

Comment on Nancy Fraser: Rereading Foucault in the Shadow of Globalization

Thomas Lemke

Nancy Fraser's interpretation of Foucault as theorist of fordist discipline is surprising for at least two reasons. First, Foucault clearly wrote not only about power and discipline, but also about different experiences, discourses, episteme, and technologies of the self – all central concepts at different points of his theoretical work. Moreover, his historical analyses concentrated on an era that came long before fordism: aside from his last works, Foucault's investigations were confined to the period from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, the thesis can of course be supported that fordism is a kind of inner reference point of Foucauldian theory. A number of examples and good arguments can be brought forth for this. Nancy Fraser has presented some of them. I do not wish to arouse the impression here of having at my disposal the one and only correct interpretation of Foucault, against which to juxtapose the one suggested by Fraser. This would in the end be a tedious endeavor. The question that interests me here is rather, which reading of Foucault opens up his ideas for the analysis of contemporary social and political transformations? Which theoretical instruments from his much-cited toolkit can still be used to explain present forms of domination and exploitation? In my view this is not a matter of a philological search for Foucault's correct theory, but rather of a political critique or, in Foucault's own words, of a "new politics of truth".¹

Here I come to the second point – or, better, the second reason – why Fraser's characterization of Foucault as theorist of fordism surprised me. When we abandon the question

of right or wrong readings of the texts and look at their contemporary reception it becomes clear that in philosophy and the social sciences today Foucault is certainly not looked upon as a theorist of disciplinary power. On the contrary, he is rather viewed as someone who pointed out its historical peculiarities and limits. Recourse to Foucault here serves most often to grasp the new, which is why such decisive importance is attached to forms of theorizing and concepts Foucault proposed. Whether we take Giorgio Agamben's critical continuation of the concept of biopolitics, Gilles Deleuze's sketch of the society of control, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's analysis of "Empire," or the governmentality debate in Anglo-Saxon sociology and political science – to name but a few – the reference to Foucault seems to be fruitful precisely for the analysis of contemporary postfordist or neoliberal strategies of control.ⁱⁱ

But perhaps – and this is how I understand Fraser, and where I see the main significance of her argument – this reference, this recourse to Foucault's categories, is the expression of a certain predicament, a theoretical weakness, or helplessness that is anything but individual. Fraser has spoken in another context of a "postsocialist condition"ⁱⁱⁱ characterized by a weak and sceptical left, the departure from class politics and the failure of progressive visions that could represent alternatives to the contemporary order. In this respect, the recourse to Foucault's work would rather be a symptom of political and intellectual crisis as a contribution to its solution.

Already at the beginning of the 1980s, Fraser was one of the first to call attention to a characteristic tension in Foucault's work which she referred to briefly once again in her lecture: the difference between empirical insights and normative problems in his theory.^{iv} Many others followed her in this assessment and seized on this difference – including such distinguished philosophers as Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer^v – but few have laid out Foucault's contradictions, paradoxes, and aporias as consistently as she has. At that time Fraser

came to the conclusion that Foucault's analyses are characterized by empirical richness and the appropriate description of the workings of modern mechanisms of power. Foucault's genealogy allows phenomena such as the family, sexuality, schools, or medicine to be analyzed as political phenomena and enables an analytical view of the microphysical and everyday meaning of processes of power. These empirical advantages, however, stand against a lack of normative clarity. Already at the beginning of the 1980s, Fraser saw this as a principled rejection, or at least a neglecting of normative questions. For her, this position was not legitimate, since Foucault could neither explain nor justify his implicit normative standards (e.g., that discipline is 'bad' or domination should be condemned). With this step, according to Fraser, effective critique is impossible.

I take it from her lecture that she has now changed her position. While she still speaks of a tension between appropriate empirical description and a deficit of normative critique, she now seems to have modified her position in one respect: whereas she previously emphasized the normative deficit in Foucault's theory, today she regards the empirical relevance of his texts more critically than she did twenty years ago. To repeat her central thesis in very abridged form: Foucault was an important theorist of fordism who lived and worked at the height of the Keynesian welfare state. This decisively stamped his analyses of disciplinary society. Today, under a postfordist regime, these analyses have in large part lost their empirical power and acuity. Phenomena such as globalization, flexibilization, and deregulation can no longer or only insufficiently be grasped starting from Foucault. In a sentence: the work of Michel Foucault the historian should itself be historicized; we must pursue a genealogy of genealogy.

