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## Forget Foucault, Forget Foucault, Forget Foucault...

DAVID CHANDLER

*University of Westminster*

It is a mantra, doomed to be repeated. It is not a plea. It is not an injunction. We cannot “forget” Foucault in the same way as, in another era, Marx could only repeat his distance from “Marxists” and the defeats of that other era turned Marxism into a dogma. In our era, the transformation of Foucault into the dogmas of “Foucaultians” and “post-Foucaultians” cannot be ended by the work of academics; it is not an academic problem. In the same way, the bloating of the discipline of IR, and the boom of dogmatic Foucaultianism within this, have nothing to do with academia per se, but how the world impinges upon and is reflected within disciplines, overdetermining the transformation of both what we call “IR” and what we call “political theory” and their inter-relationship.

As Marxists, it is possible for us to understand how the transformation of Marxist thought into dogma was a necessary reflection of the degeneration of the liberatory political project of *The Communist Manifesto*, and, as Foucaultians, it is possible for us to understand how, in our era, the “disciplining” or “colonizing” of Foucault, within IR, is not a contradiction or a puzzle or an occasion for the allocation of blame but is a necessity. Why has IR “colonized” Foucault so easily, and yet found Marx so indigestible that he has been a constant mystery to the discipline itself? What is it about IR today that facilitates an appropriation of Foucault’s epistemological framework in ways which have been much more problematic within political theory (which, of course, had no difficulty institutionalizing Marx in the academy)?

Foucault tells us the answers (and they are replayed in discussions of the possibility or impossibility of “scaling up” Foucault in investigations of global governmentality). IR was not amenable to liberal frameworks because there was no sovereign and no society, no political or legal field of relationships between government and governed: IR lacked a sovereign. As Foucault states, IR was pre-liberal, it was Mercantilist, a sphere of zero-sum relations. In this pre-liberal world, the pursuit of individual interests did not lead to the collective good, on the contrary the only thing at stake was life itself: collective destruction.

The pre-liberal nature of IR, its lack of a sovereign, meant that, as long as we lived in a liberal world, IR would always play the “country cousin” in relation to the discipline of liberalism, the discipline shaped and bounded by the sovereign: political theory. We asked, as if we did not know: “Why is there no IR theory?” We answered that in IR, as we knew it then, there was no history, no progress, no ethics, no community, no sovereign, and so on and so on. We said that IR was defined precisely by its lack of content, its emptiness, in contradistinction to the fullness of the world bounded by the sovereign state.

The words that we said about political theory and the words that we said about IR are said in our era but with an inversion of the disciplines. In a world no longer liberal, political theory, enslaved to the sovereign, is empty and leaden; the dumb and backward “country cousin” destined to forever gaze up at IR and ask “Why can I not theorize and appropriate the world?” The removal of the sovereign from power is only one of the many “shifts, transformations, and inversions in traditional liberal doctrine” which Foucault describes in his prescient work on the *Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault 2008:118).

Once the postliberal world had made sovereignty redundant in the act of empowering the interest-bearing actors of civil society, IR began to cry out to be the sphere of rethinking and representing the postliberal “dispositif”: the postliberal field of policy and practice and meaning. It took the end of the Cold War for what could only have been marginal to IR to redefine the discipline, to be its driving dynamic.

The precondition for IR to become the field through which postliberal framings could be worked through was the brief “interregnum” of the 1990s, when IR imagined itself and was imagined in liberal terms. The imaginary sovereign weighed a liberal “economy of power” in the “too much or too little” of intervention and the clash of rights of the human and the postcolonial state—imagined and weighed as those of the individual and the collective, of freedom and security.

The liberal imaginary fell on the rocks of the reality of a lack of a real global sovereign and society, allowing postliberalism to appear as the only possible framing of our world. Ethical foreign policy failed to free itself from the taint of interests and the global sovereign from the taint of particular interests. The imaginary particular held back the imaginary universal and could not be shrugged off; it threatened to expose it at every turn.

If innocents died in war or if people continued to starve or die from disease was this not because the particular self-interests of those who imagined themselves to rule in the name of all, as global sovereigns, made it so? If soldiers, intervening, put their own safety ahead of that of potential victims of abuses did it not show that the universal was trumped by the particular, whatever the declarations of ethical or human-centered interventions? If we cared as much as we said we cared and if the stakes of care and interest overlapped as we were told, how could power still allow the wrongs and evils of the world to exist?

Power appeared indefensible and therefore needed the defense called upon by liberal power—the defense of institutionalism or of the biopolitical—convincing us and itself that it does not exist. The moment that it was possible for power to be articulated in the name of the imaginary global sovereign was the birth of the biopolitics of global relations.

The imaginary global sovereigns quickly imagined the disappearance of the global sovereign. Rerunning the apologias of the 1970s, reviving institutionalism to say that they were not to blame for the state of the world: the pyres of war dead and non-war dead. These things could not be ended by those who claimed the imaginary rights of global sovereignty.

The dead and the about to die could only help themselves, they had to “own” the policies of their salvation and be their own angels of intervention. The disappearing global sovereign could only facilitate, empower or capacity-build and even then, unknowing and uncomprehending, had to struggle to realize that in the postliberal world very little could be done, except to challenge the hubris of those who had gone before.

The imagining of a liberal “moment” was the precondition for postliberal IR to bloat itself feeding off the corpse of liberalism. IR became the discipline that could prove that the sovereign didn’t exist, that we lived in a world of globalization, of complexity and interdependence, where liberal assumptions no longer

applied. The postliberal framings of institutionalism—that we cannot act and cannot know, that there is nothing beyond the “irreducible” subject of individual “interests”—that there is no sovereign and no society—the truths that preliberal IR told when they were not truths—were now repackaged as political theory once the world had become globalized in the imagination. It was through IR that the blockages of political theory—the boundaries of the sovereign, framing a world of rights and law—could be overcome and restructured.

How do we govern in a world with no sovereign and no citizens, only the “homo oeconomicus” of interest-bearing individuals? This is the postliberal problematic that drives IR and turns political theory into the philosophy of a world which no longer exists. Turning Foucault into dogma—turning contingency into certainty and a problematization of power into an apologia for power, turning the inversion of liberalism into liberalism—has been necessary to enable IR to critique its imaginary liberal self as the basis upon which postliberal framings of the global become a possibility. The global world is a world made safe for Foucault and makes Foucault safe for the world—for the critique of liberalism can only enforce the discipline and the disciplining of IR as the forcing ground for postliberal understandings.

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## Why Not to Choose a Secure “We” in a Security-Obsessed World

ASLI CALKIVIK

*University of Minnesota*

In an interview in his later life, Foucault voiced his amusement at the diversity of the ways he had been judged and classified along the political spectrum (as “an idealist, as a nihilist, as a ‘new philosopher,’ an anti-Marxist, a new conservative, and so on”) and accounted for his project as posing “a problem to politics.” As he comments:

I do not appeal to any “we”—to any of those “wes” whose consensus, whose values, whose traditions constitute the framework for a thought and define the conditions in which it can be validated. But the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a “we” in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a “we” possible by elaborating the question. Because it seems to me that “we” must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result—and the necessary temporary result—of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it. (Foucault 1984:385)

It is not a pre-given “we” that Foucault takes his point of departure for thought, judgment and action. Rendering us unfamiliar with habitual ways of recognizing ourselves, questioning the hidden assumptions of what we do and