

© Victor Coutinho Lage

DOI:

ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No. 24, pp. 203-207, June 2018

Foucault Studies

The multiple Foucault and the Modern/Colonial International

Victor Coutinho Lage, Federal University of Bahia

Book review: Philippe Bonditti, Didier Bigo and Frédéric Gros (eds.), *Foucault and the Modern International: Silences and Legacies for the Study of World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

The main aim of *Foucault and the Modern International: Silences and Legacies for the Study of World Politics* is stated in Philippe Bonditti's Introduction: "this volume is all about pluralization: pluralizing Foucault..., and pluralizing knowledge about the International" (p.1). More than a reinforcement of the existence of "many Foucaults" or of "many theoretical approaches to the International", it is at stake in this pluralization the exploration of potentialities of critique through the mobilization of Foucault's thought(s) as a *multiple* – as a *pensée multiple* (multiple-thought), as Bonditti emphasizes (see p.1). In this sense, the reading of the volume produces an encounter of the "proliferation of Foucault's name" (as R.B.J. Walker notes) with the production of knowledge on the "International" that enables the potentialization of a critical attitude in face of a diverse range of problematizations.

Composed of contributions by some of the most insightful scholars working around and from Foucault's thought(s), the volume is divided into six parts, besides an Introduction (ch.1, by Bonditti) and a Conclusion (ch.18, by Walker): "de-disciplining knowledge about the international" (Part I); "between philosophy and method" (Part II); "international?" (Part III); "(neo-)liberal?" (Part IV); "biopolitical?" (Part V); and "global?" (Part VI). The essays take the "figure of Foucault" (Nicholas Onuf's expression) to multiple routes: the field of international relations more specifically (Nicholas Onuf, and Didier Bigo), migration (William Walters), political spirituality (Michael Dillon), power (Mitchell Dean), method and literary texts (Michael Shapiro), colonialism (Marta Fernández and Paulo Esteves), terrorism (Philippe Bonditti), globalization (Jean-François Bayart, and Armand Mattelart), human capital (Luca Paltrinieri), mesopolitics (Ferhat Taylan), geopolitics (Stuart Elden), as well as diverse aspects of liberalism and neoliberalism (Frédéric Gros, Béatrice Hibou, and Laurence McFalls and Mariella Pandolfi).

In what follows I will engage with it in two ways. Firstly, I will highlight some of the theoretical insights coming from certain essays, leaving the readers to decide whether they deserve further exploration or not. Secondly, I will identify one aspect from the book that I think requires second thoughts – an aspect constantly raised in my own engagement with Foucault’s thought(s).

Onuf (ch.2) opens Part I, arguing that Foucault’s famous discussion about the domains of Life, Labor and Language misses a fourth one: Law. This fourth domain “survived a series of ruptures and periodically recast the limits of knowledge about power and politics, rules and rule” (p.27), and, this way, it “helped to frame political knowledge” (p.27). The attention to modern law defined as “an infinitely extendable and adaptable set of rules constituting an apparatus of rule in diverse settings – some liberal, some not” (p.26), continues Onuf, would make Foucault’s adoption of the concept of “governmentality” unnecessary. The latter, however, receives different assessments in other essays of the volume.

Walters (ch.4), for instance, notes that the thematic of the microphysics of power has been attracting less attention over the years in contrast to the notion of governmentality. In face of that, he insists on the importance not to lose from sight that microphysics and governmentality do not require an either/or choice, since they are not “self-contained and opposed theories of power” (p.63-4). Taylan (ch.15), in his turn, prioritizes the concept of “governmentality” – more precisely, “environmental governmentality”, or “mesopolitics”, defined as “a modern political rationality which tends to ‘conduct the conduct’ of human beings by planning their surroundings” (p.262). The further exploration of Foucault’s insights, then, presents a valuable contribution to the ongoing debates on the “Anthropocene”, by bringing to the foreground the history of the knowledge produced about the environment “in order to govern human beings better” (p.271).