To be sure, this program possesses a considerable attractiveness. Fraser apparently takes up Foucault's own methodological intuitions and continues along the theoretical path he had

broken. Is she not being faithful to him precisely by pointing out the historical and political limits of his theory? And does she not go with Foucault beyond Foucault, even if or precisely because the result of her genealogy shows that Foucault is “outdated”? According to Fraser, Foucault’s “history of the present” belongs more to history than to the present. But she can only arrive at this finding by altering the concept of genealogy itself. While Foucault’s appeal to history always served to point out its contemporaneity and his genealogy could make it plausible to us that Bentham’s Panopticon, the early-modern establishment of the police, and the ancient techniques of the self have something to do with us here and now, Fraser sees genealogy in Foucault’s texts above all as documents of a finished and past epoch that are only of interest for the history of theory.

But is Nancy Fraser right to conclude that Foucault’s texts have nothing more to do with us? Does he belong to that category of classics that have been sufficiently and conclusively interpreted, explicated, and mapped, that can communicate nothing new and certainly nothing surprising to us? By way of anticipation: I do not share this opinion. But allow me to explain this by going more precisely into Nancy Fraser’s double critique that Foucault’s work is normatively lacking and empirically overtaken. I will only go into the first point very briefly – it was mentioned in the lecture only in passing – and then I will come to the question of the empirical significance of Foucault’s work for the analysis of contemporary political and social transformations.

1. Performative Contradictions

Fraser repeats her reproach that Foucault does not identify the normative basis on which his critique could be based. This critique is only too justified! But that is precisely the problem: it is

only justified and it is *too* justified. It concentrates on the question of right and justification, on norms and normativity. It thereby misses the decisive and characteristic feature of Foucault's work. For Foucault norms themselves are part of the historical field under investigation and not outside it; they are less the measure or starting point than an object of analysis and the outcome of a conflict. Norms are not something laid out in advance of political struggles that guide and govern them; rather they are constituted in struggles, are a part of them and a stake in them.

The supposed deficit and ostensible weakness that is always deplored as the lack of normative criteria in Foucault's work thus turns out to be its richness and strength. When Fraser and many others point to paradoxes and contradictions in Foucault's work, they take them to be signs of a deficit: a lack of coherence, an incompatibility between theory and practice, a disintegration of leftist political engagement and nihilistic or positivistic thinking. But these contradictions and paradoxes do serve a very important strategic purpose since they allow to articulate a critique of the juridical discourse on a theoretical level. Foucault's work produces paradoxa since it struggles against *doxa*, it seeks to place in question orthodoxies of political thought and leftist critique. It is contradictory since it contradicts dominant forms of critique that itself function as a constraint for imagining political alternatives.^{vi} The reactions on Foucault's rejection of normative criteria for founding critique show the compulsion that binds each political intervention to a proof of justification, to a norm of identity or, in his own words, a "test of legitimacy."^{vii} Foucault tried to make this compulsion visible and felt, it was for him a matter of putting in question a theoretical practice that calls upon us to take a position in an already fixed political system. Against this, Foucault wanted to contribute to "a new idea of politics"^{viii} to emerge that allows to "to image and to bring into existence new schemas of politicisation".^{ix}

It was Foucault's intention to problematize a particular disciplinary regime, or – perhaps

in more contemporary terms – a certain kind of quality management that determines how critique is ‘correctly’ conducted in order to establish itself as ‘true’ critique, what tests have to be passed in order to be really critical and not merely affirmative. Let us say that for him this was a matter of de-juridifying and de-disciplining critique: “Critique doesn’t have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes: this then is what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those you fight, those who resist and refuse what is. [...] It doesn’t have to lay down the law for the law. It isn’t a stage in a programming. It s a challenge directed to what is.”^x

