
Society, like the market, needs to be constructed: Foucault's critical project at the dawn of neoliberalism

History of the Human Sciences
2018, Vol. 31(1) 74–96
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0952695117746045
journals.sagepub.com/home/hhs



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Abstract

It has been commonplace to equate Foucault's 1979 series of lectures at the *Collège de France* with the claim that for neoliberalism, unlike for classical liberalism, the market needs to be artificially constructed. The article expands this claim to its full expression, taking it beyond what otherwise would be a simple divulgation of a basic neoliberal tenet. It zeroes in on Foucault's own insight: that neoliberal constructivism is not directed at the market as such, but, in principle, at society, arguing that the value of this insight goes beyond the critique of a neoliberal present. The neoliberal rationale rather helps him to reveal a unique historical architecture, a latent approach to the social dissimilar to the one that has long predominated in the human sciences. The inversion of *homo oeconomicus* in neoliberal theory amounted to the unearthing of a 'social subject of interest' within civil society. Such a subject, barely recognized by neoliberals who simply instrumentalize it for the sake of the market, demonstrates that the social is not necessarily the natural product of ethical subjects; that society may also need to be constructed.

Keywords

civil society, constructivism, economization, Michel Foucault, neoliberalism

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Introduction

Colin Gordon once alluded to a kind of ‘game of the social’ that Foucault did not follow. Reflecting on the reception of Foucault in Britain, he spoke of his ‘little faith in the goodness of society’, his ‘mistrust for the social bond’ and his distance from ‘the game of critique of society in the name of society allied to the invocation of a deeply rooted, popular and constitutive sociability’ (Gordon, 1996: 262-5). The question that naturally follows – and that Gordon struggled to answer, still appealing at the end of his essay to a ‘universal principle of collective identity’ (ibid.: 268) – is that of *what other game of the social is there then?* Foucault’s 1979 lectures at the *Collège de France* offer a rare opportunity to elucidate this question. They deal directly with the 18th-century theme of a ‘civil society’ and, as he himself comments, with what ‘very quickly’ comes to be called ‘the nation, society, the social’ (Foucault, 2008: 296).

Beyond scattered comments and oblique analyses, Foucault never fully dedicated himself to this highly charged theme of modern political culture (Dean, 2010: 684; cf. Neocleous, 1996). And even in this course, he treats civil society with noticeable detachment, as a technical referent for a liberal form of rule seeking to justify its power by reference to an outside that is in need of government. There is a minimal sense in which Foucault’s own critical project does have a clear relation with this theme. As he synthetically expressed it in one of his late interviews, ‘critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are . . . We must free ourselves from the sacralization of the social as the only reality’ (1988: 154-5). But, as one can readily sense, it is a connection that only deepens our curiosity. What does the social look like when it is not ‘sacralized’? What other ‘reality’ is there for a critical reflection on our contemporary circuits of collaboration?

I take for granted in this article that ‘the social’ was invented and, in this sense, ‘constructed’ at some point. Foucault, it is already known, played a crucial role in achieving this historicist understanding. His ‘governmentality’ framework, for example, has helped to relativize the idea of a systemic and ideational unity called ‘culture’ or ‘society’ as a contingent effect of 18th-century governmental ambitions (Helliwell and Hindess, 1999; Poovey, 2002). The full publication of his 1979 lecture course constitutes a sort of living archive in this sense. The real insight of this article, as signaled by its title, is rather that ‘society needs to be constructed’ in the same sense as Foucault stated that the market, from the viewpoint of neoliberal rationality, needs to be ‘carefully and artificially constructed’ (2008: 120-1). I intend to persuade a well-established interpretive audience that has learned to read this text with the lens of ‘governmentality’ of this additional and equally significant move embedded in Foucault’s lectures.

An immediate objection from a governmentality reading could be that ‘the state’ is the analytical concern in these lectures rather than ‘society’ (Villadsen and Dean, 2012). Nevertheless, it is of significance that Foucault’s critical point at the end – his ‘punch line’ – was about society. This is not only noticeable during his last lectures, as I will discuss at length, but also in the course summary, where he ends up defining liberalism as a ‘critical’ ethos of political reflection coming ‘from within or outside’ the sphere of governance that persistently departs from ‘a problematic . . . of “society”’ (Foucault, 2008: 318-21). Such an overarching conclusion suggests that the force of Foucault’s

criticism can be located within a broad understanding of liberalism. His project is ‘liberal’ in the expansive sense that refers us to the political will for progressive social change shared by the ‘moderns’, whether this will for reform is expressed at the level of state policy or grassroots mobilization (Beaulieu, 2010; Cruikshank, 2007; Stenson, 1998; Tobias, 2005).

Foucault is, in principle, neither ‘state-phobic’ (Dean and Villadsen, 2016) nor ‘pro civil society’ (Villadsen, 2016), and, more importantly, he does not side with any political projection of the social, like the Marxist or neoliberal one, either (Patton, 2013: 39–40). To discern the specific orientation of his critical project, I contend, a distinction is needed at a meta-level, at the level of the social’s architecture as a historical problem. Investigating the architecture of a problem is not about getting involved, or at least not directly, in the drafting of any particular solution, but only about identifying the routes that are historically available to solve it. Revealing, however, that there is a broader range of ways of solving things than was previously imaginable can constitute a critical project in itself. It is to open up the field of the possible within the internal bounds of an already existing historical conscience that places importance on the social.

