

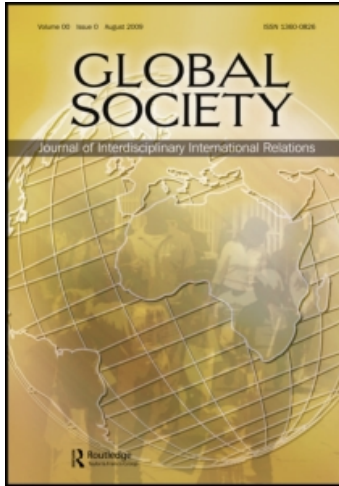
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Globalising Foucault: Turning Critique into Apologia—A Response to Kiersey and Rosenow

DAVID CHANDLER

Introduction

A special issue of *Global Society* generated from recent discussions on Foucauldian approaches to IR, some of which I co-convoked, with Hiroyuki Tosa at BISA 2008 and Giorgio Shani at ISA 2009, is to be welcomed. For readers of the issue it may have seemed that some of the articles were overly defensive in relation to the criticisms of Foucauldian approaches, which would appear to be limited to a few disparate articles, which I am not sure really constitute putting “the concepts and methods of Michel Foucault (again) on trial”.¹ In fact, as far as I am aware, the few critical voices in the discussion have a great deal of sympathy for Foucault’s “concepts and methods”. The point which they have in common, and which I am keen to highlight here, is a questioning approach to the academic and critical value of some of the work of self-proclaimed Foucauldians developing critiques of the global operation of power relations. In this short response, I would like to draw out what might be politically at stake in the discussion of the “globalising” of Foucault and to highlight that the discussion of the relevance of Foucault’s methods or of whether or not it is legitimate to apply Foucault to IR is somewhat of a red herring.

In the special issue, Nicholas Kiersey and Doerthe Rosenow take direct issue with my work and they are by no means unrepresentative of Foucauldian IR in their stress on the need to defend the critical “application” of Foucault to the operations of “global liberalism” or “global governance”.² I would like to defend myself and at the same time question both sides of this “critical” equation and go so far as to suggest that, from this starting point, attempts to develop a critical approach to IR tend inevitably to end in apologia. The danger of this approach is that of turning methodology into a dogmatic a priori approach which takes its object or subject matter at face value and therefore develops a critique which does not go beyond surface appearances. While Foucauldians in IR clearly reflect on their methodological tools for deconstructing “traditional meta-theories and concepts” they seem much less reflective about the inevitability with which they reproduce dominant narratives of the operation of power and politics in today’s “global world”. This approach may be popular in the discipline of IR

1. Doerthe Rosenow, “Decentering Global Power: The Merits of a Foucauldian Approach to International Relations”, *Global Society*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2009), pp. 497–517 (p. 497).

2. *Ibid.*; Nicholas Kiersey, “Neoliberal Political Economy and the Subjectivity of Crisis: Why Governmentality is Not Hollow”, *Global Society*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2009), pp. 363–386.

but does little to assist in our understanding or even our application of the methodology or insights of Foucault and, in fact, risks closing avenues of critique rather than opening them. I want to illustrate this in the context of the understanding of the relationship between power and politics in this form of Foucauldian IR.

Distancing Power from Politics

My own research interest, at the time we organised these discussions to reflect on the boom of Foucauldian work within the discipline of IR, was that of the discursive shift from the international to the global. I found that many critics working from a Foucauldian perspective tended to reproduce dominant narratives about the global as the key site of understanding the operation and contestation of power.³ It seemed clear that the assumption that we lived in a *global* and *liberal* world order was seen to be a crucial precondition to enable the “scaling up” of Foucault.⁴ It was this move which facilitated the boom in IR of this type of Foucauldian approach. This enabled a critique centred upon the ontological presupposition that the object of analysis was the working of *global* biopolitics or *global* governmentality. The criticisms of what we now tend (perhaps misleadingly) to call “Foucauldian IR” stem, I believe, from this uncritical approach taken to the “global”.