2. Discipline, Postfordism and Governmentality

Let’s now turn to the second aspect of Nancy Fraser’s lecture: the empirical relevance of Foucault’s analyses. Fraser claims that Foucault is a theorist of fordist discipline which according to her, dominated the so-called “short twentieth century,” the time from the First World War to the end of actually existing socialism. This is at least an unusual reading which diverges from the historical and social scientific literature. Generally ‘fordism’ designates a capitalist formation that arose in the aftermath of world war I. and the world economic crisis first in the USA, and later also in some European states. This form of regulation is distinguished by the characteristics Fraser points out, but the dynamics of the fordist mode of accumulation – and this is decisive here – already began to show signs of breaking down in the middle of the 1970s (and not with the fall of actually existing socialism at the end of the eighties). The discussion of a new, postfordist mode of regulation and regime of accumulation set in long before 1989^{xi} and – according to my argument – Foucault was not only a contemporary of this transformation but also conscious of the end of a historical formation. In an interview in 1978 that was published

under the title *The crisis of disciplinary society* he explained that it seems to be “obvious that we have to say good-bye to the disciplinary society such as it exists today”.^{xii}

Foucault possessed a sensitivity for the growing fragility of the old formation, and perhaps it is not claiming too much to see a relation between the political and social upheavals and a “theoretical displacement.”^{xiii} in Foucault’s theory that extends to a form of explicit self-critique. In any case, Foucault recognized the inadequacy or at least the limitedness of his analyses that in the first half of the seventies were in fact oriented toward discipline as the dominant technique of power. From the middle of the seventies – and thus precisely from the time when the first clear tears appeared in the fordist model of regulation – we can observe a growing theoretical distancing from the disciplinary model, which now appears to Foucault as a peculiarly “uneconomic” and “archaic” form of power.^{xiv} Complementing this movement of theoretical displacement, there arises a new problematic that centers on the concept of government.

Indeed, it seems to me that behind the present economic crisis and the large antagonisms and conflicts that are becoming visible between rich and poor nations, looms a crisis of government. By government I understand the totality of institutions and practices, means by which one rules people, from administration to education. This totality of procedures, techniques, methods – which guarantees the rule of people under one another – seems to me today to have come into a crisis.... Perhaps we stand at the beginning of a large, stormy reassessment of the problem of government.^{xv}

Foucault uses the concept of government in a comprehensive sense geared strongly to the older meaning. It refers to an art of directing people and includes the interaction of forms of knowledge, strategies of power, and modes of subjectification. With the neologism “governmentality”, Foucault designated the distinct rationalities, forms of conduct, and fields of practice that aimed in diverse ways at the control of individuals and collectivities and likewise

included forms of self-conduct like techniques of directing others.^{xvi} As a consequence, Foucault expanded his microphysics of power to social macrostructures and the phenomenon of the state. He also became interested in forms of subjectification beyond disciplinary subjection. With this analytics of government, Foucault established a theoretical connection to a tradition within French Marxism which approached the state less as a fixed institutional ensemble or a bureaucratic apparatus than as the “condensation of social relations of power” in Nicos Poulantzas’s formulation or “ideological state apparatuses” in Louis Althusser’s.^{xvii}

The state, which until then had represented a negative reference point in his theory, now became a central object of his analyses. Already in *The Will to Know* Foucault speaks of two registers of biopower: the disciplining of the individual body was placed alongside the regulation of the body of the population. He went further still in his 1978 and 1979 lectures at the Collège de France. Foucault’s “Governmentalization of the State”^{xviii} investigates the transformations of technologies of power and their concentration and centralization in the form of the modern state. At the conclusion of the lecture series, he develops an analysis of neoliberal discourses and programs, the political actuality and social relevance of which he pointed out before the election of Thatcher and Reagan. Especially in the work of the Chicago School he saw the attempt to develop a new political rationality that, beyond the critique of the welfare state, aimed to extend the economic form to the social.^{xix}