The article follows this rationale to capture the historicist preoccupation that was behind Foucault’s effort to relate neoliberal thought to classical Enlightenment writings on civil society. Unlike philosophical, inter-textual and contextual readings that have ambiguously found in this course a ‘sympathetic’ response to neoliberalism (Dilts, 2011: 132), a ‘generally positive view of it’ (Behrent, 2015: 388) or a fundamental, if uncertain, ‘affinity’ (Dean and Villadsen, 2016: 164), an intra-textual reading at this architectural level is able to establish Foucault’s intellectual relation with neoliberalism in a straightforward way. Foucault simply sensed a striking resonance when reading foundational statements on the social, in particular those of Adam Ferguson like the one I cite below, with an emerging political rationality based on a sociality of competition:

Mankind, we are told, are devoted to interest; and this, in all commercial nations, is undoubtedly true: but it does not follow, that they are, by their natural dispositions, averse to society and mutual affection. . . . What must we think of the force of that disposition to compassion, to candour, and goodwill, which, notwithstanding the prevailing opinion that the happiness of a man consists in possessing the greatest possible share of riches, preferences, and honours, still keeps the parties who are in competition for those objects, on a tolerable footing of amity, and leads them to abstain even from their own supposed good, when their seizing it appears in the light of a detriment to others? (Ferguson, 1995[1767]: 38–9)

In this article, I will follow the same layered progression that Foucault’s lectures describe to make reference to ‘the social’ and ‘civil society’ as the problematic in general of circuits of collaboration: in principle, as the sphere of communal values and virtues that can be opposed to the market; then, eventually, as the very sphere of the market where commercial exchange becomes the source of collaboration and mutual civility (see Hirschman, 1997[1977]: 51–66); and, ultimately, as the more encompassing sphere of belonging and sociality where the latter two coalesce to form society as a whole. Foucault’s hypothesis – for it is too undeveloped in his work to be called a ‘thesis’ – was

that a socially collaborative subject had to be in fact at the heart of the neoliberal project for a renewed *homo economicus*. This hypothesis has come to be confirmed by more recent research that, from different disciplinary angles, similarly perceives a recognizable social aspect to neoliberalism (Bonefeld, 2013a; Dean, 1999; Feher, 2009; Muehlebach, 2012; Rose, 1999). One only needs to recall Margaret Thatcher's words after being elected to appreciate the relevance of this interpretation: 'the first principle of this government . . . is to reinvigorate not just the economy and industry but the whole body of voluntary associations' (cited in Rose, 1999: 138). Foucault's contribution to this literature lies less in the concrete details he could provide at such an early stage than in the recognition of the historical potential that has always existed for a layered and essentially 'instrumental' conception of the social like the neoliberal one, a recognition from which, nonetheless, a whole constructionist critical project can emerge.

First, this article re-examines Foucault's claim about neoliberalism's 'market constructionism', showing how it points, not towards a critique of 'economization', but rather towards an implicit meta-distinction between 'ethics' and 'strategics' within the social.¹ Then, it proceeds to trace the historicist concern driving Foucault's inquiry, capturing it as a hypothesis about a 'social subject of interest' latent within civil society. Expanding on the previous two findings, it goes on to elaborate on a strategic level the affinity between Adam Smith and an ethics-based conception of society. Lastly, this article reflects upon the peculiar constructionist insight that underlies this work of historicization, urging social critique to go beyond its traditional 'strategic holism'.

Neoliberals' analytical move

Foucault's critical project in the 1979 lectures is about the social but not in the sense that he would like society to be remoralized, de-economized, autonomized or 'defended', as he had objected years earlier in the same course (2003: 316). I would like to start by examining the critical interest that Foucault did manifest towards a relatively novel, at the time, neoliberal rationality of government. This critical interest has usually been captured in terms of a concern with the 'economization of the social' (e.g. Bröckling *et al.*, 2011: 25; Brown, 2015: 62). However, it is possible to demonstrate fairly quickly that, if anything, he was more concerned with 'the socialization of the economic', and, at any rate, regardless of the terminology, that what he brings to our attention is the way the social is conceptualized in a wholly unexpected way by neoliberals.

The main neoliberal innovation for Foucault lies in the idea, conceived by German ordoliberalism, that 'competition' is an artificial, not natural, phenomenon (2008: 133). As Werner Bonefeld has come to elaborate, for ordoliberalism 'competition is a human necessity', yet it is one that cannot subsist without 'a social policy that secures the fundamental sociability of the unsocial interests' (Bonefeld, 2013b: 110). Neoliberals, as has come to be well known thanks to a certain extent to Foucault, decide, in principle, to act upon and actually 'construct' the so-called free market (see Gershon, 2011). But, on closer inspection, what Foucault notices is that, in reality, their policy is less a matter of altering the market than 'of constructing a social fabric', that 'basically, [government] has to intervene on society so that competitive mechanisms can play a regulatory role at every moment and every point in society' (Foucault, 2008: 148, 145). In spite of the

interventionist drive of neoliberalism, the market for them still cannot be approached directly – ‘since this is a liberal regime’ (ibid.: 145), as Foucault at some point stresses. Thus, beyond establishing the minimal rules and framework for a free economic game between enterprise units (ibid.: 140, 173), *constructing the market* for neoliberals means – as commentators on the lectures agree (see e.g. Protevi, 2010) – *intervening in society in such a way that it fosters market competition*.

The issue that this analysis creates is whether the critical concern behind it relates to the market – either in a denunciatory or sympathizing way – or rather to society. Foucault’s rhetoric during the lectures gives the impression of being critical in the first sense at times. After introducing ordoliberal thought, for example, he suggests that what he has just reviewed, ‘the original armature of neoliberalism’, demonstrates that this form of government has as its main objective ‘a general regulation of society by the market’ (Foucault, 2008: 145). Ordoliberalism is in other words depicted as an art of government that, while offering a new constructivist take on the market, still displays an equal or greater desire to colonize the domain of the social through the predominance of an economic behavior – the only difference being that, in this case, ‘the *homo oeconomicus* sought after is not the man of exchange or man the consumer’ but ‘the man of enterprise and production’ (ibid.: 147). Comprehensibly, the reader may thus be left with the image of an antisocial dystopia made of one-dimensional individuals whose cunning nature leads them to battle each other in court, in the marketplace and countless other ‘surfaces of friction’ emerging ‘between each of these enterprises’ (ibid.: 149).

