and which Foucault had always found suspect. From the utilitarian perspective, law is simply a process of "deal-making" (*transaction*), whereby individuals negotiate what powers belong to the state, and what freedoms they reserve for themselves. Where revolutionary liberalism makes law the foundation of politics, utilitarian liberalism sees politics as the origin of law. Having demonstrated how the tradition of political liberalism that emphasizes human rights and the legal basis of the state remained wedded to a problematic set of anthropological assumptions, Foucault could downplay the French Revolution's importance, dismissing its

[84] Rosanvallon had close ties to Furet as well as to Foucault.

conception of politics as "retroactive"[85] —a charge, presumably, that he would have just as happily leveled against Furet and his cohort.[86]

In addition to dispensing with unnecessary anthropological hypotheses, utilitarian liberalism—alongside economic liberalism, which he considered to be closely related—impressed Foucault for another reason: it managed to conceptualize a liberal order by relying on no other category than power itself. For liberalism to work, Foucault suggested, there is no need to hypothesize something outside or beyond power, such as law, rights, or even liberty. Rather than a metaphysical entity or a human attribute, liberty, for the utilitarian, is simply a side effect of power—as Foucault put it, "the independence of the governed in relation to the governing."[87] Similarly, for economic liberals, the paradoxical imperative that power must limit itself is essentially a political maxim aimed at optimizing administrative efficiency, not a morally motivated recognition of an inalienable right. Liberalism, Foucault explained, "is shot through with the principle: '*On gouverne toujours trop*'"—one always governs too much.[88] As we have seen, such a characterization of liberalism was, in the late 1970s, very much in the air: Foucault's definition echoes, in striking terms, Barre's pronouncement that "the State must do on its own as little as possible."[89] But this assessment was also consonant with Foucault's philosophical ambition to emancipate the conceptualization of power from juridical categories—or, as he liked to put it, to cut off the king's head (by abandoning the idea that power must derive from a sovereign, legitimate source). Because utilitarian and economic liberalism attach no special importance to the question of power's origin (unlike the revolutionary and natural-rights tradition), they effectively dispense with the need for juridical foundations.[90] Consequently, from Foucault's perspective, they manage to chop off the king's head very ably—more so, paradoxically, than the revolutionaries themselves. Contemporary economic liberalism thus epitomized power as Foucault had come to understand it. Just as for Marx the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is both class conflict's latest form

---

85 Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 41.

86 Though Furet, too, was critical of many aspects of revolutionary politics, it was ultimately the Revolution's failure to ground political life in a solid legal framework, rather than its rootedness in such a tradition, that he condemned.

87 Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 43.

88 Ibid., 324.

89 Quoted in Fourçans, "La Politique du gouvernement Barre", 279.

90 For these reasons, M. Bonnafous-Boucher's argument is exactly wrong: Foucault does not embrace what she calls "liberalism without liberty," but rather liberty without liberalism—at least insofar as the latter is understood in a more conventional (i.e. humanistic) sense. See M. Bonnafous-Boucher, *Le Libéralisme dans la pensée de Michel Foucault: Un Libéralisme sans Liberté* (Paris, 2001).

and the moment at which class conflict is unveiled as history's driving force, so liberalism is, for Foucault, both one form of power among others, and the form that demonstrates most effectively how little power has to do with law.

Economic and utilitarian liberalism thus suggested ways that one might be a liberal without subscribing to philosophical humanism or to a juridical theory of power. But if this explains how Foucault *could* be a liberal, what made him *want* to be one—or, in any event, to endorse it in a particular strategic context? The reason lies in Foucault's aversion to the stubborn archaism of the French left, particularly as it was embodied by Mitterrand's Socialist Party. As Michael Scott Christofferson has persuasively argued, the same concern drove many former leftists in these years (including Furet and the *nouveaux philosophes*) to undertake a public campaign designed to portray the socialists (as well as the communists, their occasional allies) as crypto-totalitarian.[91] Foucault's somewhat more furtive intervention in this debate consisted in judging the left from the standpoint of economic liberalism.

