



Review: Foucault and the Modern International: Pluralizing IR, power, domination and ...
Foucault

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Foucault and the Modern International: Pluralizing IR, power, domination and ... Foucault

Philippe Bonditti, Didier Bigo, Frédéric Gros (eds.), *Foucault and the Modern International: Silences and Legacies for the Study of World Politics*

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Michel Foucault is one of the French thinkers who, along with Pierre Bourdieu or Bruno Latour, deeply influenced the evolution of how scholars of International relations (IR) understood their field over the last two decades. The book *Foucault and the Modern International* is a rich and eclectic exploration of these influences. It is an edited volume of eighteen chapters written by scholars who have extensive experience in working on Foucault's thought. It approaches the author's significance by scrutinising a wide range of research objects, such as security, neoliberalism, globalisation, the Anthropocene, space and geometry. Consequently, *Foucault and the Modern International* is an intellectually dense and highly analytical text that contributes to the debate on the place of Foucault in the evolution of IR, both as a discipline and a reality to be studied. Its contribution is an important one for at least three reasons.

First, as Bonditti puts it, “[t]his is not a book on Foucault, nor is it a book on “international relations”. This edited volume is both ...”¹ The book aims to rediscover Foucault's work through the study of the field of international relations and, at the same time, to analyse the latter through the lens of the former. Of course, examining Foucault's relevance in some IR sub-fields, such as security studies,² is now an

1 Philippe Bonditti, “Introduction: The International as an Object for Thought”, in P. Bonditti, D. Bigo, F. Gros (eds.), *Foucault and the Modern International: Silences and Legacies for the Study of World Politics* (Paris: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 1.

2 Michael Dillon, Andrew Neal (eds.), *Foucault on Politics, Security and War* (Basingstoke and New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) ; Julian Reid, *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror: Life Struggles, Liberal Modernity and the Defence of Logistical Societies* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2006); Vivienne Jabri, “Michel Foucault's Analytics of War: The Social, the International, and the Racial”, *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), pp. 67–81 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2007.00005.x>; Ayse Ceyhan (ed.), *Identifier et surveiller: Les technologies de sécurité, Cultures & Conflits*, n°64, 2006; *Biopolitique et*

established approach (and the book also develops this). Nevertheless, the volume also takes a much rarer road, and that is to look at Foucault's work through a critical perspective based on scientific debates in IR. It raises the question of what can be said about Foucault in the light of the appropriation of his work in the IR field. The answer the book offers is that it is

*“all about pluralization: pluralizing Foucault, rather than confining his multiple-thought ... to the arbitrary unity of a book on Foucault, and pluralizing knowledge about the International – rather than reproducing the kind of knowledge developed within IR”.*³

In other words: many (revisited) Foucaults for/through many internationals. From a philosophical point of view for instance, Dean suggests the reconnection of the “halves” of some theoretical dualities Foucault used to work with, especially when it comes to the contemporary extension to the international scene of domestic components of liberal government. While Foucault described two opposing sides of the modern security *dispositif* of the liberal rationality (diplomatic-military for war and police for the domestic management of population), Dean's ambition is to connect these two “halves” and to “observe the development of international agencies that seek to regulate the economic governance of nations, the attempted management of populations across borders and in international spaces ... and the view of military intervention as form of international policing”.⁴ In the same vein, Fernandez and Esteves's chapter is a reflexive invitation to carefully look at the role played by Foucault's work in postcolonial studies. The contribution is an incitement to complete the puzzle that Foucault built, on what he saw as a decisive dynamic in the constitution of the modern international system: the formation a “European society of nations”, understood as a system of states founded on the mutual recognition of their sovereignty. Qualifying Foucault's conception of the international as “Eurocentric”, given his “silence” on the role of colonialism in the making of the continental modern order, the authors argue that the colonial domination (encapsulated in the violent construction of an uncivilized, but annexed “Other”) is intrinsic to the production of the “European self”, whose principle of mutual recognition has been precisely denied to colonies, but nevertheless elaborated in a relational opposition to them. The fact that the volume focuses on Foucault's “silences” or “misunderstandings” related to the international is an interesting way to investigate the ways the tools he developed can be adapted or re-shaped to open various empirical or conceptual paths in IR.

Secondly, the book also reflects on how the inspiration international relations scholars have drawn from Foucault has contributed to the “pluralization” of their research field. The thinking of the French philosopher had already been mobilised at the end of the Cold war in order to criticise the hyper-rationalised and ideological foundations of the dominant neorealist paradigm. The genealogical method and the “power/knowledge” nexus were used by the first wave of poststructuralist scholars, like Ashley, Bartelson and Walker (who signs a concluding chapter in the book), to deconstruct neorealism, seen as political knowledge constitutive of the modern

gouvernement des populations, *Cultures & Conflits*, n°78, 2010.

