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Structuralism, post-structuralism, neo-liberalism: assessing Foucault's legacy

Mark Olssen

This article traces Foucault's distinctive commitment to 'post-structuralism' through tracing the affinities and departures from structuralism. It is argued that under the infuence of Nietzsche, Foucault's approach marks a distinct break with structuralism in several crucial respects. What results is a materialist post-structuralism which is also distinctively different from the post-structuralism of writers such as Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrilliard. Foucault's account of neo-liberalism as an historically formed discourse is presented as an example of materialist post-structuralist analysis.

Foucault and structuralism

There are several reasons why Foucault's approach to social science can be termed '*post-structuralist*'. During the 1960s, structuralism constituted an obscure, although important and at times highly fashionable intellectual focus in the human sciences in France. For its precise derivation and history, one must go outside France, back to studies in the fields of linguistics, mythology and folklore carried on in the Soviet Union and central Europe in the years prior to the 1920s. In an interview with Duccio Trombadori in 1978, Foucault (2001: 262) recounts how the 'Stalinist steamroller . . . knocked to one side and even crushed' structuralist thought, effecting its uptake in France:

> Subsequently, structuralist thought came to circulate in France through networks that were more or less underground or, at any rate, little-known: think of Evgeni Trubetskoy's phonology, of Vladimir Propp's influence on Georges Dumézil and Claude Lévi-Stauss, and so on. So it seems to me that something like a historical knowledge that was unfamiliar to us was present in the aggressiveness with which certain French Marxists opposed to the structuralists of the sixties: structuralism has been the great cultural victim of Stalinism, a possibility that Marxism hadn't been able to face (Foucault 2001: 262).

In France in the 1960s, structuralism was essentially a doctrine about language which was also applied to other aspects of life and culture. The classical text of Structural Linguistics is the *Course of General Linguistics* by the Swiss linguist de Saussure (1959), compiled in 1916 by his students after his death. In de Saussure's view, the study of language was not through historical change in language, but through focusing synchronically on its underlying structures as part of a *system*.

Mark Olssen is Reader and Director of Doctoral Programmes, in the Department of Educational Studies, University of Surrey. He has published articles in the *Journal of Education Policy*, *The British Journal of Educational Studies*, *Educational Psychology*, and *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, and is a co-editor with Michael Peters and Colin Lankshear of *Critical Theory: Founders in Praxis* (Peter Lang 2002).

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Language formed a system because it belonged to individuals collectively, and constituted a social institution. de Saussure privileged spoken language and represented the system as made up of sounds and as having meaning. Hence, the sign is a set of sounds (a 'signifier') which has a meaning (a 'signified'). The signified was not the referent of the object, however, but rather the concept, or sense, which the sign expressed. Signs were 'arbitrary', in de Saussure's view, in that there was no necessary relation between a sign and its referent. Rather, signs were defined in relation to other signs. What characterizes a language then, is a *system of differences*, and the kinds of differences that a language embodies are central to the way that objects in reality are classified and categorized as the basis of common understanding in the society.

de Saussure's structuralist theory of language had its initial impact in Linguistics. In this discipline, structuralism had it formal beginnings in the *Thèses* presented by members of the Prague Linguistic Circle to the First International Conference on Slavic Philologists held in Prague in 1929. The *Thèses* introduced the concept of *structure* in a debate with traditional methods of the discipline which were seen as too concerned with linguistic origins and the study of isolated facts. It proposed language as a functional system to be understood in terms of its aim (communication). Structure was the structure of a system, the way in which the parts were dependent upon the whole, and where the parts could only be understood in relation to the structure. In this, as de Saussure (1959: 87) put it, it concerns the 'laws of solidarity' and 'reciprocal relations' of the parts, rather than considering them in isolation.

de Saussure's structuralist theory of language was to have a marked influence across the disciplines, in subjects as diverse as physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, economics, as well as nearly all of the human sciences (Robey 1973: 2). In Anthropology, Levi-Strauss saw in it a way of classifying and understanding the differences between cultures. In psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan related structures of conscious thought to structures of the unconscious, representing the subject not as something transparent and accessible to consciousness, á la Descartes, but as something constructed in language. And, in Marxist theory, Louis Althusser extended a structuralist method to an anti-Hegelian reinterpretation of the role of the economic in Marxism, and to understanding the role of science in capitalist society. Althusser theorized individual action simply as the trace (*traeger*) of system forces. Systems of signification, like the structures of the economy, were structural forms independent of human action. Change was due to the reciprocal and interacting effects of the different practices (economic, political, ideological, scientific) that made up the social formation, which Althusser explained through the concept of *overdetermination* (an early non-linear, structuralist version of complexity theory of change).