For if liberalism was the quintessential form of modern governmentality, it soon become clear that France's left was hopelessly antiquated. To make this point, Foucault, in 1979, took the circuitous route of considering Ordoliberalism, the German economic school that theorized the Federal Republic's "social market economy." The school owes its name to the journal *Ordo*, founded in 1948 by a group of liberal economists who had met at the University of Freiburg before the war. Their finest hour came when they undertook a liberal critique of the economic policies pursued by Allied occupation authorities in the immediate postwar period. Soon, they found their way to the antechambers of finance minister Ludwig Erhard, the architect of West Germany's "economic miracle."[92] Despite the devastation in which Germany found itself in these years, the Ordoliberals did not back away from their liberal convictions—if anything, they became even more convinced that humanity's future depended on the renunciation of collectivism in all its forms. They were unsparing in their critique of Keynesianism; according to Foucault, Wilhelm Röpke, one of their most prominent members, went so far as to dismiss the Beveridge Report, which paved the way for Britain's National Health Service, as warmed-over National Socialism.[93]

---

91 Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left.*

92 See J. François-Poncet, *La Politique économique de l'Allemagne occidentale* (Paris, 1970); and H. Rieter and M. Schmolz, "The Ideas of German Ordoliberalism, 1938–1945: Pointing the Way to a New Economic Order," *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 1/1 (1993), 87–114.

93 Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 114. Foucault's editors, however, find no evidence that Röpke ever makes precisely this claim. See 131, n. 39.

Though firmly committed to the capitalist economy, the Ordoliberals were not, however, crude free-marketeers. Their beliefs boil down to a single crucial insight: everything that neoclassical economics says about the free market's virtues is true; the problem, however, is that competition is a quasi-mathematical ideal, not an empirical reality. For competition to work its magic, it must first be jump-started by the state. Specifically, the state needs a robust legal framework, one that allows marketplace competition to approximate its ideal form (though like the utilitarians, it should be noted, the Ordoliberals conceived of law as a political tool, not as the state's metaphysical foundation). What seems to have intrigued Foucault about Ordoliberalism is that it confirmed his intuition that economic liberalism should be thought of as a political and not merely an economic system. As Foucault put it, it is precisely Ordoliberalism's insistence that intervention in the economy be limited (such as refraining from economic planning and price-setting) that requires intervention in the legal realm—that is, the legislation and jurisprudence that will grease the market's gears. Trying not to govern too much, it turns out, keeps a government rather busy.

Moreover, because they believed that a free market required an efficient state, the Ordoliberals were also responsible for a remarkable political transformation: the historic decision of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) to renounce Marxism at its 1959 Bad Godesberg conference. Foucault cautioned against denouncing the Bad Godesberg decision as a betrayal. In the first place, by 1959, the SPD needed to embrace neoliberalism and renounce its commitment to mass nationalizations to be a serious contender in electoral politics. But second, and more importantly, the Bad Godesberg decision endowed the SPD with a program for governing. As Foucault put it, the conference marks the SPD's entry into "the game of governmentality."[94]

Critical lessons were thus to be gleaned from the German experience. The SPD had reconciled itself with liberalism and then, a decade later, rode to power with Willy Brandt. Yet in June 1977, François Mitterrand could declare, "There is no way out for liberal society, [either] we will defeat it, or it will defeat itself"—before losing elections (once again) the following year.[95] As Foucault saw it, the most pernicious problem with Mitterrand and his supporters was not their leftist orientation, but their inability to recognize socialism's constitutive shortcoming: the fact that there is "no autonomous socialist governmentality."[96] Historically, Foucault argued, socialists come to power brimming with ideas, but invariably find themselves borrowing governmental practices—the means

---

94 Ibid., 92.

95 Quoted in J. Moreau, "Le Congrès d'Epinay-sur-Seine du Parti socialiste," *Vingtième siècle* 65 (2000), 95.

96 Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 93.

by which they actually get things done—from other political traditions: from economic liberalism, for instance, in the case of the German SPD, or from the police state, in the case of Soviet socialism. Socialism is deficient in this way because socialists have always been more enamored of texts than of practices: they become consumed, for instance, by the problem of authenticity—that is, with the question of what "true" socialism really is—in ways that often privilege fidelity to foundational texts over political and administrative know-how (this political critique is, interestingly, analogous to a philosophical one that Foucault had leveled against Jacques Derrida[97]). What the SPD had learned from Ordoliberalism, but which still escaped the French left, was not how to love capitalism, but how to govern. Those on the left who believed that power matters would thus be wise, he suggested, to learn more about liberalism.

