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# The culture and subjectivity of neo-liberal governmentality

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## **Key concepts:**

Michel Foucault; governmentality; neo-liberalism; political economy; liberalism; industrialism; post-industrialism; capitalism; iron cage; culture; subjectivity; discipline; society of control; biopolitics; biopower; liberty; security

## **Abstract**

*This article forms part of an ongoing investigation into and research on the dynamics, culture and forms of subjectivity of neo-liberalism. Seen through the lens of French philosopher Michel Foucault's analyses of neo-liberalism as a form of governmentality, neo-liberalism emerges as a political programme intent on subjecting the political sphere - along with every other dimension of contemporary existence - to an economic rationality. The focus of this article is on the impact on conditions of work and subjectivity of an economic rationality that has become the dominant political programme. In other words, Foucault's analyses of neo-liberalism as a particular historical form of power called "governmentality" facilitate a critical understanding of the post-industrial culture of work and the concomitant mechanisms of subject-formation in the contemporary West. Like most concepts in Foucault's diagnostic toolkit, governmentality is an analytical notion closely linked to changing historical rationalities of power, rather than a rigid descriptive mechanism that establishes one rationality of governing once and for all, that is the same for all times and places, and that infuses political orders in predictable, regular and uniform ways. It is my contention that Foucault's analyses of neo-liberalism of the late 70s remain instructive and relevant to reach a critical appreciation of neo-liberalism as a particular form of power that infuses the formation of culture and subjectivity in the present. This article utilises a historical approach in which one epoch, notion or governing rationality is understood in terms of that which precedes it, acknowledging some continuity while respecting and reflecting on discontinuity and differences. More specifically, I explore the post-industrial culture of work in terms of the*

*preceding industrial age; biopower in terms of the preceding notion of disciplinary power; and neo-liberal governmentality in terms of the preceding liberal governing rationality. By way of an introduction and contextualisation of the problematics, I first outline the differences between the industrial and post-industrial paradigms of work from a sociological perspective (sections 2-4), before moving on to Foucault's analyses of (neo)-liberal governmentality (sections 5-6).*

## **1. Outlining the problem and approach**

This article forms part of an ongoing investigation into and research on the dynamics, culture and forms of subjectivity of neo-liberalism. According to David Harvey (2005), neo-liberalism found its inception in a series of transformations occurring in the late 1970s: the end of the dollar's gold convertibility, the emergence of anti-inflationary policies, and monetarism's ascent as the dominant economic paradigm in many industrialised nations. However, my concern here is not with the specifics of neo-liberalism as an economic model. Rather, I take it to refer to that global and increasingly globalising phenomenon responsible for the transformation of economics quite literally into political economy, i.e. the economisation of *everything* – also that or especially that which traditionally fell outside of the realm of the market. Within this context neo-liberalism emerges as a *political* programme or “technology of power” that espouses economic liberalism as the only means of promoting economic development and securing political liberty. It was French philosopher Michel Foucault's analyses of neo-liberalism as a form of “governmentality” that first enabled us to see that neo-liberalism, unlike its precursor, classical liberalism, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy. Rather, it is intent on subjecting the political sphere along with every other dimension of contemporary existence to an economic rationality. The focus of this article is on the impact on conditions of work and subjectivity of an economic rationality that has become the dominant political programme. Foucault's analyses of neo-liberalism as a particular historical form of power called “governmentality” are utilised in my attempt to come to a critical understanding of our present post-industrial culture of work and the concomitant mechanisms of subject-formation. As a form of governmentality, neo-liberalism is unpacked as a form of power that extends and disseminates market values to all aspects and spheres of individual and collective life.

Like most concepts in Foucault's diagnostic toolkit, governmentality is an analytical notion sensitive and responsive to changing historical rationalities of power, rather than a rigid descriptive mechanism that establishes one rationality of governing once and for all, that is the same for all times and places, and that infuses political orders in predictable, regular and uniform ways. It is my contention that his analyses of German and American neo-liberalism found in his 1979 *Collège de France* lectures remain instructive and relevant to come to a critical appreciation of neo-liberalism as a particular form of power that infuses the formation of culture and subjectivity today.<sup>1</sup> Like Foucault, I am sensitive to the fact that thought is always rigorously limited by the particular historical horizon in which it germinates. This nevertheless does not render the thought and wisdom of the great thinkers in history useless to those who followed them. Mindful of the danger of propagating Foucault's analyses of two particular historical "strands" of neo-liberalism as "the truth of neo-liberalism" that transcend their historical moment, I utilise a historical approach in which one epoch, notion or governing rationality is understood in terms of that which precedes it, acknowledging some continuity, but respecting discontinuity and differences. More specifically, in my analysis I attempt to understand the post-industrial culture of work in terms of the preceding industrial age; biopower in terms of the preceding notion of disciplinary power; and neo-liberal governmentality in terms of the preceding liberal governing rationality. In what follows I proceed by first introducing and contextualising the problematics by outlining the differences between the industrial and post-industrial paradigms of work from a sociological perspective (sections 2-4), before moving on to Foucault's analyses of (neo)-liberal governmentality (sections 5-6).