3 Philippe Bonditti, “Introduction”, in P. Bonditti, D. Bigo, F. Gros, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

4 Mitchell Dean, “Power as Sumbolon: Sovereignty, Governmentality and the International”, in P. Bonditti, D. Bigo, F. Gros, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

sovereign project.⁵ Since then, IR has been the object of reflexive works highlighting the necessity to no longer think starting from pre-conceived objects (the “state”, the “international system”, the “market”, “international organization” and so on), but through the deconstructive lens of how they are socially and discursively brought into reality. *Foucault and the Modern International* is a stimulating contribution to this approach as it submits both Foucault and IR to a cross-disciplinary reading. The various empirical objects evoked in the book are analysed along different and complementary Foucauldian sensibilities. Neoliberalism is for instance understood from, at least, two points of view. Through a philosophical lens, Gros argues that neoliberalism is not a unilateral privatisation of the state (as the common-sense suggests). It is a reconfiguration of liberal governmentality. The rupture of the “internal limitation” of political power in relation to the market (generated by the emergence of the political subject as an “entrepreneur of himself”) has resulted in the extension of economic rationality beyond its original field (the market), the consequence in the evolution of government being that “the state must learn to re-model its public policy ... through the filter of economic calculation, and replace investigation of the justice of its action by investigation of its profitability”.⁶ The contributions of Hibou, on one side, and McFalls and Pandolfi, on the other, interestingly completes Gros’s philosophical reflexion by using a sociological Foucault to study the power practices of neoliberalism in terms of bureaucratisation (the government through mathematical/fictional abstractions supposed by the economic rationalisation of public services) and of “therapeutic domination” (the government of “vulnerable populations” through the principle of “perpetual crisis”). The cross-disciplinary reading of Foucault shows that his work is adaptable to multiple scales of analysis and types of questions raised in the IR field.

The third main contribution of *Foucault and the Modern International* is to think power as a contingent and dynamic reality, especially when it comes to the international realm. Many of the reflexions in the volume start from Foucault’s conclusions on the need to conceptualise the relation between security and liberty in order to understand the contemporary evolution of political power. Those two concepts are not opposed, but interlinked. The liberal government (and its biopolitical component) is focused on the prolific production of liberties (of circulation, mostly) and their management, rather than setting up interdictions and fight against designated threats.⁷ Security shapes and acts on the “milieu” of the socio-economic body, instead of targeting specific “dangerous” subjects. Therefore the extension (or restrictions) of the domain of freedom depends on the configuration and, ultimately, displacements of the space of security. The latter, in Bigo’s evocation, being a set of practices aimed at assuring the productivity of the former by “separating the majority from the margins” (or its potential obstacles).⁸ Therefore, the transformations of modernity that the book

5 Richard Ashley, “The Poverty of Neorealism”, *International Organization*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 1984, pp. 225–286 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300026709>; Jens Bartleson, *A genealogy of sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); R.B.J Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).

6 Frédéric Gros, “On Liberalism: Limits, the Market and the Subject”, in P. Bonditti, D. Bigo, F. Gros, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

7 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

8 Didier Bigo, “Michel Foucault and International Relations: Cannibal Relation”, in P. Bonditti, D. Bigo, F. Gros,

explores are equivalent to the evolutions in the exercise of power as seen through the liberty/security nexus. The chapters dealing with mobility, surveillance and practices of control show that the contemporary discourse of an unpredictable (terrorist) risk, involves the structuration of preventive security knowledge that reconfigured the management of circulations (human, financial) as revolving around the logics of “profiling” and “traceability” (see Bonditti’s and Mattelart’s respective chapters). This is why predicting the next attack, to secure motilities justifies an extension of security in terms of practices (technologies of surveillance and control like biometrics to identify “suspicious behaviour” at borders, airports, or other key transit hubs) and scale (transnational connections and exchange of data between national and international intelligence agencies, especially in terms of border control). From this perspective, the volume provides interesting insights into the study of the impact of neoliberalism on security. Given that the chapters dealing *per se* with neoliberalism are not solely focused on security (except for McFall and Pandolfi’s), the book also relates to existing research on the restructuring processes following the influence of economic rationalities in public policies. The development of preventive security intelligence has indeed been the backbone of (and depends on) a growing private/industrial market of risk management funded on a purely technological vision of security.⁹

Interestingly, beyond illustrating the added value of using Foucault to read internationalised forms of power, the book additionally points out the production of its subjects, many of which are at the margins of the socio-economic order shaped by the liberty/security nexus. As Walters argues, deportations and brutal controls to which “illegal migrants” are submitted are violent, but generative sites where the legal/legitimate global regime of mobility is developed. Similarly, the rise of the neoliberal version of “human capital”, understood as the conditions under which a population is defined as able to work and generate durable profits, as an individual (rather than collective) property and “motivation” tends to produce a “kind of skill racism”, depending “less on racial and national affiliation than on the stock of skills possessed by the individual”.¹⁰ In what he sees as a complete separation established by neoliberal economical theorists between the work force and its national or sociological integration, Paltrinieri explains that: “The new “danger” threatening the social body is the individual incapable of engaging in the mechanism of competition, incapable of developing their skills and appraising themselves”.¹¹ Thus, there are resonances between the reflexion conducted in the volume on the individual flexibility at the core of the neoliberalist conception of work and economy, and the research dealing with the transformation of state security as apparatuses increasingly aimed at containing or repressing “non-productive” populations.¹² In other words,

op. cit., p. 47.