Of course Foucault’s analytic of governmentality was more a fragmentary outline than a finished, worked-out theory. Its realization is unsystematic, and the largest part of it is to be found in still unpublished lectures. Nevertheless, an analytical perspective is sketched here that could be of great critical interest for us even today. Allow me in conclusion and only in a few words to explain why I find the concept of governmentality helpful in grasping contemporary

processes of transformation.^{xx}

3. Neoliberalism as a Political Rationality

First, unlike how Nancy Fraser takes it, Foucault's analysis is not fixated on the nation-state or limited to the fordist mode of regulation. To the contrary, for Foucault the state itself is a "technology of government"; since it is "the tactics of government which make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not, the public versus the private, and so on, thus the state can only be understood in its survival and its limits on the basis of the general tactics of governmentality."^{xxi} The perspective of governmentality makes possible the development of a dynamic form of analysis that does not limit itself to stating the "retreat of politics" or the "domination of the market" but deciphers the so-called "end of politics" itself as a political program. The crisis of Keynesianism and the dismantling of welfare-state forms of intervention lead less to a loss of the state's capacity to govern than to a reorganization or restructuring of technologies of government. This theoretical stance allows for a more complex analysis of neo-liberal forms of government that feature not only direct intervention by means of empowered and specialized state apparatuses, but also characteristically develop indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals. The strategy of rendering individual subjects "responsible" (and also collectives, such as families, associations, etc.) entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc. and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of "self-care". This form of individualization is therefore nothing that would be outside the state. Likewise, the differences between the state and civil society, national regulation and transnational agencies do not represent the basis and limits

of practices of government, but rather functions as their elements and effects.

With this I come to the second point. Foucault understood neoliberal technologies of government as a transformation of the social rather than as its end. The concept of governmentality allows to call attention to the constitution of new political forms and levels of the state such as the introduction of systems of negotiation, mechanisms of self-organization, and empowerment strategies. At the same time, this theoretical perspective can grasp the rearticulation of identities and subjectivities. It focuses not only on the integral link between micro- and macro-political levels (e.g. the call for “lean” collective bodies and institutions and personal imperatives as regards beauty or a regimented diet), it also highlights the intimate relationship between "ideological" and "political-economic" agencies (e.g. the semantics of flexibility and the introduction of new structures of production). This enables us to shed sharper light on the effects neo-liberal governmentality has in terms of (self-)regulation and domination. These effects entail not just the simple reproduction of existing social asymmetries or their ideological obfuscation, but are the product of a re-coding of social mechanisms of exploitation and domination on the basis of a new topography of the social domain.

The third point: on the basis of the concept of governmentality it can also be shown that privatization and deregulation do not follow economic imperatives so much as political strategies. Paradoxically, the critique of neoliberalism itself most often falls back on economic models of argumentation. The concept of governmentality proves to be useful in correcting the diagnosis of neoliberalism as an expansion of economy in politics, that takes for granted the separation of state and market. The argument goes that there is some “pure” or “anarchic” economy that has to be “regulated” or “civilised” by a political reaction of society. Marx in his critique of political economy already demonstrated that such a position is untenable. Foucault’s

“critique of political reason”^{xxiii} takes up the lines of this tradition. The transformation of the relations of economics and politics are therefore not be investigated as the result of objective economic laws, but from the perspective of a transformation of social power relations. In short, instead of the power of the economy, the analytic of governmentality returns the focus to the “economy of power”.

To conclude, Fraser’s claim that Foucault was “the great theorist of the fordist discipline” seems to somehow disciplining Foucault’s analytic of power and excludes major aspects of his work. If we are willing to take up and pursue his work on governmentality it might prove far more “flexible” and “just-in-time” Fraser assumes. Perhaps Foucault’s “untimeliness” lay in the fact that he sought answers for questions we are only discovering today.

NOTES

ⁱ Michel Foucault, *Essential Works III: Power*, New York: The New Press 2000, p. 133.

ⁱⁱ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998. Gilles Deleuze, *Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle*, in: Deleuze, *Pourparler*, Paris: Minuit 1990. Michael Hardt/Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press 2000. Graham Burchell/Colin Gordon/Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Hemel Hempstead 1991; Andrew Barry/Thomas Osborne/Nikolas Rose (eds.), *Foucault and political reason. Liberalism, neo-liberalism and rationalities of government*, London 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist”-Condition*, New York and London: Routledge 1997.

^{iv} Nancy Fraser, *Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions*, in: *Praxis International*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1981, pp. 272-287.