## 2. The iron cage of industrialism

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting, yet, to my mind, unconvincing, argument that challenges the assumption that what Foucault had to say about neo-liberalism in 1979 is relevant to understanding neo-liberalism today, see Behrent 2009. He considers Foucault's analyses of neo-liberalism in the late seventies as a "strategic endorsement necessitated by contemporary intellectual politics" (p. 17). I agree that in a time of economic crisis in France, when change was needed, Foucault turned his attention to neo-liberalism and its proposed solution of "less government". But his analyses of (neo-)liberalism as an *ethos* of government hardly translate into an endorsement. To be sure, Foucault appreciates the critique of State reason that liberalism introduced, but does not embrace it as a more desirable alternative than the prevailing Keynesian orthodoxies. In fact, as we shall see, Foucault precisely problematises the "less government" of neo-liberalism as a strategic move to extend governing techniques beyond the state apparatus.

The various transformations of capital between industrialism (which, since the mid 18<sup>th</sup> C, was marked by the development of the factory system of manufacturing, characterised by a complex division of labour and the routine of work tasks), and post-industrialism (i.e. the present structure of developed societies based on the provision of information, innovation, finance and services), are commensurate with an ever greater distance from the rigid disciplinary mechanisms and bureaucracies Max Weber famously characterised with his image of the “iron cage” [*stahlhartes Gehäuse*] in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1905. This image of a “steel-hard casing”, to use a more literal translation, represents Weber’s inversion of Richard Baxter’s 17<sup>th</sup> C imaginings of what heaven might be like in his *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*. According to Baxter, the concern for material goods should lie upon the shoulders of his saints like “a lightweight coat that could be thrown off at any time” (Weber 2002: 123). Yet, according to Weber, the modern capitalist spirit with its insistence on the rational organisation of life on the basis of the idea of a vocational calling forged a steel-hard casing from this supposedly lightweight coat. The emphasis on and valorisation of specialised work – one’s supposed vocational calling – which necessitates the renunciation of the Faustian multi-dimensionality of the human species, was, according to Weber, the precondition for doing anything of value at all at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> C.

In other words, already one hundred years ago, as material goods acquired an increasing power over people, the technical and economic conditions at the foundation of mechanical and machine production trapped individuals in a rigid bureaucratised social order based purely on teleological efficiency and rational calculation. But surely one might suspect that things have changed since Weber’s invocation of Nietzsche’s “last men” – those:

narrow specialists without mind, pleasure-seekers without heart; in its conceit, this nothingness imagines it has climbed to a level of humanity never before attained (Weber 2002: 124).

As we have progressed from the age of the factory to that of finance, the last men – surprisingly enough – still appear to walk amongst us albeit in a completely different guise.

### 3. The post-industrial culture of work

Let us consider the transformation that the culture of work has undergone in the post-industrial era. According to French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1998), the neo-liberal turn in capitalism with the concomitant globalisation of financial markets and exponential progress of information technology – which has gone on unabated since the end of the 1970s – ensures an unprecedented mobility of capital and gives investors (or shareholders) concerned about their immediate interests, i.e. the short-term profitability of their investments, the possibility of permanently comparing the profitability of the largest corporations and appropriately sanctioning these firms' relative setbacks. Companies themselves, subject to this permanent threat of “losing the market's confidence” and their shareholders' favour, have to adjust ever more rapidly to the exigencies of the markets. This leads to the absolute reign of flexibility, with recruitments on short-term contracts or on a temporary basis and repeated restructurings. In addition, this leads to the creation, within the company itself, of competition among autonomous divisions and finally, between individuals, through the individualisation of the wage relation. This is accomplished through the establishment of individual performance objectives and incessant evaluations, individual salary increases or granting of bonuses as a function of competence and individual merit, as well as through strategies of “responsibilisation”. These strategies are designed to enforce the self-exploitation of staff who, while remaining wage-earners subject to strong hierarchical authority, are at the same time held responsible for their performance as though they were independent contractors. Moreover, these employees are expected to self-assess their functioning by way of performance evaluations or performativity reports, a factor which extends their involvement in accordance with the techniques of “participatory management” far beyond the management level. Individualisation and responsabilisation are both examples of methods of rational domination which, while imposing over-investment in work under the constant pressure of urgency at all levels of the hierarchy, contribute to cripple and eventually eradicate all collective standards and solidarities. The post-industrial culture of work can therefore be described as a Darwinian world, i.e. a hostile exploitative world in which, according to Bourdieu, “the struggle of all against all at all levels of the hierarchy ... finds support through

everyone clinging to their job and organisation under conditions of insecurity, suffering and stress”.<sup>2</sup>

To many readers this might appear as a rather hyperbolic depiction of post-industrial conditions of work. This depiction becomes all the more compelling when translated into an idiom more familiar and relevant to the readership of this journal – that of the contemporary South African university, where the intrusion of a normative business model has all but erased the once deeply ingrained collegial interactions of university life and governance.<sup>3</sup> Even more disconcerting is the fact that academics themselves are either passive in the face of such a threat to the nature of academic life or actively involved in the establishment and nurturing of the new spirit of intellectual commercialisation. Since research production, which generates subsidy from the Department of Higher Education and Training, is measured primarily by accredited publications, top managements of higher education institutions have realised that boosting the research “productivity”, i.e. measurable output per employee, is a sure way to increase income. Staying afloat, not to mention getting ahead, in the corporate university has become a matter of buckling down, i.e. learn to publish and learn to publish a lot faster, but only in those journals that will generate a return. Within this paradigm service to your community of scholars such as the peer review of papers, journal editing, conference organisation or book reviews is rendered a waste of valuable time. What is decisive for favourable performance evaluations and promotions are accredited publications, not the refereeing, editing, and dissemination of the competition’s (your peers’) output – even if the publication process is precisely dependent upon such “uneconomical” behaviour. While teaching and administration take up most of an academic’s time, they are not supposed to impinge upon publication output. While the production of educated citizens and qualified professionals remain facets of the core business of the corporate university, it should not interfere with its *primary* profit objective to regulate and intensify knowledge production not so much – or not in the first place – to enhance scholarship but to maximise returns. Accomplished university professors cannot but be model neo-liberal subjects – too busy getting published, (self-)evaluated and rated to question the new rules of the corporate game –

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<sup>2</sup> The following section draws upon Hofmeyr 2008a: 69.