The adoption of a structuralist approach, whatever the discipline, carried some important philosophical implications. First, it dispensed with the 'correspondence' theory of language or truth which saw them as representing reality as a transparent reflection (or expression) of the real. Rather than categories and concepts taking their origins and meaning from the nature of the world, they were determined by the nature of language, as well as the contingent historical factors that shaped language. Rather than there being any one-to-one correspondence between mind and world, the structures of the language determine the types of categorizations and distinctions made between objects and value systems. The words and concepts that were used are not determined by the objects of the material world, but operate, and derive their differentiation, solely in relation to the system of language. With refinements, modifications and exensions of de Saussure's semiotics by Benveniste,

Jakobson, Hjelmslev, Greimas, Prieto, and others, semiotics advances a theory of language as completely hermetically sealed in its separation from the world. As Harland (1987: 91) expresses the point: 'an original methodological decision to exclude the outside world (explicit in Benveniste and Hjelmslev) gradually turns into a general philosophical principle of unlimited scope'.

A second implication of structural linguistics was that it rejected the Cartesian conception of the subject as an intrinsically rational being, as well as Kantian notions of a transcendental subject. Rather, thought is something empirically learned by the human subject through coming to understand the cultural basis of meaning. If thinking requires language, and language is learned, then the investigation of thought, truth and consciousness implicates the human sciences. This was the legacy of structural linguistics that influenced the increasing popularity of structuralism throughout the disciplines from the middle of the 20th century.

Foucault's rejection of structuralism

There can be little doubt that Foucault was more influenced by structural linguistics in his work written in the 1960s, and less so in his genealogical studies of the 1970s and beyond. Whether the influence was ever great enough to warrant calling Foucault a 'structuralist' is far more doubtful, however, and my answer is that there is not. There were various perceptions by commenators in the 1960s and 1970s that linked Foucault to structuralism, either directly or indirectly. Partly, this attachment to structuralism was reinforced because of a general tendency in polemics to identify as structuralist those writers that stood opposed to a philosophy of the subject. Whereas Sartre and Merleau-Ponty had been concerned with meaning, experience, the human subject and a philosophy of consciousness, Foucault was generally associated with those writers such as Cavaillès, Bachelard, Canguilhem and Althusser who advocated a philosophy of the system, of concepts and of structures. It was associations like this that led to Foucault being represented as a structuralist, as in the cartoon by Maurice Henri which portrayed a structuralist *déjeuner sur l'herbe*, comprising Foucault, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss and Barthes seated on a lawn wearing grass skirts. Macey (1993: 199) also reports how Gérard Fellous, in his introduction to the *La Presse* interview, describes Foucault's project as 'the Bible of structuralism'. Although arguably not an accurate description, even relating to the works written and published prior to 1970,[1] there was at this time a pre-eminent concern with what was essentially the synchronic method of archaeology aimed as it was at enunciating the *rules for the formation of discourse*, as materially embodied in the statement (*énoncé*). Throughout his early period, too, Foucault was concerned above all to abolish or transcend the idea of a sovereign rational subject, a concern that he shared with the structuralists. There were other affinities well. As became apparent in his lectures in *Dits et écrits* (Foucault 1994a), certain aspects of structural linguistics became central to understanding the nature of his analysis. One aspect was in relation to his conception to causality. Traditionally, the rationality of analytic reason has been concerned with causality in a linear (Humean) sense. In structural linguistics, however, the concern is not with causality, but with revealing multiple relations which, in his 1969 article 'Linguistique et sciences sociales', Foucault (1994b: 824) calls 'logical relations'. Here, Foucault speaks of the 'presence of a logic that is not the logic of causal determinism that is currently at the heart of philosophical and theoretical debates'.