By the third last lecture, however, as a reader, one is bound to be faced with the fact that in this German approach there is still a certain social embeddedness or ‘*economic-ethical ambiguity* around the notion of enterprise itself’ (Foucault, 2008: 241, emphasis added).² Having, by that point, also gone through the particularities of the Chicago School of neoliberalism, it is then highly possible that any attentive reader will feel that ‘so far it is not entirely clear where this is going’ (Tribe, 2009: 693). In fact, to confuse things even more, a sign of critique expressed in quite palatable terms would seem to come again during that antepenultimate lecture. In front of a packed auditorium, Foucault plainly states that, in comparison with the aforementioned ethical ambiguity, ‘American neo-liberalism evidently appears much more radical’ (2008: 243).

This statement, a turning point in the course at any rate, appears to reinstate the option of a critique about the ‘economization of the social’. Foucault even elaborates on how this American radicalness refers to an ‘unlimited’ or ‘absolute generalization’ of what he calls ‘the economic form of the market’ to ‘the whole of the social system not usually conducted through or sanctioned by monetary exchanges’ (Foucault, 2008: 243). Nevertheless, notwithstanding this rhetoric, Foucault provided telling remarks and signs of not being interested in his invoked ‘radicalness’ in this sense.

On the one hand, it is true that he had just identified in the previous lecture how the individual was being reconceptualized as an ‘ability-machine’ that produces its own income, which indeed called for an extension of economics into social areas, since it would be relevant to know how this ‘human capital is formed and accumulated’ (Foucault, 2008: 226-7). Nevertheless, Foucault sensed that this capital-oriented optic could not be simply denounced and unproblematically equated to a pervasive

utilitarianism (see Feher, 2009). Instead, he made a call to investigate how its ‘coefficient of threat’ is owed to ‘the very effectiveness of the analysis’ it advances (Foucault, 2008: 233).

On the other hand, it is still true that he does talk, then, of a certain radicalness that challenges the sociological understanding of human behavior. And yet, it is again a claim that must be understood in a non-conventional sense. In principle, as Gordon grasps with precision, American neoliberal theory has ‘an altogether more radical consistency’ because it ‘empowers economic calculation effectively to sweep aside the anthropological categories and frameworks of the human and social sciences’ (Gordon, 1991: 42-3). But this does not mean that such theorization is anti-sociological, that in it ‘every individual, every subject is an economic man’ (Foucault, 2008: 253). Early on, Foucault discarded the critique that, ‘from a sociological point of view [neoliberalism] is just a way of establishing strictly market relations in society’ (ibid.: 130). And, later on in the course, he would supersede it:

considering the subject as *homo aeconomicus* does not imply an anthropological identification of any behavior whatsoever with economic behavior. It simply means that economic behavior is *the grid of intelligibility* one will adopt on the behavior of a new individual. (ibid.: 252, emphasis added)

Even the neoliberal *homo aeconomicus* of the Chicago School was not coextensive with the field of economic behavior. It was something more than a model of conduct to reify the economy. For Foucault, it was a ‘grid of intelligibility’ that economists try to apply to all ‘non-random’ practices, to the extent that any minimally thoughtful conduct can be said to be the result of a ‘strategic choice of means’ (ibid.: 269).³

The way Foucault is interested in this ‘radicalness’, then, goes in a counterintuitive direction.⁴ For the sake of clarity, I capture his orientation here as one of intellectual interest in the neoliberal ‘socialization of the economic’. In relation to both of the schools of neoliberal thought he analyses, Foucault draws this conclusion. During his examination of ordoliberalism, he emphasizes the way their form of governmentality was actually trying to be ‘sociological’ in its own way (Foucault, 2008: 146). Rather than observing ‘economic laws’, he was surprised that this art of government ‘has to intervene on society as such, in its fabric and depth’ (ibid.: 145-6). In the case of the Chicago School, what he questions is how, in their economic theories, *homo aeconomicus* could refer to a subject with ‘any purposeful conduct’ and ‘who is eminently governable’ (ibid.: 267, 270). How, in other words, could they possibly apply this notion of the subject to socially-oriented behaviors if, in principle, what makes *homo aeconomicus* ultimately useful and politically valuable is its self-driven, detached, and, essentially, self-interested nature? Thus, what was ‘radical’ about this newest free-market policy orientation was not for him the way it had enlarged its ambitions of economization – neoliberals had substituted, after all, a self-conscious grid of intelligibility for what used to be an essentialist anthropological universalism.⁵ Their radical move rather seems to be the way they increasingly attempted to make the social their focus of attention and the fact that society could now become relevant and legible for these economists.

Imagining what a ‘socialization of the economic’ explains in practice has little value for our purposes here (cf. Lazzarato, 2009: 131). It definitely refers to the way neo-economists like Schultz, Becker and Fisher oddly start to care, as Michel Feher has shown, about behavioral outcomes like a ‘future well-being’, an ‘improved appreciation of literature’ or a ‘sense of comfort’ as forms of income (Feher, 2009: 26). Beyond neoliberal theory, one could even start to speculate about how it applies to all those market actors that are being currently driven by an ambivalent social mentality – such as volunteer tourism, corporate social responsibility or even fair trade. Doing so, however, would be to warp things and apply to concrete practices what Foucault expressed as an analytical appreciation at a meta-level. The ‘socialization of the economic’ simply signals what Foucault’s critical interest was not. It is a rather vague expression whose purpose is to stress the fact that he was not concerned with a cross-contamination between ‘the social’ and ‘the market’, as though they were isolated spheres. To state Foucault’s critical interest more positively one would require the much more abstract help of a meta-distinction. With this purpose in mind, I will mark a contrast here between social conceptions that are structured in terms of ‘ethics’ and others, like the neoliberal one, that are structured instead in terms of ‘strategics’.

