

THE BIRTH OF BIOPOLITICS

As it turned out, this year's course was devoted in its entirety to what was to have formed only its introduction. The theme addressed was "biopolitics." By that I meant the endeavor, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race . . . We are aware of the expanding place these problems have occupied since the nineteenth century, and of the political and economic issues they have constituted up to the present day.

It seemed to me that these problems could not be dissociated from the framework of political rationality within which they appeared and developed their urgency. "Liberalism" enters the picture here, because it was in connection with liberalism that they began to have the look of a challenge. In a system anxious to have the respect of legal subjects and to ensure the free enterprise of individuals, how can the "population" phenomenon, with its specific effects and problems, be taken into account? On behalf of what, and according to what rules, can it be managed? The debate that took place in England in the middle of the nineteenth century concerning public health legislation can serve as an example.

What should we understand by "liberalism"? I relied on Paul Veyne's reflections concerning historical universals and the need to test a nominalist method in history. And taking up a number of choices of method already made, I tried to analyze "liberalism" not as a theory or an ideology—and even less, certainly, as a way for "society" to "represent itself"—but, rather, as a practice, which is to say, as a "way of doing things" oriented toward objectives and regulating itself by means of a sustained reflection. Liberalism is to be analyzed, then, as a principle and a method of rationalizing the exercise of government, a rationalization that obeys—and this is its specificity—the internal rule of maximum economy. While any rationalization of the exercise of government aims at max-

imizing its effects while diminishing, as far as possible, its cost (understood in the political as well as the economic sense), liberal rationalization starts from the assumption that government (meaning not the institution "government," of course, but the activity that consists in governing human behavior in the framework of, and by means of, state institutions) cannot be its own end. It does not have its reason for being in itself, and its maximization, even under the best possible conditions, should not be its regulative principle. On this point, liberalism breaks with that "reason of state" which, since the end of the nineteenth century, had sought, in the existence and strengthening of the state, the end capable both of justifying a growing governmentality and of regulating its development. The *Polizeiwissenschaft* developed by the Germans in the eighteenth century—either because they lacked a large state form, or also because the narrowness of their territorial partitions gave them access to much more easily observable units, given the technical and conceptual tools of the time—always subscribed to the principle: One is not paying enough attention, too many things escape one's control, too many areas lack regulation and supervision, there's not enough order and administration. In short, one is governing too little. *Polizeiwissenschaft* is the form taken by a governmental technology dominated by the principle of the reason of state, and it is in a "completely natural way," as it were, that it attends to the problems of population, which ought to be the largest and most active possible—for the strength of the state. Health, birthrate, sanitation find an important place in it, therefore, without any problem.

For its part, liberalism resonates with the principle: "One always governs too much"—or, at any rate, one always must suspect that one governs too much. Governmentality should not be exercised without a "critique" far more radical than a test of optimization. It should inquire not just as to the best (or least costly) means of achieving its effects but also concerning the possibility and even the lawfulness of its scheme for achieving effects. The suspicion that one always risks governing too much is inhabited by the question: Why, in fact, must one govern? This explains why the liberal critique barely detaches itself from a problematic, new at the time, of "society": it is on the latter's behalf that one will try to determine why there has to be a government, to what extent it can be done without, and in which cases it is needless or harmful for it to intervene. The rationalization of governmental practice, in terms of a reason of state, implied its maximization in optimal circumstances insofar as the existence of the state immediately assumes the exercise of government. Liberal thought starts not from the existence of the state, seeing in the government the means for attaining that end it would be for itself, but rather from society, which is in a complex relation of exteriority and interiority with respect to the state. Society, as both a precondition and a final end, is what enables one to no longer ask the

question: How can one govern as much as possible and at the least possible cost? Instead, the question becomes: Why must one govern? In other words, what makes it necessary for there to be a government, and what ends should it pursue with regard to society in order to justify its existence? The idea of society enables a technology of government to be developed based on the principle that it itself is already "too much," "in excess"—or at least that it is added on as a supplement which can and must always be questioned as to its necessity and its usefulness.