Structural methodology helped Focault avoid both methodological individualism and a linear sense of causal determinism. Such a theoretical framework serves the purpose of enabling the study of social reality as a *structure*, or set of relations among elements, whereby change is analysed holistically. Just as linguistics undertakes a synchronic analysis seeking to trace the necessary conditions for an element within the structure of language to undergo change, a similar synchronic analysis applied to social life asks the question, in order for a change to occur, what other changes must also take place in the overall texture of the social configuration (Foucault 1994b: 827). Such a method helps him challenge Marxism, whch is concerned with a narrow linear conception of causality (*un causalisme primaire*) and enables him to advance a non-reductive and holist analysis of social life. As Davidson (1997: 11) expresses the point, in noting Foucault's dependence on structural linguistics, 'this kind of analysis is characterized, first, by anti-atomism, by the idea that we should not analyse single or individual elements in isolation but that one must look at the systematic relations among elements; second, it is characterized by the idea that the relations beween elements are coherent and transformable, that is, that the elements form a structure'. Adding to these methodological similarities his theoretical anti-humanism and his recognition of the discourse as a rule-governed set of statements as the fundamental unit of analysis reveal a consistent set of affinities between Foucault and those writers – de Saussure, Barthes, Lévi-Strauss or Althusser – commonly seen as 'structuralists proper'.

Yet, Foucault consistently denied being a structuralist. As he stated in the 'Foreword' to the English translation of *The Order of Things*: 'In France, certain half-witted ''commentators'' persist in labeling me a ''structuralist''. I have been unable to get into their tiny minds that I have used none of the methods, concepts, or key terms that characterize structural analysis'. While he perhaps tellingly goes on to accept that 'there may well be similarities between the works of the structuralists and my own work' (Foucault 1970: xiv), in retrospect one can distinguish several major emphases that Foucault clearly rejected within the structuralist *ouvre*, and, therefore, justify the label '*post*-structuralist'.

First, Foucault rejected the notion central to structuralism as a system of *universal rules* or *laws* or *elementary structures* that underpinned history and explained it in surface appearances. This was clearly associated with structuralists such as de Saussure, Barthes (at least in his early work) and Lévi-Strauss whose work demonstrated adherence to the notion that there was one original structure which was both universal and ahistorical. In this sense, the post-structuralist, as opposed to the structuralist approach, assumes that the regularities identified are not the same in all historical periods and in all cultures, but rather are specific to particular times and places. As a consequence of this, Foucault also rejected the structuralist and Marxist utilization of topographical or architectural metaphors between depth/surface, or base/superstructure, in preference for an approach which focused at the level of the micro-practices of lived experience.

In Lévi-Strauss's work, as Descombes (1994: 115) notes, structures are variously presented in terms of 'three metaphysical statuses': as '*natural causes*', i.e. 'as mechanisms which generate phenomena'; as '*laws of spirit*', i.e. 'as constants which the observation of cultural phenomena helps us to decern'; and as '*ideal rules*', i.e. 'intellectual models which agents could not follow if they did not have some understanding of them'. In Descombes (1994: 115) view, structuralist theory has been guilty of 'not siding decisively among these metaphysical options'. For Foucault, however, to

suggest, as all three conceptions do, some ahistorical groundplan to history, back to which appearances are explained and related – a core dimension of the structuralist perspective *in toto* – was always unacceptable.

Secondly, relatedly, Foucault always stood opposed to a marked tendency amongst structuralist writers to *prioritising* the structure over the parts, or the *pre-existence* of the whole over the parts, whereby the units can be explained once the *essence* of the structure is uncovered. This was again the case for structuralists like de Saussure, Barthes, Lévi-Strauss and Althusser, as well as for the sociologist, Durkheim, and the philosopher, Hegel. For Althusser, the economic mode of production 'explained', albeit 'ultimately' and 'in the last instance', the particular functions of the Repressive State Apparatuses as well as the ideological State Apparatuses. Similarly, for Lévi-Strauss (1969: 100), human institutions were:

> Structures whose whole – in other words the regulating principle – can be given before the parts, that is, that complex union which makes up the institution, its terminology, consequences and implications, the customs through which it is expressed and the beliefs to which it gives rise.

Hence, although Foucault's conception of structural causality was arguably influenced by, and shows similarities to, certain features of a model of change adopted by Structural Linguistics, namely its holistic, non-atomist and non-linear conception of change, there is no representation of the structure or whole as *integrative* of the entire social formation, or as constraining the system of differences. This constitutes the essence of Foucault's *pluralism*, a principle on which he differed explicitly from writers like Althusser, but also from the whole structuralist tradition. As Foucault (1978: 10) points out:

> Nothing, you see, is more foreign to me than the quest for a sovereign, unique and constraining form. I do not seek to detect, starting from diverse signs, the unitary spirit of an epoch, the general form of its consciousness: something like a *Weltanschauung*. Nor have I described either the emergence and eclipse of formal structure which might reign for a time over all the manifestations of thought: I have not written the history of a syncopated transcendental. Nor, finally, have I described thoughts or century-old sensitivities coming to life, stuttering, struggling and dying out like great phantoms – ghosts playing out their shadow against the backdrop of history. I have studied, one after another, ensembles of discourse; I have characterized them; I have defined the play of rules, of transformations, of thresholds, of remanences. I have established and I have described their clusters of relations. Whenever I have deemed it necessary I have allowed the *systems* to proliferate.

