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Review of Zamora's 'critiquer Foucault' [Review of: D. Zamora (2014) Critiquer Foucault: Les années 1980 et la tentation néolibérale]

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Published in:
Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft

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Citation for published version (APA):

Teurlings, J. (2015). Review of Zamora's 'critiquer Foucault' [Review of: D. Zamora (2014) Critiquer Foucault: Les années 1980 et la tentation néolibérale]. *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*, 2015(Juli 29).
<http://www.zfmedienwissenschaft.de/online/review-zamoras-«critiquer-foucault»>

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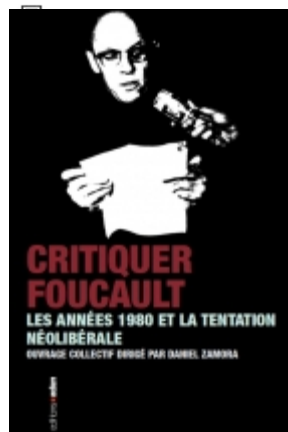
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BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

REVIEW OF ZAMORA'S «CRITIQUER FOUCAULT»

Daniel Zamora: *Critiquer Foucault: Les années 1980 et la tentation néolibérale*, Bruxelles (Éditions Aden) 2014.

reviewed by: *Jan Teurlings*



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It is rare that a book enters the intellectual scene with such a splash as the edited collection *Critiquer Foucault: Les années 1980 et la tentation néolibérale*. Part of its success can be explained by a highly visible debate on the pages of *Jacobin*, itself in turn a highly visible magazine on the Left. In a first interview entitled «Can We Criticize Foucault?», ¹ the editor of the collection, Daniel Zamora, spelled out the book's main argument, namely that

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Foucault's almost iconic status amongst the radical Left glosses too easily over his accommodating stance towards conservative positions, and especially towards the emerging neoliberalism of the 1970s. The interview led to a strong reaction by Peter Frase,² and a final text by Zamora³ in which he responded to his detractor. But the success of the book cannot be explained by this exposure alone; it also asks a genuine question, not only about Foucault's relationship with neoliberalism but also about the strategies of the Left of the last 40 years or so.

It is hard to review an edited collection. The reviewer is faced with problems of carving out the overall argument (what is the argument of a collection of essays that do not necessarily share a point-of-view or even have the same object of analysis?), and decisions on which essays to focus. *Critiquer Foucault* has many facets, from Michael Scott Christofferson's contribution on Foucault's relationship with «la nouvelle philosophie», Loïc Wacquant's invocation of Foucault and Bourdieu vis-à-vis the punitive forms neoliberalism has taken, and Jean-Loup Amselle's critique of Foucault (but also Derrida and Deleuze) as embracing a spiritualization of philosophy. For the purpose of this review, however, I will focus on the contributions of Michael C. Behrent, Daniel Zamora and Jan Rehmann as they cover much of the same terrain, namely the question of Foucault's affinity with—and critical distance to—neoliberalism. The English translation of the book will include a chapter by Mitchell Dean, as well as a new conclusion by Zamora and Behrent, but these are not discussed in this review.

Behrent, in his «liberalism without humanism», explains Foucault's interest in neoliberalism by situating it within Foucault's longstanding dislike of humanism, the essentialist definition of Man that posits a kernel of eternal «humannes» and thus places actual human beings outside of history, and which was the object of his scorn already in the last pages of *The Order of Things*.⁴ In neoliberalism, and especially in the Anglo-Saxon, economic variety influenced by utilitarianism, Foucault finds no such models of human nature. To the contrary: there is a tacit assumption that human beings can be moulded through the abstract forces of the market place (which is very different from political liberalism, based as it is on notions of «natural rights»). This is not a very odd move by Behrent since this can be readily read from the pages of *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008 / 2010).⁵ But Behrent's interpretation goes much further than this. He argues that the interest of Foucault has to be situated in the general intellectual climate of the 1970s in France, where many former Marxists moved against the state. He dedicates lengthy pages to the rise of «la deuxième gauche», a group of intellectuals linked to the important trade union CFDT, who started thinking about a Leftist orientation that was not putting all of its hopes on the state (the orientation of the «first Left»), arguing instead for models of workers' self management (a move not dissimilar to Italian autonomism). Behrent is careful not to equate this Second Left with neoliberalism, but nevertheless notes a certain *rapprochement* between both camps, and suggests that Foucault's interest in neoliberalism is a consequence of his engagement with this Second Left.