Instead of making the distinction between state and civil society into a historical universal that allows us to examine all the concrete systems, we can try to see it as a form of schematization characteristic of a particular technology of government.

It cannot be said, then, that liberalism is a utopia never realized—unless the core of liberalism is taken to be the projections it has been led to formulate out of its analyses and criticisms. It is not a dream that comes up against a reality and fails to find a place within it. It constitutes—and this is the reason for both its polymorphism and its recurrences—a tool for criticizing the reality: (1) of a previous governmentality that one tries to shed; (2) of a current governmentality that one attempts to reform and rationalize by stripping it down; (3) of a governmentality that one opposes and whose abuses one tries to limit. So that we will be able to find liberalism, in different but simultaneous forms, as a regulative scheme of governmental practice and as the theme of a sometimes-radical opposition. English political thought, at the end of the eighteenth century and in the first half of the nineteenth, is highly characteristic of these multiple uses of liberalism. And even more specifically, the developments and ambiguities of Bentham and the Benthamites.

There is no doubt that the market as a reality and political economy as a theory played an important role in the liberal critique. But, as P. Rosanvallon's important book has confirmed, liberalism is neither the consequence nor the development of these,¹ rather, the market played, in the liberal critique, the role of a "test," a locus of privileged experience where one can identify the effects of excessive governmentality and even weigh their significance: the analysis of the mechanisms of "dearth" or more generally, of the grain trade in the middle of the eighteenth century, was meant to show the point at which governing was always governing too much. And whether it is a question of the physiocrats' Table or Smith's "invisible hand"; whether it is a question, therefore, of an analysis aiming to make visible (in the form of "evidence") the formation of the value and circulation of wealth—or, on the contrary, an analysis presupposing the intrinsic invisibility of the connection between individual profit-seeking

and the growth of collective wealth—economics, in any case, shows a basic incompatibility between the optimal development of the economic process and a maximization of governmental procedures. It is by this, more than by the play of ideas, that the French or English economists broke away from mercantilism and cameralism; they freed reflection on economic practice from the hegemony of the "reason of state" and from the saturation of governmental intervention. By using it as a measure of "governing too much," they placed it "at the limit" of governmental action.

Liberalism does not derive from juridical thought any more than it does from an economic analysis. It is not the idea of a political society founded on a contractual tie that gave birth to it; but in the search for a liberal technology of government, it appeared that regulation through the juridical form constituted a far more effective tool than the wisdom or moderation of the governors. (Rather, the physiocrats tended, out of a distrust of law and the juridical institution, to look for that regulation in the recognition, by a despot with institutionally limited power, of the economy's "natural" laws, impressing themselves upon him as an evident truth.) Liberalism sought that regulation in "the law," not through a legalism that would be natural to it but because the law defines forms of general intervention excluding particular, individual, or exceptional measures; and because the participation of the governed in the formulation of the law, in a parliamentary system, constitutes the most effective system of governmental economy. The "state of right," the *Rechtsstaat*, the rule of law, the organization of a "truly representative" parliamentary system was, therefore, during the whole beginning of the nineteenth century, closely connected with liberalism, but just as political economy—used at first as a test of excessive governmentality—was not liberal either by nature or by virtue, and soon even led to antiliberal attitudes (whether in the *Nationalökonomie* of the nineteenth century or in the planning economies of the twentieth), so the democracies of the state of right were not necessarily liberal, nor was liberalism necessarily democratic or devoted to the forms of law.

Rather than a relatively coherent doctrine, rather than a politics pursuing a certain number of more or less clearly defined goals, I would be tempted to see in liberalism a form of critical reflection on governmental practice. That criticism can come from within or without, it can rely on this or that economic theory, or refer to this or that juridical system without any necessary and one-to-one connection. The question of liberalism, understood as a question of "too much government," was one of the constant dimensions of that recent European phenomenon, having appeared first in England, it seems—namely, "political life." Indeed, it is one of the constituent elements of it, if it is the case that political life exists when governmental practice is limited in its possible excess

by the fact that it is the object of public debate as to its "good or bad," its "too much or too little."