Thirdly, clearly apparent in Foucault's perceptions of the limits of structuralism was a failure to theorise adequately the *historicity* of structures. Amongst structuralists like de Saussure, Barthes and Lévi-Strauss there was little sense of history, which is to say they privileged *synchrony* over *diachrony* in analysis. For Lévi-Strauss, indeed, the search for universal structures was a direct challenge to the established disciplinary concern with evolutionary historical development.

In retrospect, one can see that even when Foucault's methodological focus privileged archaeology, it was within the context of historically constituted *epistemes* and the difference of his position to structuralism was already manifest in relation to several key dimensions. The dissociation became more apparent after Foucault's turn to genealogy and Nietzsche at the close of the 1960s, wich led to an emphasis on history and power and led him to play down the importance of 'archaeology' and its concern with the purely formal (and more 'structuralist') analysis of discourse. With the turn towards genealogy, Foucault became more concerned with power and history, and the historical constitution of knowledge. In this process, there is, however, no *integrative* principle and no *essence*. If the genealogist studies history:

> he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms (Foucault 1977a: 142).

Foucault's materialist post-structuralism

Foucault's concentration on power signals an added and distincive character to his post-structuralism in comparison to writers like Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrilliard. In this, as has been maintained before (Olssen 1995, 1996, 1999), Foucault post-structuralism is a more materialist conception, rejecting the priority of the signifier and its over-emphasis in relation to the signified, and the failure to contextualize both signifier and signified in the context of the pre-discursive. Meaning is not produced through the free play of signifiers alone, but signification is effected by power. The material substance of the expression is the statement, *énoncé*, which serves as a mechanism constraining signification, which in turn is effected by social and historical context, and within such a context, by power. Unlike for de Saussure, and I would argue for Lyotard, Derrida, Kristeva and Baudrilliard, culture for Foucault, as for his fellow Nietzscheans, Deleuze and Guattari, is not simply a system of signification but a system of material and discursive articulation. In this, genealogy puts an emphasis on *power* rather than knowledge and *practices* rather than language. As Foucault (1980: 114) says: 'one's point of reference should not be the great model of language (*langue*) and signs, but to that of war and battle'. For this he introduces the concept of 'apparatus':

> what I call an apparatus is a much more general case of the *episteme*; or rather . . . the *episteme* is a specifically *discursive* apparatus, whereas the apparatus in its general form is both discursive and non-discursive, its elements being much more heterogeneous (Foucault 1980: 197).

Foucault's utilization of Nietzsche also differentiates him from Derrida's post-structuralism in relation to the focus on the body, as opposed to the signifier. The relationship beween power and bodies operates as both power *over* bodies, and the power *of* bodies, the latter operating through Will and Desire, whereby Foucault discovers a force not determined by epistemic frameworks, and where the 'historical *a priori*' of discourse is underpinned by a more primary reality, which explains it. The post-structuralism of Foucault is, thus, not concerned with language, but with politics.

Expressed in terms of semiology, Foucault would reject de Saussure's system of the sign as the unity of signifier and signified, in that it suggests a one-to-one exchange relationship between signifier and signified, privileging ideas, concepts and communication over the world. In such a model, as Bakhtin (1981), Pierce (1931) and Eco (1976) also maintained, expressive symbols are explained in a theory that privileges cognitive thought processes over the objective world, which is, in turn, seen as dependent and ancillary to an autonomous realm of social interaction and communication. As Gottdiener (1995: 69) points out, such accounts of semiotics have a limited grasp of the symbolic role of material culture. Because semiotics de-emphasizes social context and privileges the synchronic study of culture, it fails to theorize the relations between social processes and material forms. This is something, as Gottdiemer notes, which Foucault avoids in that he recognizes the *énoncé* as the material element of discourse, and as constrained and effected by power and history. In this, Foucault allows for the duality of articulation between discourse and material forms as well as distin-

guishing between both the *discursive* and *pre-* or *extra-discursive* levels of reality. Gottdiener (1995: 70) cites Deleuze (1986: 124) who makes a similar point when he notes that:

> Foucault's general principle is that every form is a compound of relations between forces. Given these forces, our first question is with what forces from outside they enter into a relation, and then what form is created as a result.