<sup>3</sup> This point is argued more extensively in Hofmeyr 2008b.

or so it would seem. This might not be the official discourse and some critical readers might find the declamatory tone exaggerated and perhaps even inappropriate, but the point remains: measurable, accredited, high impact output is unequivocally the primary and decisive measure of the performance of academics affiliated to South African universities today.

The inaction and atypical academic conformism sketched above may be attributed to the demands of performativity,<sup>4</sup> which inflict a kind of intellectual paralysis: “who in their right mind could be against all the new demands for effective academic work? ... How does an academic sustain a critique of the demands and the obstacles when every demand in the job context seems so reasonable and self-evident to the modern person?”<sup>5</sup> When the demands of optimal research output are combined with demands for effective teaching and administration, these “perfectly reasonable and self-evident” demands precisely become what Lyotard calls the reign of terror of performativity in the Darwinian world of individualised career paths. Those members of faculty busy teaching – faced with huge first-year classes and many “under-prepared” students – or administrating and therefore not getting published or securing satisfactory performance evaluations are relegated to the ranks of “dead wood”.<sup>6</sup>

The efficacy of the implementation of the process and “logic” of corporatisation has much to do, according to Weinberg and Graham-Smith (2010), “with the erosion of the principle of communality in society, which allows the mechanisms of business to define the parameters of socialised interaction. Collegiality has been fatally imbricated in this altered institutional culture and, thus, while it continues to be active, has effectively been co-opted and neutralised by the new order”. Within this new order, according to them, there is no room left for “an ethic that gives precedence to disinterested common purpose”. It is the tried-and-tested technique of divide-and-conquer, albeit in a cloaked form. The order of the day in the “corporate” university is:

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<sup>4</sup> See Lyotard’s *The postmodern condition* in which it is argued that the demands of what he dubbed “performativity”, to which academics have been subjected since the 1960s, cause “terror”.

<sup>5</sup> See Van der Walt, Potgieter & Wolhuter (2010). They cite empirical evidence about the tendency towards managerialism and performativity at universities and their effects on South African academics (quote from p. 289).

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, see Charlotte Mbali’s “Publish or be damned” in the *Mail&Guardian* of 25 February 2011.

a systematised competitiveness that conscripts the individual academic within the university's profit-based rationale, calling on him or her to enhance not the discipline but career paths and the university's own market share.<sup>7</sup>

While competition is generally considered as a stimulus to improved performance, its effects have proven to be more ambiguous. One American study on the effects of competition on scientists' work and relationships, for example, have found that "competition contributes to strategic game-playing in science, a decline in free and open sharing of information and methods, sabotage of others' ability to use one's work, interference with peer-review processes, deformation of relationships, and careless or questionable research conduct." Instead of being a salutary driving-force, the effects of pervasive competition "may jeopardize the progress, efficiency and integrity of science" (Anderson, Ronning, De Vries & Martinson 2007: 437). In other words, having constantly to compete with colleagues and with oneself corrodes the solidarity of subjects<sup>8</sup>, understood as a fellowship arising from common responsibilities, interests and purpose. It is solidarity that endows subjects with the power of community, which includes the credibility and the power to change things. Individualisation necessarily entails depoliticisation: the neo-liberal subject is no longer a citizen amongst others empowered to challenge and change the policies governing its existence, but an insular entity merely struggling to survive in a world that is not of its own making.

Let us return to the post-industrial conditions of work beyond the university. According to Bourdieu (1998), the practical establishment of this world of struggle is made possible by the "complicity of all the *precarious arrangements* that produce insecurity and of the existence of a *reserve army of employees rendered docile by these social processes that make their situations precarious*, as well as by the permanent threat of unemployment" [own emphasis]. In fact, the "harmonious" functioning of the individualist micro-economic model is precisely premised on the "flexploitation" and "precarity" of large segments of the work force. According to Richard Sennett (2006: 49), "[t]emporary labor is the fastest growing sector of the labor

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<sup>7</sup> See Prof Alan Weinberg and Dr Greg Graham-Smith of Unisa's "A hostile takeover" in the *Mail&Guardian* of 24 September 2010.