The concern with a wider historical perspective to the problem of government marks Matterlart’s (ch.16) and Elden’s (ch.17) essays as well. Elden thinks Foucault is misguided when the latter puts that “population displaced territory as the principal object of government” (p.296). Hence, Elden claims that biopolitics must be understood in relation to “geopolitics”, as “a politics of the earth” (p.299), and to “geometrics”, as a politics of “earth-measuring” (p.300). This way, the “threefold relation between geopower, geometrics and geopolitics” (p.300) enables one to understand territory as a “*political* question” (p.301, emphasis in the original), with profound implications to recent assessments of, for instance, climate change and the Anthropocene (see pp.303-7). Mattelart, in his turn, seeks to situate his problematization within the wider historical frame of the “foundation of modernity”

(pp.278-80), the original moment of the “project for world integration and unification” (p.280). He argues that “traceability” – linked to the use of digital information in the government of the people – has become in the last decades increasingly pervasive in the attempts at “global integration” carried forward through the expansion of “security dispositifs” (p.287).

The concept of traceability is central to Bonditti’s essay (ch.9). According to him, the current transformation in the art of governing betrays the emergence of “societies of traceability” (pp.165-71). Putting into relief the ways information are collected “*in relation to, and by means of, everything that moves*” (p.170, emphasis in the original), the concept of “traceability” would be a more clarifying way of approaching the problem of government than what Foucault proposed with the notion of “security societies”. If Bonditti, less enthusiastic about how Foucault managed his problematization of government in relation to biopower, moves his attention to violence and circulation, Dean (ch.6) takes a different route. He suggests three extensions to Foucault’s discussion of power, this way exploring certain “analytical openings” (p.107) in his thought(s). The first one takes Foucault’s characterization of “domestic liberal government” to the “current liberal-international politics and governance”; the second extension challenge Foucault’s understanding of the relation between liberalism and the international domain; finally, the third proposes a reassessment of sovereignty as both a “right to death” and “a condition of a politics of life” (pp.97-8).

While Dean explores the relation between contemporary liberalism and the politics of life through those three analytical openings, Paltrinieri (ch.14) brings the discussion on “biopolitics” back to “the Malthus-Marx debate and the human capital issue”. More precisely, the reassessment of the Malthusian concept of “population” and the Marxian (and Engelsian) focus on “classes”, Paltrinieri claims, provides us with “a different genealogy of neo-liberal biopolitics” (p.245). Neoliberalism turns the attention away from what Malthus and Marx, in very different ways, identified as the motor of history, that is, “conflict” (p.254); what we get, instead, is the idea that “human capital” is “a potentially infinitely renewable resource whose very existence contradicts classical economics’ scarcity principle” (p.254).

Neoliberalism is also discussed in Gros’ (ch.11), Hibou’s (ch.12), and McFalls and Pandolfi’s (ch.13) interventions. While Gros’ essay (ch.11) reminds us that *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1979) is a “unique” incursion “into the immediate present” when compared to the other lectures at *Collège de France*, and then situates them historically, the other two expose different research venues inspired by them. Focusing on the bureaucratic dimension of neoliberalism and crossing Foucault with Max Weber, Hibou claims that the former neglected “the specific process of abstraction every act of formalization implies” (p.203, emphasis dropped). McFalls

and Pandolfi, alternatively, draw on Foucault's analysis of the liberal order and mobilize the genealogical method in order to claim that the epochal changes witnessed in the last decades "mark less a rupture than a realization of liberalism's illiberal potential" (p.220) in the current "too-late liberalism".