Foucault's critique of French socialism resonated with contemporary arguments advanced by the Second Left. The lecture in which Foucault made his remarks on French socialism was delivered shortly before the Socialist Party's Metz conference, during which Rocard and his supporters publicly questioned the wisdom of the party's commitment to a "rupture with capitalism." These efforts were, in the end, fruitless: the platform ultimately adopted by the socialists denounced the "so-called 'economic laws' that are presented on the right as eternal, analogous to those of cosmology."[98] Foucault's frustration with French socialists endured, even after they finally came to power in 1981. Didier Eribon recounts, for instance, how in 1983 he and Foucault had planned to publish a short book entitled *La Tête des socialistes* (The Socialist Mindset), which would have demonstrated that socialism is bereft of an "art of governing"[99] —the conclusion that Foucault had first reached in 1979. Their broadside against socialism never made it to print. Even so, one imagines that, by 1983, Foucault felt vindicated by the course of events: faced with a deteriorating economic climate, Mitterrand's government suspended its ambitious program of nationalizations, devalued the franc, and adopted austerity measures that de facto acknowledged the market's laws—a Bad Godesberg moment, yet an unacknowledged one, sowing confusion from which the party has never quite recovered.

Claiming that socialism's political relevance required that it come to terms with economic liberalism was daring enough. But Foucault, in 1979, upped the ante: far from inaugurating a new form of fascism, as some leftist intellectuals were suggesting, neoliberalism, he maintained, should be seen as a distinctly nondisciplinary form of power. To make his case, he turned to the Chicago

---

97 Foucault, "Mon Corps, ce papier, ce feu," in *idem*, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, *1970–1975*, ed. D. Defert, F. Ewald, and J. Lagrange (Paris, 1994), esp. 267–8.

98 Quoted in Moreau, "Le Congrès d'Epinay", 95.

99 D. Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (Paris, 1991), 325–6.

School. No doubt surprising his listeners with his sudden interest in economic policy, Foucault explained the provisions of the so-called "negative tax," an idea explored in the early sixties by the Chicago economist Milton Friedman (a guru of the Thatcher and Reagan revolutions), which had also sparked interest in France when the liberal economist Lionel Stoléru endorsed it in a noted essay published in 1974.[100] The negative tax seeks to streamline costly social-service bureaucracies and to eliminate work disincentives created by certain welfare programs. With the negative tax, the government no longer worries about guaranteeing that only the deserving poor receive assistance. The sole criteria for defining poverty, and the only level at which the state intervenes to reduce it, is income. Rich and poor alike file tax returns; however, those whose income falls below a particular threshold receive a cash handout inversely proportional to their means, rather than paying a portion of their income in taxes. What intrigued Foucault about this idea (enacted in the United States as the "earned income tax credit" in 1975, and in France as "le prime pour l'emploi" in 2001) is that it broke with the tendency of the modern welfare state to link payouts to behavior. Eliminating the long-standing distinction between the "good" and the "bad" poor, the negative tax is supremely indifferent to the spending choices and work habits of its recipients. What matters is solely that they be guaranteed an income that allows them to be players in the economic game.[101] All of which suggests, Foucault maintained, that capitalism has entered a new era. Compared to the *dirigiste* policies of the postwar years, neoliberalism of the Chicago variety is "much less bureaucratic," and "much less disciplinary" (*disciplinariste*)[102]—which, coming from Foucault, was no mean compliment.

American neoliberalism's nondisciplinary implications were perhaps even more apparent in its approach to a question that had long been one of Foucault's deepest concerns: that of crime and punishment. For neoliberalism jettisons the oppressive moral categories characteristic of discourses on crime. The Chicago economist Gary Becker, for instance, demonstrates that to understand criminal behavior, there is no need to define crime as anything more than any individual action that incurs the risk of punishment. The criteria of good and evil, normal and abnormal, and even of legal and illegal can be happily dispensed with. Discussing models that explain how market mechanisms might regulate drug use more effectively than law enforcement, Foucault marvels that, with these approaches, the criminal undergoes an "anthropological erasure."[103] Furthermore, rather than nursing the fantasy of a crime-proof society, the

---

100 L. Stoléru, *Vaincre la Pauvreté dans les pays riches* (Paris, 1974).

101 Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique,* 210–11.