<sup>8</sup> What interested Foucault was certain forms of subject-formation or *subjectivisation* inasmuch as they correspond to certain forms of *subjection*, as might be argued is the case with neo-liberal governmentality. To be sure, his interest, especially in his later works, extended beyond subjection, to "the struggle against forms of subjection — against the submission of subjectivity" (Foucault 1982a: 213).



force in the United States and Britain; all round, temp-work accounts for 8 percent of the US labor force today. If we add to this number people employed on a short-term, benefits-avoiding basis in retail sales, restaurants, and other service work, the percentage would climb to something like a fifth of the American labor force". In Western Europe between a quarter and a third of the labour force is employed on a temporary and/or part-time contract basis. As for the South African context, the following quote from a study conducted by The Confederation of South African Workers Unions (Consawu) reflects a similar situation:

In 2006 data from Stats SA's labour force Survey confirmed a growing trend towards the casualisation of work. The survey showed that the number of informal non-agricultural workers had increased from 1.8m in 2000 to 2.4m in 2006. Including informal agriculture, informal workers constituted 31% of the labour force in 2006, and contributed as much as 10% (R51.7bn) to GDP. Andrew Levy, chief executive of labour consultancy Andrew Levy and Associates, noted that the rising demand for casual workers had witnessed a stupendous increase (300%) in the number of labour brokerages since 2000. Whereas there had been 1 076 labour brokers in 2000 there were 3 114 in 2006. The reality is that on any given day 9% of the workforce is engaged in temporary work.<sup>9</sup>

The structural violence of temporary contract labour consists in flexible exploitation (low wages, high blackmailability, intermittent income, lack of any job security, etcetera) and existential precariousness (high risk of social exclusion because of low incomes, welfare cuts, high cost of living, etcetera). These conditions mostly affect two categories of workers that are at opposite ends of labour market segmentation in post-industrial economies: pink-collar workers – mostly (but not exclusively) women, immigrants or migrants in retail and low-end service industries (including cleaners, waiters, receptionists, domestic workers, etcetera) and "creaworkers", i.e. young talent temping for cheap in the information economy of big cities around the world: the creative class of strongly individualistic workers, such as designers, artists, architects, academics, researchers and so forth. A "*precarious*" existence is

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<sup>9</sup> From CONSAWU's "A descriptive study of the social impact of temporary contractual labour in South Africa", published on their website on 28 March 2011.

characterised by temporary, flexible, contingent, casual, intermittent work, i.e. the absence of any job security, which in turn has a severely adverse effect on material and/or psychological welfare.<sup>10</sup> This highly individualised, self-responsible and flexible labour force is occupying a central position in the process of capitalist accumulation under Post-Fordism.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. From iron cage to rhizomatic network

It would therefore seem as if the present culture of work (a culture, moreover, that has infiltrated every aspect of life as a result of its porous nature) has transformed Weber's steel-hard cage into something more akin to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic network – something pliable, multiple, and non-hierarchical based on principles of connection and heterogeneity.

A typical strategy of neo-liberalism is to take something originally devised as a strategy of resistance and to incorporate it as a structural component of the regime of domination – precisely the reason why Foucault was reluctant to offer alternatives rather than critique. An exemplary case in point is the way in which creativity itself has become the driving force of the neo-liberal variant of capitalism. Think, for example, of the manner in which an entire new urban rejuvenation trend was started by the publication of Charles Landry's *The creative city* (2000) and Richard Florida's *The rise of the creative class* (2002). Within contemporary urban management, it sparked a collaboration agreement between the economy on the one hand, and art and culture on the other: by establishing the so-called “creative class” in urban slum areas, economic growth and rejuvenation would soon follow – creativity as a shot in the arm to skid row, as it were. In this context, creativity – traditionally conceived as the wellspring of resistance and insubordinate contra-cultural tendencies – serve as the pathfinder for a more virulent form of capitalism.

Unlike the iron cage-metaphor, a rhizomatic network is porous and seemingly prone to rupture: it might be broken, but will start up again along other lines. Rather than narrow specialists, the “last men” of neo-liberalism are shape-shifters constantly needing to reinvent

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<sup>10</sup> According to Rose (1999: 156-157), “[p]erhaps more significant is the fact that such economic insecurity is now given a positive value in economic strategies from a whole variety of political perspectives. Flexibilization is the name for this arrangement of labour when it becomes an explicit political strategy of economic government”.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Neilson & Rossiter (2005) as well as <http://www.areachicago.org/p/issues/city-as-lab/introducing-precarity-chicago/>

themselves or falter at the demands of the markets. Rather than rigid, stable bureaucratic structures, institutions should be capable of internal change, flexibility and constant innovation.

According to Weber, bureaucracies teach the discipline of delayed gratification. Instead of judging whether your immediate activities matter to you, you learn to think about a future reward which will come if you obey orders now. The future gratifications and fulfilments promised often never arrive, however. This ethos is internalised to form subjects that, true to the discipline of delay, often cannot permit themselves to arrive, incapable of enjoying the present for its own sake (cf. Sennett 2006: 31).

For the neo-liberal combination of intensifying competition for profitable outlets in global markets and the dominance of speculative financial capital pursuing short term profits, on the other hand, instant gratification is the model. It leads to an increasing orientation to short term profitability by capital as a whole in a regime dominated by what the American economist, Bennett Harrison (1994), calls “impatient capital”. As the pursuit of material goods quickens into a maddening pace, homo oeconomicus paradoxically becomes increasingly insecure – insecure in the sense that this mad scramble does not safeguard him/her from risk and loss, but instead strips away all forms of assurance. The neo-liberal subject is radically self-responsible and individualised: every man for himself and let the devil take the hindmost. Instead of caged, the neo-liberal subject appears to be nestled in a Nessus skin, scorched by the poisoned gift of neo-liberalisation.