In *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977b), for example, Foucault observes how punishment cannot be derived solely from the force of the discourse, for torture, machines and dungeons are material and have meaning because of the ideology of punishment. However, one cannot derive the resultant forms solely from the discourse or the law, although they are clearly related. Rather, the social forms of discipline and punishment represent a synthetic and relatively autonomous compound of knowledge and technique and material objects. The developments of the prison, the clinic and the mental asylum are, thus, the outcomes of this multiple articulation. Foucault can be distinguished in this from other post-structuralist and post-modern writers, such as Baudrilliard and Derrida, who as Gottdiener (1995: 73) says 'have ignored the interrogation of material forms' in the same way as western sociologies like Symbolic Interactionism have done. Deconstructionism confines itself to the synchronic study of texts, seeking to expose the way some terms and concepts are privileged over others, a bias involved in *any* construction. Derrida is concerned to articulate a strategy for textual interpretation independent of social context and without reference to material culture. Language, in Derrida's view, is simply an infinite play of signifiers proliferating into infinity and any attempt to halt the endless play and invoke a concept of reference to the real world is impossible. In this respect, expressed in semiological terms, Foucault's approach is more concordant with those of Pierce (1931) who claimed that behind the play of signifiers lies the 'absolute object'. A similar parallel exists between Foucault and Eco (1976), who claimed that there is a contextual basis to truth claims, and who attacked deconstruction as a form of idealism on the basis that meaning cannot be derived from a free play of signifiers. As Gottdiener (1995) puts it, both Pierce and Eco adopted what is essentially a 'socio-semiological' approach. Foucault's approach, like Pierce and Eco, does not offer just a textual analysis, nor just a critique of the forms of discourse, but an account of how discourse is shaped, and how discourse shapes everyday existence. Unlike deconstruction which confines itself to synchronic textual analysis, seeking to isolate the metaphysics in the text, Foucault is concerned to trace the historical constitution of the most prized certainties, to expose their contingent historical basis, and to track the inter-relations between power and knowledge within a particular historical period. In this schema, culture is not just a system of signification, but a system of material and discursive articulation. And meaning is not just the outcome of the free play of signifiers alone, but the processes of signification are effected by power, i.e. by material culture.

Beyond these differences, there are of course similarities as well between Foucault and the other post-structuralists. With post-structuralism generally Foucault faces up to the contradictions regarding scientific progress, differentiation and relativism. He refuses reduction to the private, individual, family, genetic, instinctual levels, or to subjectivist appropriations of Nietzsche, as manifested in Existentialist or Anglo-American interpretations of Nietzsche's work. In this, he privileges the social, and sees individual experience as socially generated out of collective public experience. And, of course, he follows de Saussure, Nietzsche, and the other

post-structuralists, in his commitment to pluralism and difference, rather than a philosophy of totalism.

If asked, how does Foucault's historicist method work in practice, analysis is possible at several levels:

- at the level at which the discursive and the material are inextricably linked together (as apparatuses), as in the development of institutional forms such as the Clinic, the Mental Asylum, the Prison, or the School;
- at the level where institutional-discursive apparatuses conflict, as for instance in the conflict over the control of birth between midwives and doctors; and
- at the level of the discursive as historically constituted material and ideological forces, rendered comprehensible via genealogy.

In his later writings and lectures, Foucault (1991) developed the concept of 'governmentality' to understand the emergence and changes in the forms of political reason, as part of a critique of liberalism. To understand his historical post-structuralist method, *as it operates in action*, this paper will conclude by focusing upon this aspect of his thought.

Foucault and political reason

For Foucault, both liberalism and neo-liberalism represent an art of government or form of political reason. A political rationality is not simply an ideology but a worked-out discourse containing theories and ideas that emerge in response to concrete problems within a determinate historical period. For Foucault, like Weber, political reason constituted a form of disciplinary power containing forms and systems of expertise and technology utilizable for the purposes of political control. Within this framework, liberal partitions between the public and the private, or the governed and the government, constitute constructed spaces by which individuals can be secure in relation to their juridically assured rights. Liberalism, rather than being the discovery of freedom as a natural condition is, thus, a prescription for rule, which becomes both the *ethos* and *techne* of government. In this sense, as Barry *et al.* (1996: 8) puts it:

> Liberalism is understood not so much as a substantive doctrine or practice of government in itself, but as a restless and dissatisfied ethos of recurrent critique of State reason and politics. Hence,the advent of liberalism coincides with discovering that political government could be its own undoing, that by governing overmuch, rulers thwarted the very ends of government.