From an angle of ‘ethics’, the social can be conceptualized as a field composed of *collaborative practices*. Such practices are thought to automatically form through their enactment a circuit of collaboration, even if the element that makes these practices inherently collaborative may be theorized in many different ways – as a capacity for empathy, sense of community, virtue of civicness, sentiment of belonging or even, as Adam Smith argued, self-discipline in exchange (2004[1759]: 73-4). Conversely, from an angle of ‘strategics’, the social can be seen as a field that is composed of or, rather, by *collaborative interventions*, by practices whose collaborative potential cannot be defined in a generic way but which are rather valuable for the way they can have as their ultimate, not instant, effect a collaborative result. In this case, the effectivity of the social is not thought of in terms of the ‘ethical’ quality or condition that can make any individual practice collaborative, but in terms of the ‘strategic’ relation that may exist between certain practices and a not-immediately-evident circuit of collaboration.

What Foucault finds critically relevant about neoliberalism is that, rather than being just about championing a certain collaborative practice that can be assumed to lead by itself to a desirable form of coexistence, it can instead be about artificially creating the conditions in which economic practices can actually become collaborative interventions. While classical free-marketeers were satisfied with a state that lets individuals act economically, neoliberals think about the shape those economic practices need to take in order to become collaborative interventions; namely, they need to integrate more than the moment of exchange, touch on the entire rationality of the individual and become, more broadly, a matter of personal investment, enveloping more than just monetary questions.

Foucault’s methodological innovation

Foucault’s critical interest in the ‘sociological’ move embedded in the neoliberal constructivism leads him to pursue a peculiar form of inquiry in his last 1979 lectures. The idea that the social could be potentialized for the purposes of a market marks for him the

path to an important historical question that requires going beyond neoliberal thought itself back to the classical roots of the modern liberal project centered around a ‘civil society’. This section explores a more focused line of inquiry for his critical approach to civil society than is possible to draw from his lecture course, going beyond the concern with Foucault’s ‘non-juridical’ analysis of liberal politics (Villadsen, 2016) or his political diagnosis of an ‘enterprise society’ (Bonefeld, 2013b).

The idea that a social subject can be activated to foster competition appears strangely thinkable to a neoliberal rationality, yet the reasoning behind this ‘constructivist’ or constructionist impetus seems far from obvious. Within ordoliberal thought, where this idea is born, Foucault in fact only seems to find a social subject with ‘warm’ values that helps with a ‘cold’ market by not being ‘alienated from his work environment’ (Foucault, 2008: 242). It is hence unclear how the social does not fall back into a compensatory function, that is, how neoliberalism does ‘not nullify the anti-social effects of competition’ but rather ‘the possible anti-competitive mechanisms of society’ (ibid.: 160). This gap is so noticeable that a knowledgeable commentator like Keith Tribe, who decides to dismiss the two closing lectures, has drawn the conclusion that the neoliberal project of a socially supportive field, ‘rather like perfect competition, to exist it has already had to have happened, it cannot be constructed’ (Tribe, 2009: 693).

The last two lectures of the course have been the most difficult to interpret, at least in as far as they relate to Foucault’s attempt to establish some sort of explanatory connection between 20th century neoliberal theory and the late-18th to early-19th century version of *homo oeconomicus* and civil society. Most commentators attribute this difficulty to the ‘extemporaneous’ or ‘impromptu’ nature of his lecturing and research (see e.g. Brown, 2015: 54; Tribe, 2009: 694). Undoubtedly, there is some truth in that interpretation. But what it brushes off too quickly is the way those very turns of direction, which he is the first to recognize – ‘as you know, I am like a crawfish and advance sideways’ (2008: 78) – are part of a mode of research that is able to produce methodological innovations that may never receive proper articulation.

Foucault made this sudden historical leap, 200 years in the past, because he needed to illuminate our understanding of contemporary neoliberalism, whose intelligibility otherwise seemed to crumble or just end in paradox – considering it is, as Gordon notes, ‘both a reactivation and a radical inversion’ of Adam Smith’s *homo oeconomicus* (Gordon, 1991: 43). It was a ‘paradox’, Foucault underlined, that this subject, who once had had to be left completely alone in order to assure the workings of an ‘invisible hand’, could in the work of neo-economists like Gary Becker appear as ‘someone manageable’, as someone who, strictly speaking, did not even need a profit orientation, but only to react in some systematic or rational way (2008: 269-70). Foucault had hinted early on that the task of understanding neoliberalism ‘in its singularity’ might hinge on making sense of that historical distance, on grasping why ‘neo-liberalism is not Adam Smith’, a task for which he even offered the warning, by way of methodological justification, that:

If it is true that important and even invaluable political effects can be produced by historical analyses . . . this absolutely never consists in saying, either implicitly or with more reason explicitly, that what existed then is the same as what exists now. *The problem is to let knowledge of the past work on the experience of the present.* (Foucault, 2008: 130 -1, emphasis added)

While Foucault's methodological openness is well known – his tendency, one could say, to work through problems rather than formats (see e.g. Fontana and Bertani, 2003: 287-8) – this leap is still disconcerting for historians tracing his work. Michael Behrent, for example, finds it 'intriguing' that 'rather than make the argument in archaeological or genealogical terms, he tells a rather straightforward story in the history of ideas', willing 'to jettison rigorous periodization' (Behrent, 2015: 381-2; see also Ashenden, 2015: 45-7). Behrent may seem here to be overlooking the methodological warning just raised, but, at the same time, it is true that Foucault in this instance does break with many of the elements that characterize his flexible disposition. Even his neo-Marxist commentators have noted that his priority usually was to focus on local practical contexts rather than abstract intellectual theories (Read, 2009: 30), and on destabilizing a stable political apparatus rather than on anticipating a 'history of the future' (Brown, 2015: 54). The reading of this leap must therefore depart, as Paul Patton has suggested, from the assumption that 'the nature of the critical project that is undertaken in these lectures' is both 'more modest and open-ended' than usual, since, after all, 'the knowledge of the past can work on our experience of the present in many ways' (Patton, 2013: 40).