## 5. Foucault’s govern-mentality

Michel Foucault offers us a particularly interesting philosophical perspective on neo-liberalism. He does this with the aid of his newly coined concept “governmentality”. *Gouverner-mentalité* is an instructive diagnostic tool in this context since it embodies Foucault’s belief in the reciprocal constitution of relations of power [*gouverner* or governing] and forms of knowledge [*mentalité*<sup>12</sup> or modes of thought] (Lemke 2001)<sup>12</sup>. As a form of governmentality, therefore, neo-

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<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere it is argued that it is not, in fact, coined by uniting words “gouvernement” and “mentalité”, but simply by making *gouvernement* into *gouvernementalité* [i.e. government + -al- adjective + -ité abstract noun] (see “Course Context” in Foucault’s “Security” lectures (Foucault 2007: 399 (footnote 126)). I nevertheless find Lemke’s explanation instructive especially since it embodies the spirit of Foucault’s definition of governmentality (cf. Foucault’s lecture presented on 1 February 1978 (2007: 108)).

liberalism produces a certain “representation” of the governing reality, i.e. a political rationality (a form of knowledge) that necessitates a certain intervention or exercise of power, which in turn conditions the “mind set” of the subjects of the neo-liberal regime.

To be sure, by government Foucault is not referring to the standard, strictly political definition of the term, but relies on a broader understanding in use until the 18<sup>th</sup>C, i.e. government as “the conduct of conduct”<sup>13</sup> or the directing and management of self and others (Foucault 1991: 90).<sup>14</sup> Here as in the pivotal 1982 text, “The subject and power”, Foucault’s understanding of government converges with his definition of power. In this context he defines the exercise of power as a way of acting upon (an) acting subject(s) by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. Power, not to be confused with domination, is a set of actions upon other actions, which is captured in the ambivalence of the term “conduct”: to “conduct” is both to “lead” others (entailing varying degrees and mechanisms of coercion) and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities (Foucault 1982: 220-221). Rather than (1) a confrontation between two adversaries, which likens power to war, or (2) the statement of the law and the operation of taboos, which associates power with domination, submission and subjugation as in the juridical notion of power (Foucault 1976: 85-86), it is a question of *government*. Foucault explains:

This word must be allowed the very broad meaning which it had in the sixteenth century. “Government” did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection, but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others (Foucault 1976: 221).

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault is playing on the double meaning in French of the verb *conduire* – to lead or to drive, and *se conduire* – to behave or conduct oneself, whence *la conduite*, conduct or behaviour (cf. Foucault 1982: 221, Translator’s note).

<sup>14</sup> This lecture, titled “Governmentality”, was originally presented by Foucault at the Collège de France in February 1978.

In the public lectures Foucault presented at the Collège de France in 1978 (“Sécurité, territoire et population”) and in 1979 (“La naissance de la biopolitique”) he deploys the concept of governmentality by way of historical reconstructions embracing a period starting from Ancient Greece through to modern neo-liberalism. Here he uncovers governmentality to be the key linking the self, which he associates with resistance, and the state, which he associates with domination. Instead of being two opposing forces, however, his genealogy of governmentality shows that the self is inextricably linked to the state understood as a specific governing technique. The self is therefore analysed as the subject of a specific form of governmentality that operates through the state and its extensions in the form of non-governmental organisations and public-private partnerships.

- **Biopolitics, biopower & the society of control**

The title of the 1979 lectures, in which Foucault analyses liberalism and neo-liberalism with the concomitant concepts of government, competition and homo oeconomicus, i.e. “The birth of biopolitics” is instructive. As we shall see in the next section, Foucault’s analyses uncover the intertwinement of liberty and security that constitute the paradox of liberalism, a paradox that has given rise to certain “crises of governmentality”.<sup>15</sup> Foucault subsequently turns to the two great neo-liberal schools, German ordoliberalism<sup>16</sup> and American anarcho-liberalism<sup>17</sup> in an attempt to ascertain whether that crisis of governmentality also characterises the present world and to what revisions of the liberal art of government it has given rise. This is the only time, throughout Foucault’s teaching at the Collège de France, that he takes contemporary history as his object of study. Both these two schools are representative of a radical reform of liberalism, each levelling a particular critique against the “too much government” of liberalism with its inherent reliance on technologies of security to maintain liberty. The first stressed the logic of pure competition on the economic terrain, while framing the market through a set of

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<sup>15</sup> See Foucault’s lecture of 24 January 1979 (Foucault 2008: 68-69).

<sup>16</sup> This is the focus of the lectures of 7, 14 and 21 February as well as 7 March 1979 (Foucault 2008: 101-213).

<sup>17</sup> Foucault analyses American liberalism in the lectures of 14 and 21 March 1979 (2008: 239-265). The final two lectures of the course (delivered on 28 March and 4 April 1979) deal with the idea of homo oeconomicus as a subject of interest distinct from the subject of right (Foucault 2008: 267-316).

state interventions, while the latter sought to extend the rationality of the market to domains formerly considered non-economic (cf. Senellart's "Course context" in Foucault 2008: 329).

Foucault introduces the concept of biopolitics in his 1976 Collège de France lectures (Foucault 2004) and in the first volume of *The history of sexuality* published that same year.<sup>18</sup> In both these instances it appears in the context of his introduction of the notion of *biopower*.<sup>19</sup> Foucault explains the difference between disciplinary power and biopower as follows:

discipline tries to rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and, if need be, punished. And that the new technology [bio-power] ... is addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on (Foucault 2004: 242-243).