For Foucault, liberalism represented a constructed political space, or a political reconstruction of the spaces in terms of which market exchanges could take place and in terms of which a domain of individual freedom could be secure. As such, a constructed space, liberalism, says Foucault, enabled the domain of 'society' to emerge in that it stood opposed to the *polizeiwissenschaft* of the *ancien regime* which constituted a formula of rule that sought total control. In this sense, liberalism is a form of permanent critique of state reason, a form of rationality which is 'always suspicious of governing overmuch, a form of government always critical of itself' (Osborne 1993: 356).

In his essay *Governmentality*, Foucault (1991) traces a genealogy where he notes that from the middle of the 16th century until the end of the 18th, political writings shifted from a predominant concern with 'advice to the Prince/Ruler' to a concern with the 'art of government . . . of how to be ruled, by whom, to what extent, and what methods, etc.' (Foucault 1991: 88). It was a concern, he says, with the 'prob-

lematic of government in general' and it articulated 'a kind of rationality' (Foucault 1991: 88). In his own geneology, Foucault traces the concern with government from its initial usage in relation to the management of the family, to its concern with territory, to its concern with the category of population, to its concern with civic society. In this manner, says Foucault (1991: 92):

> The art of government . . . is essentially concerned with answering the question of how to introduce economy – that is to say, the correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the family (which a good father is expected to do in relation to his wife, children and servants) and of making the family fortunes prosper – how to introduce this meticulous attention of the father towards his family into the management of the state.

Hence, the art of government that one finds at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th century 'organizes itself around the theme of the reason of state' (Foucault 1991: 97) in the sense that:

> the State is governed according to rational principles which are intrinsic to it and which cannot be derived solely from natural or divine laws or the principles of wisdom and prudence: the State, like Nature, has its own proper rationality, even if this is of a different sort. Conversely, the art of government instead of seeking its foundation in transcendental rules, cosmological models or philosophical-moral ideals, must find the principles of its rationality in that which constitutes the specific reality of the State.

Liberalism emerges as a form of state reason with the 17th century jurists and philosophers 'who articulate or ritualize the theory of the contract' (Foucault 1991: 98). In this sense, liberal reason constituted itself in relation to juridical, biological, economic and political doctrines that were to emerge from the 17th century and which anchored the scope of government in relation to the prevailing sciences of biology and evolution and in accord with the recognized scientific views concerning the individual. It is this formation of a 'savoir' proper to government which is bound up with the knowledge of the processes related to population in its widest sense, and which incorporates also a contemporary idea of the 'economy' (Foucault 1991: 98).

It is the conceptual coupling of political rationality with specific technologies of governance which enable one to understand the link beteen discursive systems and material realities and, thus, which are essential to conceptualizing liberal and neo-liberal forms of state reason. Foucault's concept of governmentality is relevant to how governmental technologies insert themselves into practical policy development and implementation at a particular historical juncture. There are indeed a number of elements involved. While the concept of *political reason* pertains to the broad discursive frame of reference through which political problems and solutions are identified and considered and which determines the focus and objects of governance, the concept of *technologies of governance* pertains at the level of operationalization and involves a consideration of the techniques and means through which practical policies are devised and inserted.

Foucault's analysis of neo-liberalism

In his lectures at the Collège de France in 1978 and 1979, Foucault focuses his attention on classical liberals such as Adam Smith, David Hume and Adam Ferguson, and two variants of post-second world war neo-liberals: the *Ordo-liberalen* in Germany and the Human Capital theorists in the US.

The *Ordo-liberalen* comprised a group of jurists and economists in the years 1928–1930 who published in the journal *Ordo*. Amongst their numbers were included

William Röpke, Walter Eucken, Franz Böhm, Alexander Rüstow, Alfred Müller-Armack and others. Preaching the slogan that 'inequality is equal for all' they devised a social market economy influencing the shaping of West Germany economic policy as it develpoped after the war. Foucault refers to these Ordoliberals as the 'Freiberg School' who had some affinities (of time and place) with the Frankfurt School but were of a very different political persuasion. While they held that Nazism was a consequence of the absence of liberalism, they did not see liberalism as a doctrine based upon the natural freedom of the individual that will develop by itself of its own volition. In fact, for the 'Freiberg School' the market economy was not an autonomous or naturally self-regulating entity at all. As a consequence, their conception of the market and of the role of competition, says Foucault, is radically anti-naturalistic. Rather than the market being a natural arena which the state must refrain from interfering with, it is rather constituted and kept going by the state's political machine. Similarly, competition is not a natural fact that emerges spontaneously from human social intercourse, as a result of human nature, but must be engineered by the state.