One way 'the knowledge of the past' could 'work on the experience of the present' would be to say that the 'third sector' now plays the role in the neoliberal imagination that civil society used to play in classical liberalism, delineating the limits and legitimate tactics for how the state can mobilize the productive forces of its population (Rose, 1999: 171). This is no doubt within the range of effects that Foucault would normally seek to provoke. But it must be recognized that, before making such a leap, Foucault did actually mark the minimal historicizing work that he expected from this specific 'knowledge of the past'. In an uncharacteristic move, Foucault started by detailing the architecture for the historical bridge he was imagining:

Is homo œconomicus an atom of freedom in the face of all the conditions, undertakings, legislation, and prohibitions of a possible government, or was he not already a certain type of subject who precisely enabled an art of government to be determined according to the principle of economy . . . Obviously, the way in which I have formulated this question gives the answer straightaway. (2008: 271, emphasis added)

Implicit in this hypothesis – although it is not until he fully explains it during the last lecture that it becomes 'obvious' – there is a larger formulation about civil society being implicated in a subtle chain of causality. If we want to understand how neoliberalism can possibly introduce a variant of *homo œconomicus* that includes social behaviors, we need to recognize, Foucault proposes, the intimate and almost architectonic connection that has always existed between this classical economic subject and 'the principle of economy' or limitation of political power that is civil society.⁶ Thus, his hypothesis is that, in spite of being an unruly 'atom of freedom', it has always been *homo œconomicus* himself, as 'already a certain type of subject', that 'precisely enabled' a form of rule dedicated to civil society.⁷

Foucault's hypothesis will make it possible to conceive, in the last lecture, of the social in analogous terms to the market – not through an 'economic subject of interest' (see e.g. Burchell, 1991: 137; Gordon, 1991: 21) but through what could be called in turn

a ‘social subject of interest’. Foucault’s hypothesis leads one to contemplate the possibility that *homo aeconomicus* might have ‘enabled’ the conception of a subject of civil society precisely for being, as he phrases it, ‘already a certain type of subject’; in other words, for already being a ‘subject of interest’. Foucault at some point in fact explicitly derives the idea that a social subject can have ‘disinterested interests’ (2008: 301) from *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Ferguson, 1995[1767]). And yet, it is noteworthy – to the extent that it is revealing of his architectural orientation – that the term, as such, is nowhere to be found within that text.

When Adam Ferguson invokes ‘disinterested benevolence’ or ‘disinterested passions’, it is actually to clarify that he will not be using the positive terminology of ‘interest’, which he still acknowledges can be used at times to refer to the ‘interest in the welfare of mankind’ (Ferguson, 1995[1767]: 20). Foucault’s reading is therefore intrinsically disconcerting for any traditional reader of Ferguson – ‘odd to say the least’ (Ashenden, 2015: 49). But it is fair to suggest that the element that comes to justify his retroactive reading of that text is the way Ferguson’s civil society ‘leads the individual to enlist’ on the side of a group or community that ‘does not coincide with humanity in general’. If they are disinterested ‘interests’, Foucault (2008: 301-2) hinted, it is because the bond with some involves at the same time ‘the loathing of others’ (cf. Lazzarato, 2009: 130 -1). In this regard, Ferguson’s account was much more explicit:

If societies, as well as individuals, be charged with the care of their own preservation, and if in both we apprehend *a separation of interest*, which may give rise to jealousies and competitions, we cannot be surprised to find hostilities arise from this source. (1995[1767]: 26, emphasis added)

It becomes reasonable in this manner to imagine that, empirically, a social subject of interest can be someone who, in their own way, is potentially competitive, to the extent that they share an interest or, more precisely, a ‘separation of interest’ with only certain others. Thus, for instance, what Nikolas Rose (1999) famously diagnosed as an ‘ethico-politics’ – among financially-minded community workers who, nowadays it is astoundingly clear, become responsabilized in critical-complicit ways as ‘moral neoliberals’ (Muehlebach, 2012) through donor-driven quasi-markets dependent on the marketing of ‘good projects’ (Krause, 2014) – acquires at least some historical intelligibility.

Ferguson’s text opens up a useful way of thinking about the neoliberal paradox. But in order to grasp Foucault’s critical project and the full meaning and reach of his hypothesis, it is important to start by getting hold of the architectural connection he was trying to make. In the preceding year of lectures, Foucault had already provided a genealogical account of civil society, tracing how it had been able to appear ‘as a possible domain of analysis, knowledge and intervention’ through the work of the physiocrats and, in general, the *économistes* (2007a: 349). Genealogically, accounting for civil society means to show ‘prospectively’, rather than retrospectively, what it *displaces* in the field of thought; namely, a statist rationality of police (Dean, 1992: 228). One must get a sense of how the collaborative circuits of an autonomous population are rendered visible, of how from an exploitable multiplicity of individuals one arrives at the idea that the ‘economy’ or ‘poverty’ of a whole ‘society’ can and must be improved (see Rose,

1999: 24-40). But, the following year, civil society is apprehended from a possible future rather than a recent past. Intrigued by the disconnect between neoliberal theorists and Adam Smith, Foucault resorts to a contemporary of the latter, Adam Ferguson, finding in his critical conception of civil society the ‘political correlate . . . of what Adam Smith studied in purely economic terms’ (2008: 298).