Disciplinary power therefore constitutes what Foucault calls a "first seizure of power over the body in an individualizing mode". It individualises subjects to survey their bodies, normalise their behaviour, and regulate their movements. Biopower, on the other hand, constitutes "a second seizure of power that is ... if you like, massifying, that is directed not as man-as-body but as man-as-species". The anatomo-politics of the human body established in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> C is therefore followed, at the end of that century, by what Foucault terms a "biopolitics' of the human race" (Foucault 2004: 243).

The "Society must be defended" lecture series of 1975-1976 were delivered between the publication of Foucault's *Surveiller et punir* (February 1975) and the first volume of the *History of sexuality, La Volonté de savoir* (October 1976). These lectures commence with a survey of the general features of "disciplinary power" – a form of power applied to individual bodies by technologies of surveillance, normalising sanctions, and the panoptic organisation of punitive institutions – and concludes with an outline of biopower – a form of power that is

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<sup>18</sup> Foucault introduced the notion of biopolitics for the very first time in a lecture he gave in 1974 (Foucault 2000: 137).

<sup>19</sup> See specifically Foucault 2004: 243 and Foucault 1990: 139.

applied in general ways to the population, life and living beings. In an attempt to trace the “genealogy” of this power, Foucault subsequently investigated “governmentality”, here understood as that form of power that has, since the late 16<sup>th</sup> C, been exercised through the apparatuses and technologies of reason of State and “policing”<sup>20</sup> (cf. Fontana and Bertani’s “Situating the lectures”, in Foucault 2004: 273). Foucault’s subsequent turn to modern German and American neo-liberalism occurred at a time of profound ideological flux in France – Marxism was under assault, the prevailing economic crisis signalled the bankruptcy of the post-war economic consensus, and mainstream socialism was under attack from the left as well as the right for its statist proclivities. Neo-liberalism emerged in the late 70s as a possible antidote to what appeared to be the evils of state interventionism. It would therefore appear as if this neo-liberal resurgence bolstered Foucault’s doubts about the limitations of understanding modern power exclusively through the prism of discipline (Behrent 2009: 20-21).

With the rise of governmentality, then, power is transformed into biopower exerted over life itself, throughout its unfolding in the species body – “the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*” (Foucault 1990: 139) [own emphasis]. Here, in the first volume of the *History of sexuality*, Foucault sees the discipline and subjugation of human bodies (an “anatomy-politics of the human body”) and the control of populations as two sides of the biopower-coin. This two-pronged form of power, aimed at the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, emerged in the course of the classical period. The two directions taken by the development of biopower still appeared to be separate in the 18<sup>th</sup> C. In fact, “they were not to be joined at the level of a speculative discourse, but in the form of concrete arrangements (*agencements concrets*)” that would finally constitute the great technology of power in the 19<sup>th</sup> C (Foucault 1990: 140).

It would appear that in the course of the last two centuries we have witnessed a gradual shift from discipline to control concomitant with the increasing pervasiveness of biopower. So, although itself a “technology of security” (Foucault 2004: 249), biopower is lighter, more

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<sup>20</sup> The political rationality of police is a form of rationality that strove to achieve complete governance of its subjects, down to the minutiae of existence (cf. Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996: 9).

ubiquitous, increasingly removed from overt “negative” or “punitive” measures and disciplinary practices, exerting control by permeating instead formerly ignored realms of social practice. This change in the operation of power, then, signals the transition from the *disciplinary society*, which Foucault analysed in his work of the ‘70s, to our present *society of control*. According to Hardt and Negri (2000), the entire first phase of capitalist accumulation, i.e. investment in production (in Europe and elsewhere) was conducted under this paradigm of disciplinary power. The passage from disciplinary society to the society of control is roughly commensurate with the shift from second-wave factory or “Fordist” capitalism to the third-wave of modern capitalism, so-called late capitalism (Post-Fordism or service capitalism) that emerged in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> C as theorised by Ernest Mandel in his *Late Capitalism* (1972). During the past few decades, capital has morphed yet again into what Jeffrey Nealon (2008) terms post-postmodern or “finance” capital, a regime in which speculative capital is wagered in a future of supposed or projected worth, rather than being invested in the production and mass marketing of new commodities or services.

What is of interest in the context of this inquiry, are the changing systems of governmentality and concomitant subject-formation associated with each metamorphosis of capital. Our society of control is a world of cyber-work, e-commerce, distance education, virtual markets, home health care, and retrainable flexibly specialised labour. Workers are managed not through confinement but through continuous control and instant communication. Tactics of discipline and biopower are intensified and extended by linking work, training, and surveillance to the micro-facets of everyday life.

- **Freedom and security**

In the 1978-1979 Collège de France lectures, Foucault discusses the topic of biopolitics in a different theoretical framework that goes beyond his initial interest in processes of disciplination and the regulation of bodies. According to his analyses, the “birth of biopolitics” is closely linked to the emergence of liberal forms of government. Liberalism is conceived neither as an economic theory nor as a political ideology, but as a specific art of governing human beings. It targets the epistemic figure of the population and relies on political economy as the



principal form of knowledge. Moreover, Foucault regards the establishment of “technologies”, “apparatuses” or “mechanisms of security” (Foucault 2007: 59, 107-108)<sup>21</sup> as a distinctive feature of liberal government. Importantly, Foucault departs from the premise that liberalism, in contrast to earlier forms of government, seeks to enhance the freedom of individuals or to expand their rights. Freedom is to be understood neither as an anthropological constant nor as a historical universal respected by different societies. In fact, it cannot be measured in quantitative terms, but denotes a social relation – “an actual relation between governors and governed, a relation in which the measure of the ‘too little’ existing freedom is given by the ‘even more’ freedom demanded” (Foucault 2008: 63).