As a consequence of this, the traditional distinction between a sphere of natural liberty and a sphere of government intervention no longer holds, for the market order and competition are engineered by the practices of government. Both the state and the market are on this conception artificial and both pre-suppose each other. In Foucault's view, such a conception means that the principle of *laissez-faire*, which can be traced back to a distinction between culture (the artificial state) and nature (the self-regulating market), no longer holds. For the *Ordoliberalen*, the history of capitalism is an institutional history. Capitalism is a particular contingent apparatus by which economic processes and institutional frameworks are articulated. Not only is there no 'logic of capital' in this model, but the *Ordoliberalen* held that the dysfunctions of capitalism could only be corrected by political-institutional interventions which they saw as contingent historical phenomena. What this means, says Foucault, is that the *Ordoliberalen* support the active creation of the social conditions for an effective competitive market order. Not only must government block and prevent anti-competitive practices, but it must fine-tune and actively promote competition in both the economy and in areas where the market mechanism is traditionally least prone to operate. One policy to this effect was to 'universalize the entrepreneurial form' (Lemke 2001: 195) through the promotion of an enterprise culture, premised, as Foucault put it in a lecture given on 14th February 1979, on 'equal inequality for all'. The goal here was to increase competitive forms throughout society so that social and work relations in general assume the market form, i.e. exhibit competition, obey laws of supply and demand. In the writings of Rüstow, this was called 'vital policy' ('Vitalpolitik') which described policies geared to reconstructing the moral and cultural order to promote and reward entrepreneurial behaviour, opposing bureaucratic initiatives which stifle the market mechanism. To achieve such goals, the *Ordoliberalen* also advocated the redefining of law and of juridical institutions so that they could function to correct the market mechanism and discipline non-entrepreneurial behaviour within an institutional structure in accordance with, and supported by, the law. In this sense, the *Ordoliberalen* were not simply anti-naturalist, but constructivist.

In his analysis of neo-liberalism, Foucault also directs his attention to the Chicago School of Human Capital theorists in America. These neo-liberals also opposed state interventionism when it was bureaucratic and supported it when it fostered and protected economic liberty. For HCT's the concern was the uncontrolled growth of the

bureaucratic apparatus as a threat to the freedom of the individual. Foucault sees the major distinction between the German and US neo-liberals existing in the fact that in the US neo-liberalism was much less a political crusade as it was in Germany or France, for in the US the critique was centrally directed against state interventionism and aimed to challenge the growth of the state apparatus. In his lecture of the 28 March 1979, Foucault discusses Hayek, von Mises (who he labels as the 'intermediaries of US neo-liberalism'), Simons, Schultz, Stigler and Gary Becker, who he says is the most radical exponent in the US. The US neo-liberals saw the *Ordoliberalen* as representing the political as above and outside the market but constantly intervening to correct its bureaucratic dislocations. From their viewpoint, they wanted to extend the market across into the social arena and political arenas, thus collapsing the distinction between the economic, social and political in what constitutes a marketization of the state. No longer is the state independent of and outside the market, but itself now subject to market laws. In doing this, the US neo-liberals extend economic criteria into spheres which are not economic and market exchange relations now govern all areas of voluntary exchange amongst individuals. In this model, the social and political spheres become redefined as economic domains. The government and the public sector will be economized to reflect marker principles and mechanisms. Thus, the economic covers all of society and society is theorized as a form of the economic. The task of government is to construct and universalize competition to achieve efficiency and invent market systems. As Foucault states, for the US neo-liberals, the market becomes 'a kind of permanent economic tribunal' ('*une sorte de tribunal économique permanent*') (Foucault, Lecture 21 March 1979 – cited in Lemke 2001).

Liberalism, neo-liberalism and education

Notwithstanding a clear similarity between *neo* and *classical* liberal discourse, the two cannot be seen as identical, and an understanding of the differences between them provides an important key to understanding the distinctive nature of the neo-liberal revolution as it has impacted on OECD countries over the last 30 years.