One could maybe suggest that what Foucault was observing ‘prospectively’ is neo-liberalism, not civil society. And yet, there is not an immediate historical displacement as such that can be interpreted in genealogical terms. Even if Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society* is known as the first modern text on the topic, its political ideas do not precede or directly influence neoliberal thinkers, or at least that is not what Foucault is implying. Rather, he attempts to show that Ferguson’s text has a certain perspective on the social which, suddenly, becomes relevant and elucidating for an unfamiliar neoliberal present. The point of reference for this reading of civil society is not a developing past, but a surprising present in the future. What is at stake is not the genealogy of a historical event in the West as much as the ‘architecture’ of an enduring political project. Instead of looking, as he traditionally does, for ‘illocutionary’ statements in Ferguson’s work that could be directed at immediate interlocutors in his political environment (Dean and Villadsen, 2016: 12), Foucault focuses on those that reveal a larger interpretive project contained in its potentiality within his argument.

The architecture of the social

During the last lecture of the course, Foucault manages to grasp the social as a problem that has always had within its internal architecture two different ways of solving things. While it is true that modern liberal thought has to wait until the arrival of neoliberalism for a clear-cut manifestation of the path we have called here ‘strategics’, Foucault’s suggestive hypothesis is that such a divergent path has always been intrinsically part of this mode of problematization.

Foucault’s hypothesis, in its simplest form, is that an economic subject of interest ‘enabled’ a social one. *Homo oeconomicus* would have become at some point, thanks to theories like that of Adam Smith, a useful means of harnessing the resources of a state, almost a source of fantasy for any acquisitive sovereign (Helliwell and Hindess, 1999: 14). But, at the same time, this subject would have created an impasse for the sovereignty of political reason, imposing, precisely, an ‘invisible’ hand, which, beyond demanding a deregulation of the market, stipulates the existence of an anarchic process or dynamic that cannot be monitored in detail (Foucault, 2008: 278-94). Thus, if rulers wanted to take advantage of the market as well as maintain control over the workings of their own state, Foucault reasons, they needed to find a manageable ‘plane of reference’ and, more concretely, an analogous ‘medium’ that could accommodate economic bonds, ‘while overflowing them and being irreducible to them’ (ibid.: 295-301). ‘This is why’, Foucault at one point confidently expresses, civil society was able to acquire a new political significance since the time of Ferguson, assuring, in a larger and more complex spectrum of human relations, ‘the *spontaneous synthesis* of individuals . . . through a *summation of individual satisfactions* within the social bond itself’ (ibid.: 300 -1, emphasis added).

In a sense, by connecting economic and social subjects through this historical narrative, Foucault contributes to a well-known story about our modern market society: that the proliferation of private property rights and commercial relations at a distance from the sovereign encouraged 18th-century authors to problematize an independent realm of sociability or ‘civil society’ (see e.g. Fine, 1997: 15-8). And yet, at stake in this account of a social subject ‘of interest’ or ‘individual satisfactions’ is a larger historical bridge. For Ferguson there is simply no great distance between social and economic interests. As he writes,

The occupations of men, in every condition, bespeak their freedom of choice, their various opinions, and the multiplicity of wants by which they are urged . . . [Man] applies the same talents to a variety of purposes, and acts nearly the same part in very different scenes. He would be always improving on his subject’. (1995[1767]: 12, 13)

Thus, by referring us back to Ferguson’s political vision, Foucault first of all evokes the paradoxically socialized *homo oeconomicus* he had earlier found in American neoliberalism. He had precisely emphasized how the income of entrepreneurial investments, instead of monetary, could simply come in the form of personal self-appreciation and individual satisfaction (see Feher, 2009: 26-7). The time and effort a mother dedicates to her children’s ‘human capital’, for example, would return the ‘psychological profit’ of being a good parent (Foucault, 2008: 244). An entrepreneur who migrates to another place has ‘psychological costs’ and, besides income, expects ‘an improvement of status’ (ibid.: 229-30). At a minimum, the counterintuitive neoliberal subject is able to find in this way some resolution.

But Foucault traces a larger connection. Not only does a social subject with competitive interests appear readily conceivable when civil society is understood as a ‘synthesis’ of ‘satisfactions’; and not only does a socialized *homo oeconomicus* become thinkable once it is possible to link its effectivity to a layered type of civil society rather than a Smithian market; there is also a more consequential historical perception that emerges, by which the classical view of the social becomes thoroughly problematizable from an angle of ‘strategics’. While one could assume from an angle of ‘ethics’ that the social is nothing but an aggregation of voluntary bonds and concatenation of intrinsically collaborative contributions, Foucault finds a way of advancing the hypothesis that, historically, at least since Ferguson, the premise that came to give civil society its prominence was much more ambitious. Civil society, he proposes, emerges in the classical imagination as just another circuit of collaboration like the market, whose ‘form is the same, but not the elements and contents . . . we are dealing with a mechanism of immediate multiplication that has in fact the same form as the immediate multiplication of profit in the purely economic mechanism of interests’ (Foucault, 2008: 301).

While neoliberals would be approaching civil society through a constructivism that renders social practices instrumental (by activating their competitiveness), Ferguson cannot be assumed to be following this same constructivism. For him, the social is still made of inherently collaborative gestures (like ‘disinterested benevolence’). And yet, there are elements in his discourse and rationale that allow one to read these gestures as personally satisfying practices with a multiplying effect. Ferguson for example states

that, 'A person of an affectionate mind, possessed of a maxim, That he himself, as an individual, is no more than a part of the whole that demands his regard, has found, in that principle, a sufficient foundation for all the virtues' (Ferguson, 1995[1767]: 41). Thus, Foucault can argue that for Ferguson a social circuit was more or less implicitly thought to accomplish its collaborative function by means of an immanent relation of 'reciprocity between the whole and its components' (Foucault, 2008: 300).