What distinguishes liberal forms of government from other forms of government is the fact that they replace an external regulation by an internal production. Liberalism does not simply provide a guarantee of liberties (freedom of the market, of private property, of speech, etcetera) that exist independently of governmental practice. Rather, liberalism organises the conditions under which individuals could and should exercise these liberties. Freedom is therefore not a natural resource but an artificially arranged product and instrument. In short, it is not the right of individuals to confront power (conceived negatively as “freedom from”), but the positive effect of governmental action. However, and herein lies the paradox of liberalism, the very process of the production of freedom also endangers the freedom it constitutes. As Foucault explains, liberalism “must produce freedom, but this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, etc.” (Foucault 2008: 64). An exemplary case in point is free trade, which cannot be “free” without controls that prevent the formation of monopolies or one country’s hegemony over others, which would precisely be the limitation and restriction of free trade. Within this context, the problem of security is “the protection of the collective interest against [different and possibly opposed] individual interests (Foucault 2008: 65). The considerable extension of

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<sup>21</sup> Within this context of his 1977-1978 lectures titled, “Security, territory, population”, Foucault (2007: 108) insists that his true interest is in a “history of ‘governmentality’”. He defines governmentality as (1) the ensemble of institutions, procedures, tactics and analyses that allows the exercise of very specific power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument; (2) that line of force, that for a long time, and throughout the West, has led to the pre-eminence of government over all other forms of power (sovereignty, discipline, etc.) entailing a series of specific governmental apparatuses (*appareils*) and knowledges (*savoirs*); and finally, (3) the result of the process by which the state of justice of the Middle Ages became the administrative state in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and was gradually “governmentalised”.

procedures of control, constraint and coercion, which act as the counterpart or counterweights of different freedoms, as well as the appearance of additional mechanisms of control and intervention for the production, increase and resuscitation of freedom ultimately led to the crises of liberal governmentality. Possible causes might have been the increase in the economic cost of the exercise of these freedoms and the formation of a legislative straightjacket in the form of excessive interventionism, constraint and coercion. The fact that the mechanisms for producing freedom actually produce destructive effects that prevail over the very freedom they are supposed to produce, is precisely “the present crisis of liberalism”, Foucault pronounced in 1979. As a result Foucault subsequently turned his attention to neo-liberalism, i.e. German liberalism of the years 1948-1962 inspired by the so-called Freiburg School and the American liberalism of the Chicago School, that constituted a response to these crises (Foucault 2008: 68-69; and also cf. Lemke 2011).

- **Redefined relation between the state (and society) and the market**

What is “new” in neo-liberalism as opposed to classical liberalism relates to the re-definition of the relation between the state (and society) and the economy. Neo-liberalism is not longer locked in battle with an overly powerful absolute state, whose powers of intervention and regulation it seeks to curtail. For the neo-liberals, it is not the market being supervised by the state, but rather the state (and society) being controlled by the market. To ensure the unimpeded operation of the market, the market economy had to be dissociated from the political principle of laissez-faire associated with classical liberalism. Instead of minimal governmental intervention, “free” markets require an active and extremely vigilant governmental policy based on the principles of a market economy. Since it remains an expressly liberal regime, however, the government should not intervene in the effects of the market, and therefore cannot correct the destructive effects of the market on society. Rather, it should facilitate the infiltration and regulation of society by the market (Hofmeyr 2008a: 76).

From the perspective of governmentality, government is a continuum that extends from political government or the state, on the one end (i.e. “technologies of domination”) to forms of self-regulation (i.e. “technologies of the self”), on the other (Lemke 2000: 12; 2001: 201). The

neo-liberal forms of government feature apart from direct intervention, indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them. Within this political rationality the individual is reconfigured as *homo oeconomicus*<sup>22</sup>. The social domain is encoded as an economic domain, which means cost-benefit calculations and market criteria are transposed and applied to decision-making processes pertaining to private and professional life (from family and marital life to work). Within this context, social responsibility is transposed onto rational subjects thereby becoming a matter of personal provisions. As responsibility for self increases, however, the citizen becomes increasingly *depoliticised*: the model neo-liberal citizen is one who looks out for him/herself by weighing various social, political and economic options, not one empowered to negotiate more favourable options. Because neo-liberalism casts rational action as a norm rather than an ontology, the necessary social policy is actively implemented by the state to produce these “responsible” and “rational” subjects. As Foucault has shown, however, power functions not only as something imposed from the outside upon hapless victims, but also and especially as something actively internalised by receptive participants. In this way, a close link is forged between the micro- and macro-political levels, between economic prosperity and personal well-being, between political rationality and personal imperatives (such as self-regulation, health and diet regimes). If neo-liberalism supplements out-dated rigid regulatory mechanisms with techniques of self-regulation, then the so-called “autonomous” individual’s capacity for self-control is integrally linked to forms of political-economic exploitation (cf. Brown 2003: 7-8; Hofmeyr 2008a: 78-79).