One central difference involves changes in relation to *laissez-faire*. Whereas classical liberalism represents a negative conception of state power in that the individual was taken as an object to be freed from the interventions of the state, meaning that the state must stay out of the market, neo-liberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state's role, seeing the state as the active agent which creates the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its necessary operation. In classical liberalism, the individual is characterized as having an autonomous human nature and can practise freedom. In neo-liberalism, on the contrary, the state seeks to create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur. In the classical model, the theoretical aim of the state was to limit and minimize its role based upon postulates which included universal egoism (the self-interested individual); invisible hand theory and the political maxim of *laissez-faire*. In the shift from classical liberalism to neo-liberalism, then there is a new element added, for such a shift involved a change in subject position from 'homo economicus', who naturally behaves out of self-interest and is relatively detached from the state, to 'manipulatable man', who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be 'perpetually responsive'. It is not that the conception of the self-interested subject is replaced or done away with by the new ideals of 'neo-liberalism', but that in an

age of universal welfare the perceived possibilities of slothful indolence create necessities for new forms of vigilance, surveillance, performance appraisal and of forms of control generally. In this new model, the state has taken it upon itself to keep all up to the mark.

As Burchell (1996: 23–24) notes, while for classical liberalism the bases of government conduct is in terms of 'natural, private-interest-motivated conduct of free, market exchanging individuals', for neo-liberalism 'the rational principle for regulating and limiting governmental activity must be determined by reference to *artificially* arranged or contrived forms of free, *entrepreneurial* and *competitive* conduct of economic-rational individuals'. This means that, for neo-liberal perspectives, the end goals of freedom, choice, consumer sovereignty, competition and individual initiative, as well as those of compliance and obedience, must be constructions of the state acting now in its positive role through the development of the techniques of *auditing*, *accounting* and *management*. It is these techniques, as Barry *et al*. (1996: 14) put it:

> [that] enable the marketplace for services to be established as 'autonomous' from central control. Neo-liberalism, in these terms, involves less a retreat from governmental 'intervention' than a re-inscription of the techniques and forms of expertise required for the exercise of government.

Central to the difference between liberalism and neo-liberalism is not just the fact that they are separated in historical time. While they share much that is common, I have represented neo-liberalism as a positive form of state power resting on a distinction between the market as a natural order and the market as engineered through the positive arm of state power. Even more important is an extension of the role of markets to traditionally non-market contexts to seeing market exchange dynamics as characterizing *all processes of voluntary exchange amongst persons*. Hence, the representation of all social relations as relations of exchange is the central feature of neo-liberalism.

In relation to education, it has been able to effect its changes through new *indirect forms of control via the use of markets* and through various other new *techniques of government*. It involves a reorganization of the spaces in terms of which freedom can be practiced and in terms of which rights can be exercised. Because it refuses to extend power or authority to groups of people who claim professionalism by virtue of a shared competence, but represents such groups solely as aggregates of self-interested individuals, it replaces networks of delegated power which characterizes the professional mode of organization, with hierarchical chains-of-line management which disempowers and 'de-authorizes' the labour of the teacher and intellectual, effecting a de-professionalization of education labour in the neo-liberal state. The differences between the classical liberal settlement, as well as the neoliberal settlement, and the Keynesian welfare liberal settlement it replaced, caused a massive shift in normative culture of education throughout OECD countries, being most sharply manifest in Britain, the US, Australia and New Zealand.

There are possibly as large number of techniques of government and new forms of technology that have made such changes possible, ranging from developments in information technology to techniques of national incomes accounting introduced after World War II. A further technique of government concerns the invention of markets and the invention of new models for the use of markets as mechanisms by which state power can be indirectly exercised, thus relieving the need for direct state action, which were developed during the first half of the 20th century and especially from the 1940s. The market has been used in the post-colonial era to effect and ensure

the emergence of appropriate civilized attitudes and as a device to effect control. If liberalism involves a tension between freedom and control (in the sense that the space in which freedom is practiced itself depends upon low-abiding conduct), then neo-liberalism constitutes a constriction of the space whereby freedom is practiced and an enlargement of the area of control. It is a new regime of adapting each individual to the whole.

The key point about liberal and neo-liberal forms of discourse for Foucault is that they exist as regulatory systems that are not pure forms but co-exist with elements of rule which contradict them, which change over time. While, in its classical form, liberalism may be a series of critical reflections on governmental reason, within liberal governmentality what are not focused on are its antinomies. The incompatibilities between law and governmental reason, between freedom and the need for surveillance, and between private interests and the common good. Foucault, clearly while respectful of liberalism, does not, therefore, believe that a theory of liberal rights can effectively guide politics. Although liberalism provides a framework for the individuals relation to the state, Foucault sees neo-liberalism as a mutation of liberal thought constituting changes that undermine the original promises in important respects.

Notes

1. *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961); *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du régard médical* (Paris: PUF, 1963); *Les Mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

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