Unlike a blind *homo œconomicus*, social subjects of interest would of course be aware of the totality or 'whole' that they produce. But Foucault's suggestion is that the way social subjects produce the general satisfaction of that totality would still be 'invisible' – that, as subjects of interest, they would still be situated in 'an indefinite plane of immanence' in which 'the will of each, the interest of each, and the way in which this interest is or is not realized are bound up with a mass of elements which elude individuals' (Foucault, 2008: 277). Ferguson, again, can be found to be at least potentially in agreement with this view: 'Like the winds, that come we know not whence, and blow whithersoever they list . . . nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design' (Ferguson, 1995[1767]: 119).

Instead of interpreting the history of liberal thought in terms of aporias, as Pierre Rosanvallon (2006) for example has done, Foucault sets out to explore what could have made opposites like a *homo œconomicus* and a truly social subject (or an economic liberalism that seeks to reconcile particular interests and a political liberalism that seeks to cultivate a general interest) simultaneously possible (Foucault, 2008: 42). And his hypothesis is that an economic subject of interest might have *even* 'enabled' a social one or, expressed in a more consequential way, that the 'subject of interest' theorized by Enlightenment thinkers was *in principle* neither an individualist nor collectivist subject. It was simply a subject that posed difficult strategic questions to those concerned with human circuits of collaboration in their different guises (*ibid.*: 271-7; see also Hirschman, 1997[1977]). Instead of solely acting for either a particular or general interest, such a subject is one that always acts out of what Hume would call its own 'peculiar interests', through 'a personal choice which is unconditionally subjective or private' in order to 'satisfy them' (Burchell, 1991: 130-1).

The consequences of Foucault having developed his hypothesis by making reference to a 'disinterested interest' in the work of Adam Ferguson have not been so far recognized. A genealogist of the social like Giovanna Procacci has simply suggested, for example, that such an analogy between economic and social interests would have eventually proved insufficient as 'an internal criterion of regulation' for an art of government, for, as she questions, 'how could one determine *the necessary degree of disinterest?*' (Procacci, 1987: 15, emphasis added). Her thesis is that the liberal approach to the social, as a pragmatic question of policy, could only have found a political pathway in the determinate notion of 'moral duty' as advanced by classical French sociology. The problems of poverty and solidarity became suitable objects of intervention, in this light, once they were attributed – from a strictly 'ethics' angle on the social – to a 'defective sociability' that needed to be corrected through pedagogic means, unearthing the citizen's 'social instinct' (Procacci, 1989: 179-84). It is possible to recognize in Foucault's hypothesis, however, a more enduring statement about the architecture of the social. The

line of thought that a ‘disinterested interest’ opens up is not relevant to the extent that it is in fact ‘disinterested’. Rather, what is revealing about it is that it can still be the expression of one same ‘interest’, a variation rather than a paradox in a stable ontological theme.

For Adam Smith as much as for Ferguson, a ‘subject of interest’ – even if the latter, as we saw, avoids this terminology – is not exactly a ‘self-interested’ subject (Ferguson, 1995[1767]: 35-6). In Smith’s case, he is rather explicit that this is simply a subject who cannot avoid being interested in the sympathetic response of others (see Hirschman, 1997[1977]: 107-9). The interest in sympathy is a sentiment that comes before any sort of cold calculation. As he elaborates in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith, 2004[1759]), it is not because ‘man’ needs ‘the assistance of others’ that he

rejoices whenever he observes that they adopt his own passions, because he is then assured of that assistance; and grieves whenever he observes the contrary, because he is then assured of their opposition. But both the pleasure and the pain are always felt so instantaneously . . . that it seems evident that neither of them can be derived from any such self-interested consideration’. (ibid.: 17, emphasis added)

For a founding liberal like Smith, then, *homo œconomicus* is not a radically different subject than the most ‘disinterested’ member and enactor of civil society. If he is able to theorize about a subject of interest that is primarily economic, it is only because, as he would come to reflect in the last edition of this moral treatise, ‘the practice of virtue’ and ‘acquisition of wealth’ are ‘two different roads’ for one same interest (Smith, 2004[1759]: 73; see Forman-Barzilai, 2009: esp. ch. 1).

Ultimately, by associating the classical view of civil society to a subject of interest, Foucault renders the ‘impulses of benevolence’ and ‘sympathy’ associated since the 18th century with ‘the social’ (2008: 296-301) legible in strategic terms. Thus, instead of ‘idealizing “society” as a good, living, warm whole’ (1988: 168), as he once complained, he detects a spontaneous summation of interests and satisfactions not that different to the one produced by the market. In this way, the idea that the social is composed of collaborative practices turns out to be dependent on a certain, albeit narrow, form of ‘strategies’. Such practices, Ferguson conveys, are not just valuable in themselves, but rather each ‘is assessed by the good it will produce or bring about for the whole’ (Foucault, 2008: 300). The ‘ethics’ way of solving things amounts, one could say, to a strategic ‘holism’ by which a certain practice (a display of solidarity, for example) is imagined to spontaneously add up, in its generalizable singularity, to a corresponding ‘whole’.

In this light, the problem of ‘the social’ does not necessarily depart from the idea that certain practices that are inherently collaborative can progressively permeate, one by one, the relations between individuals. The collaborative effect of even the most ethical and immediately recognizable ‘social’ practice does not appear as an effect that is just cumulative – in whose case, the invocation of ‘strategy’ would be rather meaningless. Instead, its effect can be recognized as immanent and ‘holistic’, which means that collaborative practices have from the beginning been, albeit in a virtual and not entirely realized way, also a type of collaborative intervention.⁸

Constructing society

For Foucault, the ‘invisible hand of the market’ constitutes only the first model of how a circuit of collaboration can be immanently produced by the spontaneous summation of individual practices. ‘Civil society’ and the problem of the social as a whole would have then been implicitly formulated in these same terms by classical liberal thought. And just as this immanent or ‘invisible’ production offers neoliberals a point of entry for further problematization, leading them to consider the possibility that a free market may actually need to be constructed, Foucault’s lectures open the path for a wider critical reflection. The shift of focus in his analysis of neoliberalism from the market to ‘the social’ in general encourages the consideration, at least among those that do not fixate their intellectual and critical work on the market, that society as a whole may also need to be constructed.