- **Political programme rather than ideology or reality**

Analysing neo-liberalism from the perspective of governmentality unmasks it as more than mere ideological rhetoric or a political-economic reality. Rather, it is exposed as a political project geared towards creating the social reality it suggests already exists. It does not passively assume that every dimension of human life can be cast in terms of a market rationality but actively installs institutional practices to develop social, cultural and political life

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<sup>22</sup> Foucault deals with the birth in 18<sup>th</sup> C thought of the idea of *homo oeconomicus* as a subject distinct from the subject of right, and of the notion of “civil society” as correlative of the liberal technology of government in the final two lectures of his 1978-1979 *Collège de France* course, “The birth of biopolitics” (Foucault 2008: 267-373).

in its own image, i.e. according to economic determinants. Neo-liberalism's normative (rather than ontological) claim about the pervasiveness of economic rationality is backed up by a strategy of implementation, i.e. the necessary development, dissemination and institutionalisation of such a rationality (Brown 2003: 5; Lemke 2000: 13). Far from being a given or the natural course of things, the economy needs to be nurtured and buttressed with the aid of law and policy as well as by the dissemination of social norms engineered to generate competition, free trade and rational economic action.<sup>23</sup>

## 6. Concluding remarks: the problem with (neo-)liberalism

In conclusion, analysing neo-liberalism as a form of governmentality throws certain things into relief that helps us to come to a better understanding of our present culture of work, how and to what extent it has infiltrated every realm of our existence, and how it effects a certain subject-formation. All these things – (1) the fact that neo-liberalism is a political programme rather than an ideology or a mere reflection on the way things are (our inherent competitive nature); (2) the concomitant implementation of biopower and control; (3) as well as the newfound relation between state (and society) and the market are inherently – albeit implicitly or explicitly – concerned with freedom. Liberalism (from the Latin *liberalis*, meaning "of freedom"), as its etymology suggests, is the belief in the importance of liberty and equal rights, i.e. that private individuals have a fundamental right to life, liberty and property, to use John Locke's formulation. In actual fact, the freedom relevant to liberalism has become increasingly dissociated with the juridical freedom of the individual recognised as such. Rather, it refers first and foremost to the freedom of the internal and intrinsic mechanics of economic processes often at the expense of individual human freedom. It would in actual fact, as Foucault (2008: 61) admits, be more accurate to speak of a naturalism rather than a liberalism.

Yet, he insists on speaking of liberalism although it is not primarily concerned with a juridical framework respecting individual freedoms and the basic rights of individuals. Foucault explains that when we speak of a new liberal art of government appearing in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> C, it does not mean that an authoritarian regime was replaced by a government which

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<sup>23</sup> In other words, neo-liberalism does not construe the market and rational economic behaviour as natural but as the result of political and legal intervention and orchestration (Lemke 2001: 195).

became more tolerant, more lax and more flexible. In other words, “liberalism” in the sense meant by Foucault here, does not announce a quantitative increase of freedom at a specific juncture in history. In fact, to use his metaphor, “[f]reedom is not a white surface with more or less numerous black spaces here and there and from time to time” (Foucault 2008: 63). Freedom is nothing other than “an actual relation between governors and governed, a relation in which the measure of the ‘too little’ existing freedom is given by the ‘even more’ freedom demanded”. Liberalism is a governmental practice that is not satisfied with respecting or guaranteeing this or that freedom; rather it is a consumer of freedom. It can only function insofar as a number of freedoms actually exist: freedom of the market, freedom to buy and sell, the freedom to exercise property rights, freedom of discussion, etcetera. If it needs or consumes freedom, it must produce it. It must produce it, it must organise it. The new art of government therefore appears as the “management of freedom”, producing what its subjects need to be free (economically). It is intent on insuring the freedom necessary for freedom, i.e. the management and organisation of the conditions in which one can be free (to buy). At the heart of this liberal practice then is the tension between the imperative to produce freedoms and the fact that this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats (Foucault 2008: 63-68).

Within the context of liberalism, freedom then necessarily implies an iron cage: the age of freedoms is exactly contemporaneous with the development, dramatic rise, and dissemination throughout society of those famous disciplinary techniques for taking charge of the behaviour of individuals day by day in its fine detail. It is for this very reason that in the end this liberal art of government introduces by itself or is the victim from within of what Foucault calls “crises of governmentality” (2008: 68). These crises then arise because the mechanisms for producing freedom (“liberogenic devices”) actually produce destructive effects which prevail over the very freedom they are supposed to produce.

It is within this context that Foucault turns his attention to neo-liberalism as a response to this crisis in governmentality of too much government by returning to a technology of frugal government (2008: 322). What his analyses uncover, however, is the fact that neo-liberalism, as we have seen, exchanges the iron cage for something more akin to a Nessus skin. Although less rigid, perhaps more scorching. Because less overt than discipline, the political

programme of limiting state intervention exerts more effective and insidious control reaching as far as the intimate recesses of our private lives. Ever since the Great Depression of the 30s mechanisms of economic intervention have been deployed to avoid the reduction of freedom that would be entailed by transition to socialism, fascism, or National Socialism. "But", asks Foucault (2008: 69), "is it not the case that these mechanisms of economic intervention surreptitiously introduce types of intervention and modes of action which are so harmful to freedom as the visible and manifest political forms one wants to avoid?"

The problem of neo-liberalism therefore seems to be liberalism itself. And the problem with liberalism is that its overt emphasis on freedom refers to market freedom rather than human freedom. Free markets do not, it would seem, contrary to Milton Friedman's insistence, make free men (Friedman 1974: 3).

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