^v Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1987; Charles Taylor, *Foucault on freedom and truth*, in: *Political Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1984, pp. 152-183; Michael Walzer, *The Politics of Michel Foucault*, in: D. Hoy (ed.), *Foucault. A Critical Reader*, Oxford 1986, pp. 51-68.

^{vi} Tom Keenan, *The ‘Paradox’ of Knowledge and Power: Reading Foucault on a bias*, in: *Political Theory*, Vol. 15, No.1, 1987, pp. 5-37.

^{vii} Michel Foucault, *Was ist Kritik?* Berlin: Merve 1992, p. 30. [“What is Critique?” S. 30.]

^{viii} Michel Foucault, *Gespräch zwischen Yoshimoto Takaaki und Michel Foucault in Tokyo 1978*, in: *kultuRRevolution*, Nr. 22, 1990, p. 10.

^{ix} Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, New York: Pantheon Books 1980, p. 190.

^x Michel Foucault, *Questions of Method*, in: Burchell, Graham/Gordon, Colin/Miller, Peter (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1991, pp. 73-86, p. 84

^{xi} See Michel Aglietta: *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation*. London: New Left Books 1979; Joachim Hirsch/Roland Roth, *Das neue Gesicht des Kapitalismus. Vom Fordismus zum Post-Fordismus*, Hamburg: VSA 1986

^{xii} Michel Foucault, *La société disciplinaire en crise*, in: *Dits et Ecrits IV*, Paris : Gallimard 1994, p. 533.

To preclude a possible misunderstanding: According to Foucault, discipline is a technology of power that works in very different social formations and historical epochs. He concentrated in his texts on the analysis of processes of disciplination from the 17th to the 19th century, but also stressed their importance for fascist, “actually existing socialist” and liberal-democratic regimes in the 20th century. In this perspective there is no absolute break between disciplinary and post-disciplinary societies and the transition to postfordism does by no means imply a disappearance of disciplinary forms of regulation. Rather we could see the contours of what might be called a “disciplinary neoliberalism” (Stephen Gill, *The Global Panopticum? The Neoliberal State, Economic Life, and Democratic Surveillance*, in: *Alternatives*, Vol. 20, 1995, p. 1).

^{xiii} Michel Foucault, *Der Gebrauch der Lüste. Sexualität und Wahrheit*, Bd. 2, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p.. 12. [use of pleasure]

^{xiv} Michel Foucault, *La population* (transcript of the lecture at the Collège de France, 25th january 1978, edited by Stéphane Olivesi), in: *Mémoire de DEA de philosophie sous la direction de Monsieur P. Macherey*, Université de Paris I, Année 1991-1992, Paris 1992 (Foucault Archive: A 271), p. 32.

^{xv} Michel Foucault, *Der Mensch ist ein Erfahrungstier. Gespräch mit Ducio Trombadori*, Frankfurt am Main 1996, pp. 118-120. [Remarks on Marx]

^{xvi} For a detailed reconstruction of the problematics of government in Foucault’s work see Thomas Lemke, *Eine Kritik der politischen Vernunft – Foucaults Analyse der modernen Governmentalität*, Berlin/Hamburg: Argument 1997.

^{xvii} Nicos Poulantzas, *L’État, le Pouvoir, le Socialisme*, Paris: PUF 1977; Louis Althusser, *Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’État*, in: ders., *Positions*, Paris: Éditions sociales 1976, pp. 79-137.

^{xviii} Michel Foucault, *Governmentality*, in: Burchell, Graham/Gordon, Colin/Miller, Peter (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1991, pp. 87-104, p. 103.

^{xix} Thomas Lemke, „The Birth of Bio-Politics” – Michel Foucault’s Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality“, in: *Economy & Society*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2001, pp. 190-207

^{xx} For a more comprehensive argument see Thomas Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, in: *Rethinking Marxism*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (in print).

^{xxi} Michel Foucault, *Governmentality*, p. 103. See also Michel Foucault: *La phobie d’Etat* (excerpt from the lecture of 31st january 1979 at the Collège de France), in: *Libération*, no. 967, 30/31 june 1984, p. 21.

^{xxii} Michel Foucault, “*Omnes et Singulatim*”: Towards a Criticism of Political Reason, in: S. McMurin (ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press 1981.