The assumption is that Foucault can be “scaled up” to understand, critique and deconstruct power at the global level, through the use of Foucault’s analytical categories. What this misses is that Foucault’s critique was essentially that of subjective framings of meaning through outlining the nature of their social construction, rather than a critique of the operation of power itself. Rather than understand the conditions of possibility that enabled us to think “the global”—and for governments to assert that rather than the task of furthering the national interest their concern had now shifted to developing “global solutions to global problems”—this shift to a “global governmentality” is engaged with only superficially. In using Foucault to critique global governmentality or global biopolitical securitisation, the discursive framing of the global is not deconstructed beyond the “critique” that confirms that power does indeed operate at the level of global discursive practices and that states and their citizens are constructed as subjects through/of this power.

In “Foucauldian IR” we have the analysis or deconstruction of the discursive practices of power but we have no politics. To my mind, this separation of power from politics and the submergence of the one by the other through the mechanism of the “global” had already been articulated by the cosmopolitan theorists of the 1990s. These theorists imagined an immanent global world of politics trumping power—we had global citizens but no global sovereign—reflected in discussions of “international society”, “emerging global norms”, “cosmopolitan law”, “global civil society”, etc. These cosmopolitan theorists imagined a liberal order, in which politics was held to operate at a global level and, in doing so, was asserted to be capable of freeing itself from power relations, held to be

3. David Chandler, *Hollow Hegemony: Rethinking Global Politics, Power and Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

4. To use Jan Selby’s expression; “Engaging Foucault: Discourse, Liberal Governance and the Limits of Foucauldian IR”, *International Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2007), pp. 324–345.

located at the national level. In the 2000s, many Foucauldian theorists sought to critique this imagined liberal global order through arguing that it was both a fiction and a reality. It was a reality in that politics and power had become separated; however, in inverting the cosmopolitan vision, it was asserted that it was power which had gone global while politics remained constrained to the boundaries of the nation-state. Instead of a world of politics without power relations we had the emergence of global power beyond the reach of politics. Power unleashed from politics became a free-standing, globally networked and multi-noded “empire” with no fixed centre. Although, for Foucault, power does not reside solely in the sovereign nor operate solely through formal political and legal processes, there is a problem when we apply this insight to the global level. In this application, power becomes external and constitutive of society, rather than securing itself through it, and therefore cannot be grasped as a political product.⁵

To my mind, it was precisely this shift to the “global”—which necessarily implies an assertion of the divorce of politics and power—that needed to be engaged with and analysed, rather than taken for granted as a “truth” of which we only became aware with the discovery of “globalisation” or the shift to “biopolitical production”. In these framings of power as distinct from or divorced from politics, the discipline of IR was transformed from an ugly duckling, marginal to social theorising and in the shadow of political theory, into a (potentially) magnificent swan, to which the other fields of social theorising gravitated, leaving political theory looking increasingly leaden in comparison. What had made IR seem backward compared to political theory—the lack of a fit between power and politics—suddenly became IR’s greatest asset. Where, once, liberalism was only at home inside the state and the divide between the “inside” and the “outside” was seen as fundamentally separating (and marginalising) IR as a discipline, now we were told by cosmopolitans and Foucauldians alike that liberalism’s new (power-free or politics-free) home was the global (for good or ill).

While politics may still take place in the hollowed-out shells of the state-based politics of representation, power has migrated to the global arena, free to mobilise independently from formal frameworks of political accountability. The separation of politics from power has enabled a direct critique of power—commonly termed as liberal, neoliberal or biopolitical—which easily reads international (and domestic) policy interventions as direct reflections of the needs or interests of hegemonic power, reducing political and academic critique to the revelation of power relations and interests and to explorations of the various practices and operations of power beyond or through the formal framings of liberal, state-based, political and legal frameworks. It is the unproblematic assumption of the global or deterritorialised nature of power which I have sought to question. This assumption and its questioning have little to do with Foucault per se; nevertheless, how we might read and apply Foucault has become central to the defence of a certain critical position with regard to power and the global. It seems to me that the claim to be defending Foucault’s intellectual relevance is something of a red herring, as the key point of the assumption of the global operation of power beyond politics is evaded.