Behrent next provides a careful and detailed reading of how this engagement with the Second Left shaped Foucault's thinking on the state, which we now can trace thanks to the publication of the lectures of 1976-1980. In these lectures we see Foucault moving away from his concerns with discipline at the time of *Discipline and Punish* (1975 / 1977)⁶ and focussing instead on biopower and governmentality. This culminates in Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism, in which he repeats at several moments that the Left does not know how to govern, or in other words, that it lacks its own governmentality, depending instead on older forms like the *Polizeiwissenschaft*, or by adopting elements of (neo)liberal governmentality, as witnessed by Mitterand's dramatic political turnaround in 1983. For Behrent the

conclusion is clear: Foucault «maintained that only by *reconciling* itself with neoliberalism could the Left obtain the necessary tools for exercising power» (pp.83–84, my translation, italics added), effectively making Foucault a predecessor of the kind of fusion of social democracy and neoliberalism that was to come during the heyday of the Third Way.

The problem is that no such statement can be found in Foucault's writings. We do not get the smoking gun in which Foucault sardonically announces his allegiance to neoliberalism. What we get instead are contextualisations and careful readings of many scattered writings, which at times amounts to a pretty convincing argument. But if the reader is looking for the definitive proof that Foucault was at heart a neoliberal, she will walk away from this book disappointed. What the collection offers is what I would call a maximalist reading: it gathers as much as possible, and in a very well-researched manner, all of the hints—and there are many, I would like to add—that Foucault was not only fascinated by neoliberalism but also shared some of its analyses. But I would also like to insist that a minimalist reading is possible, one in which Foucault critiqued the Left's focus on the state (including all of its repressive, bureaucratic and normative functions), not to turn to neoliberalism but to find a new way of governing that does not rely on the governmentalities found elsewhere. In such a minimalist reading there would not be a «reconciliation» with neoliberalism as Behrent suggested above, but a provocation to keep looking for a governmentality of the Left.

This can be made more tangible by examining Daniel Zamora's contribution. His main argument is that Foucault's critique of the welfare system as being normative and exclusionary for a whole range of identities and life styles has come at the price of neglecting the issue of exploitation (including such mechanisms as trade unions and social security that are meant to attenuate—not solve, I would like to insist—its effects). Zamora is careful not to dismiss the issues raised by Foucault in the early 1970s around gender and sexual identities, undocumented workers, drug users, the mentally ill or unemployed youth from the *banlieus* as irrelevant. Rather, he aims to show that these issues «are increasingly theorised and thought outside of the issue of exploitation. Instead of a theoretical perspective that thinks the relationship between both problems simultaneously, they have become, little by little, each other's opposite» (p.93, my translation). In Zamora's analysis, Foucault becomes one of the intellectual figureheads that influenced the change in social policy away from combatting inequality towards combatting exclusion during the 1990s. Zamora has some pretty harsh words for said switch, and rightfully so.

Perhaps the most damning pages in the book are those where Zamora takes apart Foucault's take on the problems of social security of his time. He shows that Foucault not only criticised the social security system for being normative (distinguishing between, for example, those deserving and undeserving of social assistance), but also that he shared with the neoliberal Right the insistence that social security was too expensive (p. 104)—which obviously is a matter of political choice rather than necessity. But even on these pages we do not encounter the smoking gun that proves once and for all Foucault's allegiance to neoliberalism. The section on negative income tax, for example, explains what Foucault saw as attractive in the system but relies on secondary commentary to argue that Foucault actually endorsed it. Negative income tax was a neoliberal proposal that aimed at giving unconditional state subsidies to everyone whose income was below a certain threshold. Its appeal for Foucault is obvious: its unconditionality does away with the distinction between those deserving and those not deserving, reduces state bureaucracy to a minimum, and allows people to freely choose their lifestyle. Zamora is right when he argues that later developments like workfare

have contradicted such an optimistic reading of neoliberal proposals, but this is again a question of interpretation: does one read Foucault as fully supporting neoliberalism or was he looking for new ways of organising social security that are not normative and allow the kinds of freedom that neoliberalism promises (but in actuality does not offer)?