- 9 Elke Krahan, “Beck and beyond: selling security in the world risk society”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37, 2011, pp. 349–372 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000264> ; Anna Leander, Rens Van Munster, “Private Security Contractors in the Debate about Darfur: Reflecting and Reinforcing Neo-Liberal Governmentality”, *International Relations*, Vol. 21, No 2, 2007, pp. 201–216 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117807077004> ; Rita Abrahamsen, Michael Williams, *Security Beyond the State: Private Security in International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- 10 Luca Paltrinieri, “Biopolitics in the Twenty-First Century: The Malthus-Marx Debate and the Human Capital Issue”, in P. Bonditti, D. Bigo, F. Gros, *op. cit.*, p. 255.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Charlotte Heath-Kelly, Christopher Baker-Beall, Lee Jarvis, *Neoliberalism and Terror: Critical Engagements* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016); Mark Neocleous, *Critique of Security* (Edinburgh:

using Foucault to understand the international means understanding power practices and relations, but, more fundamentally, domination and its living structures.

Foucault and the Modern International shows that the French philosopher is now an established and key intellectual reference in IR. The book provides a sophisticated overview of how Foucault has been, and can be used or discussed in the study of world politics. The debate on Foucault in the field over the last two decades has been accumulating, and is so varied, that a systematic collective reflection can be conducted on how to (re)read Foucault himself. Whether one agrees with the philosopher's presence in international studies or not, his works provides powerful tools to imagine the international and its power practices as well as to question the socio-political implications of how IR scholars practice their research.

From this perspective, there are at least two issues left open in the book that would be interesting to further investigate.

The first one concerns the connection between the success of Foucault in IR and the political struggles in which it is ultimately embedded. As Cusset and Keucheyan reveal in their analysis of the new left intellectuals, the exportation of Foucault's works abroad has been linked to the rise of certain political contests and claims, as it was the case in the US with feminist and minority studies.¹³ While the volume explicitly mentions the subversive capacity of Foucault's thinking in IR, it would have been interesting to further explore the political dimension of this appropriation: To what extent has the scientific success of Foucault in IR (and the substantial critiques formulated by some IR scholars on security, economy, North-South relations) been related to (or depended on) political struggles structuring public spaces?

The second open question raised by the book regards the analysis of the brutal implications supposed by the transformations of modern rationalities. If Foucault perceived the modern order as a complex mode of government progressively oriented towards a management of the living rather than the sovereign distribution of death, his work also gave us important insights into the production of "the illegal", "the deviant", "the marginal", or, to a certain extent, what Butler calls "ungrievable" lives.¹⁴ As noted above, some of the contributions in the volume mention this question, but it would be of benefit, to the state of research on Foucault's complex relation with IR, to pursue the analysis on the role of the violent reproduction of the "margins" in the making of contemporary international dynamics. As Foucault notes in *The Will to Knowledge*, the unprecedented destructive capacity of modern security apparatuses is precisely the consequence of the problematising of Western populations as living bodies, whose defence ultimately involves their "biological survival".¹⁵ In other words, displacing the analytical perspective from the "complex" centre of gravity of the modern normalising machine (the action on the "milieu") to the "limits" it brutally produces, would allow a different understanding of the role of (military

Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Henri Giroux, *The Terror of Neoliberalism: Authoritarianism and the Eclipse of Democracy* (London: Paradigm, 2004); Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 2009.

13 François Cusset, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003); Razmig Keucheyan, *Hémisphère gauche: Une cartographie des nouvelles pensées critiques* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017).

14 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009).

15 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), pp. 136–137.

or police) organised violence in the contemporary liberty/security reality (in the same way, for instance, as Wacquant in *Punishing the Poor* or *Urban Outcasts*¹⁶ or as in some critical analysis on detention camps).¹⁷

16 Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, *op. cit.*; *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2008).

17 Andrew Neal, "Foucault in Guantánamo: Towards an Archeology of the Exception", *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 31–46; Yolande Jansen, Robin Celikates, Joost de Bloois (eds.), *The Irregularization of Migration in Contemporary Europe: Detention, Deportation, Drowning* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Jérôme Valluy (ed.), *L'Europe des camps : La mise à l'écart des étrangers*, Cultures & Conflits, n°57, 2005.