5. For Foucault, politics only starts once the Prince rules through society rather than externally to it. See Foucault’s discussion of Machiavelli, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 65.

From this point on I will restrict myself to taking up some of the points raised by the authors against the analysis which I make in my article in *International Political Sociology*,⁶ which, as the editors state, “looms large in many of the contributions to the collection” and was a focus of the pieces in the special issue by Kiersey and Rosenow.⁷ This article only referenced Foucault’s recently translated lectures from the Collège de France as a contextual aside and focused on the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and to a lesser extent Giorgio Agamben, Julian Reid, Mark Duffield, Vivienne Jabri and Costas Douzinas to illustrate my argument that Foucauldian-inspired theorising tended to reproduce a similar ontological view of the divorce between power and politics as that produced by cosmopolitan theorists. In fact, considering that Kiersey argues that my critique may, in fact, be applicable to much of “what passes as biopolitical research in IR theory or the field of Security Studies” there would, at first glance, seem little reason for defensiveness.⁸ I do not make any “broader claim that Foucault would have little or nothing to say about the ‘crisis’ of contemporary liberalism”.⁹ My concern is primarily what we (as critical academics working in the discipline of IR) have to say about this “crisis” and, secondarily, how we understand this crisis in relation to current developments in the international sphere.

In my article, I criticised some of the Foucauldian approaches within IR for closing down questioning of some of the assumptions which I see as at the heart of the apparent popularity of IR as a discipline today and for a certain lack of reflectivity regarding what is at stake in the shift from the international to the global and the rise of Foucauldian IR within this. I sought to highlight that in asserting the rupture between power and politics, both cosmopolitans and Foucauldians critique the philosophical and political grounding assumptions of the autonomous rights subject. This critique was popularised by cosmopolitan theorists in the 1990s and this body of theory reflected both the crisis in liberal theorising and attempts to renegotiate our understandings of power and politics independently of the classical rights-based approach of liberal theorising. I suggested that much contemporary Foucauldian theorising could be seen as a contribution to this discourse rather than as a critical approach to it.

I argued that the withdrawal of the masses from the political process was the material basis for the implosion of liberal frameworks of political meaning. For Kiersey, however, all is right in the world of the liberal subjugation of the subject and instead we have “the production of a very active subject indeed”;¹⁰ one who is actively self-governing on the basis of the domination of biopolitical and neoliberal capitalism’s ability to “elicit and produce” these forms of behaviour in the population through a series of “market-based technologies”.¹¹ Apparently Kiersey occupies the critical or radical high ground in this exchange

6. David Chandler, “Critiquing Liberal Cosmopolitanism? The Limits of the Biopolitical Approach”, *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2009), pp. 53–70.

7. Nicholas Kiersey and Jason Weidner, “Editorial Introduction”, *Global Society*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2009), pp. 353–361 (p. 358).

8. Kiersey, “Neoliberal Political Economy”, *op. cit.*, p. 384.

9. *Ibid.* In my view, Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008) tells us much more about the crisis of contemporary liberalism than the entire output of “Foucauldian IR”; see David Chandler, “Risk and the Biopolitics of Global Insecurity”, *Journal of Conflict, Security and Development*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (forthcoming 2010).

10. Kiersey, “Neoliberal Political Economy”, *op. cit.*, p. 385.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 365, 385.

as it appears that I am advocating a “sovereign individualist platform” where individuals are held to be autonomous and therefore can be seen to be to blame for their political passivity, whereas, instead, we should appreciate that it is the discursive practices of neoliberal capitalism that have produced this alleged “crisis” through “labour[ing] vigorously on the production of subjects of economic responsibility”.¹² There is no crisis of liberalism, merely the reproduction of liberal governmentality on a global scale.