Of course, the above reflections constitute not an "interpretation" of liberalism which would claim to be exhaustive but, rather, a plan of possible analysis—of "governmental reason," that is, of those types of rationality which are brought into play in the methods by which human behavior is directed via a state administration. I have tried to carry out such an analysis concerning two contemporary examples: German liberalism of the years 1948–62, and American liberalism of the Chicago school. In both cases, liberalism presented itself, in a definite context, as a critique of the irrationality peculiar to "excessive government" and as a return to a technology of "frugal government," as Franklin would have said.

In Germany, that excess was the regime of war, Nazism, but, beyond that, a type of directed and planned economy developing out of the 1914–18 period and the general mobilization of resources and men; it was also "state socialism." In point of fact, German liberalism of the second postwar period was defined, programmed, and even to a certain extent put into practice by men who, starting in the years 1928–1930, had belonged to the Freiburg school (or at least had been inspired by it) and who had later expressed themselves in the journal *Ordo*. At the intersection of neo-Kantian philosophy, Husserl's phenomenology, and Weber's sociology, on certain points close to the Viennese economists, concerned about the historical correlation between economic processes and juridical structures, men like Eucken, W. Roepke, Franz Böhm, and Von Rustow had conducted their critiques on three different political fronts: Soviet socialism, National Socialism, and interventionist policies inspired by Keynes. But they addressed what they considered as a single adversary: a type of economic government systematically ignorant of the market mechanisms that were the only thing capable of price-forming regulation. Ordo-liberalism, working on the basic themes of the liberal technology of government, tried to define what a market economy could be, organized (but not planned or directed) within an institutional and juridical framework that, on the one hand, would offer the guarantees and limitations of law, and, on the other, would make sure that the freedom of economic processes did not cause any social distortion. The first part of this course was devoted to the study of this Ordo-liberalism, which had inspired the economic choice of the general policy of the German Federal Republic during the time of Adenauer and Ludwig Erhard.

The second part was devoted to a few aspects of what is called "American neoliberalism": that liberalism which is generally associated with the Chicago school and which also developed in reaction against the "excessive government" exhibited in its eyes, starting with Simons, by the New Deal, and

planning, and the great economic and social programs generally supported by postwar Democratic administrations. As in the case of the German *Ordo-liberals*, the critique carried out in the name of economic liberalism cited the danger represented by the inevitable sequence: economic interventionism, inflation of governmental apparatuses, overadministration, bureaucracy, and rigidification of all the power mechanisms, accompanied by the production of new economic distortions that would lead to new interventions. But what was striking in this American neoliberalism was a movement completely contrary to what is found in the social economy of the market in Germany: where the latter considers regulation of prices by the market—the only basis for a rational economy—to be in itself so fragile that it must be supported, managed, and “ordered” by a vigilant internal policy of social interventions (involving assistance to the unemployed, health care coverage, a housing policy, and so on), American neoliberalism seeks rather to extend the rationality of the market, the schemes of analysis it proposes, and the decisionmaking criteria it suggests to areas that are not exclusively or not primarily economic. For example, the family and birth policy, or delinquency and penal policy.

What would need to be studied now, therefore, is the way in which the specific problems of life and population were raised within a technology of government which, without always having been liberal—far from it—was always haunted since the end of the eighteenth century by liberalism’s question.

The seminar was devoted this year to the crisis of juridical thought in the last years of the nineteenth century. Papers were read by François Ewald (on civil law), Catherine Mevel (on public and administrative law), Eliane Allo (on the right to life in legislation concerning children), Nathalie Coppinger and Pasquale Pasquino (on penal law), Alexandre Fontana (on security measures), François Delaporte and Anne-Marie Moulin (on health policy and health politics).

Note

1. P. Rosanvallon, *Le Capitalisme utopique: critique de l'idéologie économique* (Paris: Seuil, 1979).

THE ESSENTIAL FOUCAULT

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1954-1984*

EDITED BY PAUL RABINOW
AND NIKOLAS ROSE



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