As we get from this brief overview, the proliferation of Foucault's name in the volume exposes diverse potentialities to be further explored, taking the figure of Foucault as a resource for and an object of critique (see also Bonditti's observation on p.9). As Shapiro's essay (ch.7) reminds us, Foucault wanted his books "to be a kind of tool-box which others can dig in to find a tool with which they can make good use" (Foucault *apud* Shapiro, p.115; see also Walker's essay). *How* a usage can be made "good" is always disputable. But, above all, this volume succeeds in not being a book "applying" Foucault (as if he had provided his readers with a "general theory" to be "applied" to "particular cases"). It is mostly about opening the possibility of *mobilizing* a thought, of taking it as a *multiple*.

I want to conclude, however, with one comment on "Foucault" and the "colonial question", which is mentioned in different parts of the volume. Bigo (ch.3), for instance, claims that, when Foucault studied death penalty or prisons, he was concerned in particular with how people are governed in other parts of the world. He reminds that Foucault, during the 1977 lectures *Society Must be Defended*, had in mind international conflicts of the time, such as in Vietnam, in Palestine, in Chile and in Northern Ireland (see p.34, and pp.42-3). Bayart (ch.10) goes in a similar direction. According to him, Foucault's concern for historicity, as well as his experiences in Sweden, Poland, North and South America, Tunisia, and Iran would be proofs of his "ability to face up to other places and other ways of engaging in the political" (p.181).

However, to point to historical circumstances that made Foucault concerned with "international conflicts", and to emphasize his attention to historicity or his experiences abroad, do not seem convincing ways of addressing the questionings advanced over the years mainly by certain "post-colonial" and "decolonial" thinkers to Foucault's work. Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Walter D. Mignolo, among many others, have pointed out in various ways that Foucault has not devoted enough attention to the colonial question. In the volume, the only essay devoted in depth to the topic is Fernández and Esteves' (ch.8). According to them, Foucault "remained quite silent about the ways in which power operated in the colonial arena" (p.137), and ignored "crucial bifurcations... that came to be constitutive of the world divided into a center... and a periphery" (p.138). The exploration of the center-periphery dyad from this angle would help in the understanding of how coloniality

is still at stake when it comes to contemporary definitions of the “modern”, including of the “modern subject”, the “modern state”, the “modern international”.

In the divergences regarding Foucault and the colonial question, at least two things are very often at stake. One of them is whether his work provides us with theoretical potentialities to be further explored in the interpretation of the issue. The other is whether he himself dealt with it empirically. I think Bigo’s and Bayart’s essays do not differentiate these two aspects well enough, while Fernández and Esteves’ has the merit of raising questions that touch on both of them, even if this is not explicitly thought through in these terms in their text. Moreover, it is important not to lose from sight that Foucault’s hugely important problematization of the figure of “man” is also one carried forward mostly from within what we have come to call “Western history” (see also Walker’s essay, pp.328-330) – as we can see from his early engagement with Kant’s anthropology and with “madness” up until his last lectures at *Collège de France* and the recently-published *Les Aveux de la Chair* (the fourth volume of *History of Sexuality*). In my view, this is something that readers of Foucault should further explore, in order to mobilize his thought(s) towards interpretations of the “modern/colonial international”.

In the Introduction, Bonditti quotes Foucault saying: “I have only one object of study, the threshold of modernity” (Foucault *apud* Bonditti, p.5). Mobilizing the figure of Foucault in relation to the colonial question is a way to move exactly this “object of study” forward. As Fernández and Esteves put it, the figure of “Europe” emerges in relation not only to its reconstructed past (the Empire and the Church), but also to its colonial “Others” (see p.146). Exploring that angle requires the problematization of any search for a pure origin of “modernity” (something Foucault is brilliant at for the most part of his work) and, in a supplementary angle, the problematization of the threshold of “modernity/coloniality”. In this sense, I think Walker (ch.18) is right: “So many Foucaults! Perhaps too many; perhaps not enough” (p.313).

Author bio

Victor Coutinho Lage

Professor of the Institute of Humanites, Arts and Sciences

Professor Milton Santos at the Federal University of Bahia. Professor at the Graduate Program in International Relations at the same university.

Bahia, Brazil

victorclage@gmail.com