The precondition for this argument is the separation of power from politics and the ontological privileging of power. Power here is the precondition for politics and has constitutive agency. Autonomous individuals are merely the subjects/objects of power as power floats freely (globally) between different levels and through different practices. No matter how many times Foucault might be mentioned or drawn upon or defended, there is the small matter that Foucauldian IR rejects Foucault’s subjective agent-centred focus on state governmentality and replaces this with the subject-less and agent-less governmentality of global power. The problem therefore is not so much the scaling up of Foucault in terms of spatial levels: from the state to the international or from Western liberal parts of the world to non-Western, non-liberal regions. The problem with the Foucauldian “scaling up” is that the sovereign and the state disappear in terms of autonomous political agency. Rather than conceptualising changing and contested governmental rationalities, drawing out the state/sovereign’s shifting understanding of and intervention in society, Foucauldians in IR are led to efface the state or sovereign as political subjects, collapsing them into the rationalities of global power.

A world without politics where all that exists is power is not one which is open to political critique. This means that, for Kiersey, for example, the question under investigation is never clear. It appears that we are not analysing discourses of meaning generated by social contestation but rather transcendental universals, with their own needs. For these Foucauldians in IR, the discourses of power are never generated by real political elites confronted by real historically grounded problems in need of negotiation. Instead, discourses (and by implication power) appear as self-generating. It is therefore no surprise that Kiersey can talk of “what liberalism desires”¹³ or of the free-floating power of “neoliberal capitalism”, going so far as to assert: “It is Foucault’s contention that neoliberal capitalism has a consciousness of itself as a theory which seeks to incite entrepreneurialism to the point of crisis.”¹⁴

Apparently we have more political and critical insights once we have rejected the “sovereign individualism” of liberal perspectives and can understand the free-floating power of biopolitical global neoliberal governmentality. This is because the subject is “active” rather than “passive”, but the active subject is no more than a secondary product of the global discursive practices of liberal power, which are held to be constantly striving to interpellate the subject in these terms. Whereas Foucault sought to highlight the internal contradictions and problems of rationalising liberal frameworks of rule, Foucauldians in IR seem to be keen to establish the unproblematic nature of global liberalism.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 376.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 381.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

Rather than deconstruct discourses of individualised agency, which cast the subject in purely institutionalist terms, as merely responding to externalities, the criticism of subject autonomy seems to reproduce them.¹⁵

Reuniting Politics and Power

The classical modern framing of the political, with the ontological primacy of the autonomous subject—the ideological precondition for the economic freedoms of the market as well as the political and legal freedoms of democracy and equality before the law—was more than just a fairy story which power told to control and dominate. It is, of course, the case that the story of the birth of the autonomous subject was not a true and honest one. Natural rights doctrine inverted the real historical movement in presupposing the autonomous rights-bearing subject as the originating actor or founder of the modern state rather than emerging in tandem with it. Nevertheless, there was something fundamentally important in this discursive framing of the relationship between politics and power.

The point of the modern framing—the doctrine of the rights of man or of the social contract—was that of the conception of the autonomous individual. The ontological primacy of the autonomous individual, whose rights and interests were conceived of as prior to society or the state, reflected the real social movements and forces of society. It should be stressed that it was these social forces that made power a subject of politics and simultaneously a political subject. Prior to this conception, there were merely organicist conceptions of power in which society was prior to the individual or the social whole took preference over its parts. With the privileging of the autonomous subject, political power was no longer a natural fact but an artificial or social product. In the words of Norberto Bobbio:

Without this Copernican revolution, which allowed the problem of the state to be viewed for the first time through the eyes of its subjects rather than the sovereign, the doctrine of the liberal state, which is first and foremost the doctrine of judicial limits to state power, would have been impossible. Without individualism, there can be no liberalism.¹⁶

The modern ontology of the primacy of the individual subject was a social construction or a narrative framing but it was also a reflection of the growth of mass politics and popular political engagement and the demand for equality and emancipation which reflected this. It was the opening of power to social control which was constitutive of politics as a distinct sphere of activity. Before the “Copernican revolution” of liberalism, power was understood to be beyond popular control or understanding. It was the birth of politics which brought power down to earth, locating it and subjecting it to conscious intervention and social construction.