102 Ibid., 213.

103 Ibid., 264.

Chicago School advises that it is more useful for a society to calculate how much crime and punishment it can afford. In his concluding remarks about the Chicago School, Foucault presents neoliberalism as an almost providential alternative to the repressive disciplinary model of society:

> what appears [in American neoliberalism] is not at all the ideal or the project of an exhaustively disciplinary society in which the legal network encircling individuals would be relayed and prolonged from within by mechanisms that are, let us say, normative. Nor is it a society in which the mechanism of general normalization and of the exclusion of the non-normalizable would be required. One has, on the contrary . . . the image or the idea or a programmatic theme of a society in which there would be an optimization of the system of differences, in which the field would be open to oscillating processes, in which there would be a tolerance accorded to individuals and to minority practices, and in which not the players of the game, but the rules of the game would be acted upon, and at last in which there would not be an intervention of the kind that internally subjugates individuals, but an intervention of the environmental kind.[104]

Openness to "differences," "tolerance" of individuals and minority practices, restraint in the practice of subjugation: these are not words that we customarily associate with Foucault's vision of political modernity. That he used them in 1979 to describe the course of power relations in modern societies reveals just how much his understanding of politics had evolved since the publication of *Discipline and Punish* four years earlier.

CONCLUSION

Foucault's 1979 lectures, I have argued, should be read as a strategic endorsement of economic liberalism. Three reasons explain his decision. In the first place, the intellectual, political, and economic factors that contributed to the rehabilitation of economic liberalism in France during the 1970s allowed Foucault to recognize its affinities with his nonjuridical theory of power. In the process, he ultimately revised the hypothesis of *Discipline and Punish*, arguing rather that the paradigmatic form of modern power is not discipline, which governs individuals by regulating their bodies, but the far less intrusive technique of population management that he dubbed biopower. Because biopower requires the state to step back and defer to spontaneous human interaction (even if it recognizes that the state must occasionally nudge these forces in particular directions), biopower paves the way for economic liberalism. Second, while many intellectuals were weaning themselves off Marxism through a newfound admiration for political liberalism, Foucault, who remained constitutionally allergic to that philosophy's

---

[104] Ibid., 265.

humanistic underpinnings, turned instead to economic liberalism—precisely because he appreciated the thinness of its anthropological claims. Third, Foucault believed that the chief problem of the contemporary French left was its inability to make the leap from ideology to governmentality: only by reconciling itself with neoliberalism, he contended, could it endow itself with the tools needed to wield power.

What emerges from Foucault's lectures on economic liberalism is, then, a different Foucault—at the very least, one considerably at odds with the Foucault that has been so vehemently debated by the American academy. Rather than a philosopher who explores the marginalized and excluded in order to challenge the pretenses of dominant epistemological and discursive systems, we find a Foucault intrigued with the ways in which a particular discursive framework—one that at the time was aspiring to hegemony—might accommodate difference and minority practices. As I have argued, we risk being tone deaf to this Foucault when we fail to grasp the context in which his words were uttered. Indeed, the shift in Foucault's thought from "discipline" (into which one might incorporate, in addition to his 1975 work, his studies of the 1960s) to "biopower" (as exemplified by economic liberalism) corresponds in many respects to a broader transformation in French society: from the full-employment, *dirigiste* model of the postwar era to the globalized—and precarious—order born in the 1970s. Hence the danger of too readily pinning on Foucault those labels that American conventional wisdom uses to identify him—"postmodernism," "post-structuralism," or "French theory." These terms are not, of course, devoid of content: insofar as they refer, in Foucault's case, to his philosophical antihumanism, his suspicion of anthropological claims, and his nonjuridical conception of power, they have their use. But too often, these labels have become associated with forms of academic discourse and politics that, amongst other shortcomings, are almost constitutively incapable of articulating why a thinker whom its adherents hail as pathbreaking could find himself, in the late 1970s, impressed with a way of thinking destined to become as closely tied to the prevailing global order as economic liberalism. As Foucault scholasticism and postmodernism's more vulgar iterations slowly lose their purchase, the time has perhaps come to situate Foucault's true significance in the deeper historical shifts to which his thought testifies, rather than the intellectual rebellion that he is presumed to have led.