To be fair: in his second Jacobin text, Zamora is far less sanguine and he hints at the direction I am arguing here: «We should continue the ideological and political work that began with the birth of the welfare state. We should radicalize its legacy, we should push it ever further, and imagine with it—and not against it—a genuinely egalitarian and democratic society». ⁷ But the text in *Critiquer Foucault* is far more defensive of the welfare state of old. Moreover, there is a curious split in allegiance in Zamora's argument. At times it seems to amount to a defence of the historical welfare state (a historical compromise between the two classes that attenuates but does not abolish capitalist exploitation). At other times the text activates a far more radical register, explicitly making reference to Marxist theory of exploitation and the abolishment of the capitalist mode of production.

Jan Rehmann's text in the volume, «The Unkept Promises of Foucault and Governmentality Studies», resolutely chooses for the latter approach. The core of his argument is not only that governmentality as a concept has many different meanings and levels of application in the different texts and books that deal with it—an assertion that anyone who has occasionally dabbled in governmentality studies can agree with—but also that Foucault limited himself to analysing the specific and articulated rationalities that governors used rather than «the ways in which governors really governed» (p.144). This is classical Foucaultian method, in accordance with the double hermeneutical bracketing ⁸ during his earlier work on discourse. But Rehmann shows that when it comes to liberal governmentality this has severe consequences, in that the promised focus on actual government practices is never realized. As a consequence «[t]he definitions of Foucault coincide entirely with the ideological image liberalism has created of itself, one that prides itself as being a philosophy and a politics opposed to government regulation» (p. 146), whereas in actual practice nineteenth-century liberalism was accompanied by violent and disciplinary measures to control the misery it produced.

It is important to be precise here. Rehmann is not giving the standard critique that «Foucault is not a Marxist». Rather, he argues that because of his method Foucault cannot grasp the connections between the political rationalities he so carefully dissects, and their real-world implementation and effects, and that hence the Foucaultian project is faulted even in its own terms—hence the unkept promises of the title of his essay. In order to remedy this, Rehmann proposes to reorient governmentality studies and complement them with (1) an analysis of neoliberal governmentality as ideology and (2) by firmly grounding this within bourgeois relations of domination. It is clear that we are here in unorthodox Foucaultian territory: the first is precisely what has been excluded from governmentality studies (more often than not they actually define themselves in opposition to ideology critique), and the second is a too «marxisant» category to be admitted into the Foucaultian roll-call. Yet the terrain that is offered by the combination of (1) a focus on specific governmental rationalities while not discarding their real-world effects, (2) a notion of ideology critique that does not just content itself with uncovering hidden intentions, and (3) a situating of all of this within the capitalist conjuncture yields enormous analytical promise. This is admittedly an unlikely and monstrous combination of Marx and Foucault, but it nevertheless seems necessary to understand our contemporary world.

Critiquer Foucault is very well-researched and contains some sources in French that will be new to the English-speaking reader. But the true merit of this book lies in the kind of questions it raises, issues having to do with the Left's relationship with the state and capitalism. With neoliberalism in tatters after having wreaked havoc on the world during the last 30 years, the current moment is full of promises. But the Left is at a crossroads and unsure of what strategy to follow: or it tries to reverse the neoliberal onslaught by harking back to the welfare state of old, or it tries to reinvent it (keeping in mind that even a reinvented Welfare state does not abolish capitalism). Whereas this book is ostensibly about Foucault and his «neoliberal moment», its wider relevance has to do with the fact that we are confronted by many problems similar to those of the 1970s, except that this time I hope we get it right. That is also why in the end I am not interested in the question of whether Foucault was a neoliberal at heart. What matters more is the use we make of the tools he offers to turn this world into a more democratic, egalitarian and freer place, and how such a world should be governed.

The English translation of the book is expected at the end of 2015 and will be published by MCM'.

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1. Daniel Zamora, Can We Criticize Foucault?, in *Jacobin*, 10 December 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/foucault-interview/>, last viewed 24 July 2015.
 2. Peter Frase, Beyond The Welfare State, in *Jacobin*, 11 December 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/beyond-the-welfare-state/>, last viewed 24 July 2015.
 3. Daniel Zamora, Foucault's responsibility, in *Jacobin*, 15 December 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/michel-foucault-responsibility-social...>, last viewed 24 July 2015.
 4. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York 2002 [1966].
 5. Michel Foucault, *The Birth Of Biopolitics: Lectures At The Collège De France, 1978–1979*, Basingstoke, Hampshire 2010, 368.
 6. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York 1977.
 7. Zamora, Foucault's responsibility
 8. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*, Second Edition, Chicago 1983, pp. 49-50.

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