For the advocates of global power, the divorce of power and politics is reflected in the disappearance of politics and the return to the operation of power independently of political contestation or engagement. This is why Kiersey argues that

15. See Foucault's *Birth of Biopolitics* on the “shifts, transformations and inversions in traditional liberal doctrines” reflected in the rise of institutionalism and behavioural economics (p. 118).

16. Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 9.

individuals should no longer be understood as autonomous political subjects but instead as objects shaped and created by “global capitalism” or “the emergence of relations of biopolitical capitalism”. In the process of the creation and subjugation of individuals, these relations of global power are actively reproduced. For Kiersey, this framework of the autonomous subject cannot be a critique of power but merely part of its reproduction and enforcement. Rosenow, similarly, takes fundamental issue with a critique focused upon the rights-subject of modern politics, claiming that the assumption of a “universal subject” as a vantage point of critique is an invalid one.

While power operates globally it appears that even the aspiration to develop a political critique is held to be invalid and is an act either of oppression or of complicity. For Rosenow, all we can do is describe and study how, on the surface, different regimes of power might work. Heterogeneity is central to this critical framing, which asserts that global power cannot be critiqued as having a centre or a structured set of instrumental goals.¹⁷ However, more importantly, there is no standpoint or universal perspective from which power can be critiqued or understood in political terms. In this allegedly Foucauldian framing of the global, power stands outside the world of politics, unknowable except by the consequences of its actions. The sovereign of the global is no more of a political subject than the global citizen in the cosmopolitan perspective and is labelled by meaningless and interchangeable abstractions: usually involving a mixture of terms such as “capitalism” and “liberalism” with varying prefixes such as “post-”, “neo-”, or “late-”, used conjunctively with words sometimes used by Foucault, such as “governmentality” or “biopolitics”.

The work of Foucault is not the subject of this paper. However, it seems to me that Foucault’s work had little in common methodologically with the “Foucauldians in IR” referred to here. It is certainly possible to read Foucault as having asserted an intimate relationship between politics and power and to have explored the shifting discourses through which this relationship was played out within the liberal problematic. Ironically, perhaps, we can find in Foucault an exploration of the centrality of the state and its relationship to society as the foundational basis for differing rationalities of governing, asserting that the ideational forms of liberal rule were not free-floating nor purely structurally determined but products of social and political relations. His discussions of governmentality and biopolitics concerned the methods by which the liberal state secured and legitimated itself through its relationship with society. His discussion of the *Birth of Biopolitics*, in particular, challenged the view that the modern state was no longer the focus of power and of politics, explaining the discursive shift to institutionalism as a way of legitimising power in response to the crisis of liberal framings of representative legitimacy in post-war Germany.

Conclusion

For Foucault, the contestation of governing rationalities—frameworks of understanding the objectives and methods of governing—was the essence of politics. Today’s governing rationality is that of the global disjunction between politics (confined to the nation-state) and power (alleged to be free-floating and

17. See Rosenow, *op. cit.*

unaccountable). In a context where it is held that governments can no longer aspire to control, to know, or to plan, it appears that government is reduced to the regulation or administration of externalities as a globalised world appears to operate beyond conscious human intervention. In this framework, the aspirations of modernity appear to be little more than an oppressive fiction or a dangerous hubris along with the view of the autonomous subject capable of knowing and transforming the external world. The Foucauldians in IR tend to reproduce this governing rationality of the migration of power to the global and unaccountable flows of cyberspace suggesting that critique lies precisely in revealing that power lies beyond the contested claims of political reason.

The modern framing of the relationship between power and politics is in crisis as governments increasingly appear to be rudderless and agenda-less in a world where the mechanisms of representation have broken down. Nevertheless, it appears that a solution to this crisis is at hand, precisely in the discourse that power has freed itself from the territorial shackles of politics, thereby setting a new series of limits and possibilities for government intervention and policy making. If this is the case, then rather than critiquing the governing rationalities of our age, the Foucauldian boom in IR can perhaps be understood as part of the process of rationalising and enforcing the dominant narratives of the impossibility of holding power to political account. My concern is that whereas Foucault offered a critique of governing rationalities, it appears that, at least in the discipline of IR, Foucauldians could be merely offering an apologia for them.