A neoliberal governmentality does not ‘construct’ society – or at least only does so to the extent that the market can be considered to be one of the forms society takes. Neoliberals enhance the latent competitiveness of the social subject but only with the purpose of creating ‘market-conforming personalities’ (Bonefeld, 2013b: 113). They do not consider, in other words, what kinds of society could be constructed by means of social or ‘disinterested’ interests all the way through. While competition among economic practices is supposed to create an even distribution of producers and consumers, ‘competition’ in a non-economic arena (i.e. where everyone is intervening with care rather than seeking to make a profit) does not need to be instrumentalized by a market rationality but could rather lead to other reflections on the ultimate form of civil society.

One could suggest that the Marxist tradition has precisely worked on this task for almost two centuries (especially if one follows Rosanvallon’s argument that Marx did ultimately rely on the liberal understanding of the individual although in an inverted way [2006: ch. 8]). And yet, even though ‘interventions’ are fundamental to Marx, whether as revolutionary acts or quotidian undertakings, ‘the social’ for him is still unequivocally made out of collaborative practices. Broadly, ‘the social’ appears as a category in Marx’s thought as a result of his frustration with Hegel, who, prioritizing the function of the state, largely dismisses the class struggle and problem of poverty that inherently exists within civil society (Neocleous, 1996: 4-13). Marx’s solution is ‘to close it off completely’ from the state, imagining that civil society can be politicized and gain control over its own administration (ibid.: 19). To achieve this kind of self-regulated civil society, practices of intervention would of course be needed, but, in the end, this version of the social, once realized, ‘emancipated’, would be sustained by the unmediated ethical relations between individuals (Rosanvallon, 2006: 160-86). The social, in this instance, can simply be expected to emerge from the extinction of the economic, political and legal forms of mediation that during capitalism have unnecessarily disrupted ‘the natural harmony of men’ (ibid.: 180).

In a sense, it is still true that, in a Marxist conception of the social, intervention must become a daily practice. The individual, beyond the moment of alienation, in its ‘fully socialized’ state (Neocleous, 1996: 22), is supposed to be in control of its own life constantly deciding how to shape it thanks to its political autonomy. Nonetheless, ‘intervention’, when understood in this sense, as deliberative action rather than simply action

with ultimate effects, would be filling in the very content of what ‘collaborative practice’ (practice that is inherently collaborative) means. Intervention becomes one other criterion of an ‘ethics’ way of solving things, a means of realizing, rather than constructing, society. Were this a solution conceived from the angle of ‘strategics’, its game of the social would not be deducible in a straightforward way from its constitutive practices.

Through the historical formulation of a ‘social subject of interest’, Foucault locates a much more tenable opening into the architecture of the social problematization. The difference that is brought into relief by focusing on such a notion of the subject is not between an epistemological naturalism that imagines society in rather essentialist terms as a circuit of collaboration that has always ‘already pre-existed’ (Durkheim, 1997[1893]: 217) and a constructivism that recognizes in the social the modern abstraction of a humanist metaphysics with an ‘objectifying perspective’ (Poovey, 2002: 127). Foucault seeks to establish a continuity rather than a discontinuity – an ‘architecture’ – and, besides, arguing that neoliberalism is ‘constructivist’ in this traditional sense would not, in any case, be particularly revealing, since neoliberal theorists and policymakers themselves publicly embrace the claim that social orders and human reality are socially constructed (Gershon, 2011: 538). What he sets in contrast to a strategic constructionism is not a ‘naïve naturalism’ (Foucault, 2008: 117), as neoliberals imagine themselves doing, but, instead, a conception of the social equally reliant on strategies, if only on ‘holistic’ ones.⁹

Seen this way, one can associate a strategic holism, beyond classical liberalism, with those projects of social critique that have emerged from Marx or from more recently influential authors such as Polanyi or Habermas. It appears in the 19th-century idea that a non-alienated proletariat would spontaneously form a communist sociality, as much as in the 20th-century ones that a nation devoid of economicism would lead to an embedded welfarism (see Robotham, 2009) or that a communicative humanity without the interference from technical systems would develop a critical civil society (see Fine, 1997: 11-13). While obtaining their critical impetus from the very premise (that civil society is socially constructed, these projects are organized by the ethics-based notion that certain practices – of political autonomy, non-market behavior, open communication – can be collaborative and have social value in themselves, which in strategic terms means that their spontaneous summation, if respected and left alone, is thought to lead to an immediately desirable ‘whole’.

Foucault did not explore the critical implications of a strategic constructionism, even if one can sense a growing concern towards the end of his life with the possible ‘perverse effects’ of the social, particularly in his 1983 interview on social security (Foucault, 1988: 159-77; see Dean, 2014: 437-8). At any rate, an angle of strategics on the social can depart from the Foucauldian notion that practices can diachronically display a certain, usually unexpected, ‘strategic logic’ through their effects (Dean, 2007: 83; Rabinow, 2003: 49-54). When applied to the problem of collaboration rather than power, such a notion of strategy becomes crucial in grasping a line of social critique that, Foucauldian or not, is in need of articulation.¹⁰ While this is not a line of critique that has to be restricted to neoliberalism, it is one that does become immediately relevant with the generalization of a neoliberal governmentality. Four reasons come to mind, at

least when one adopts a purely theoretical standpoint like the one of Foucault at neoliberalism's 'dawn'.

First, neoliberal constructivism makes it technically plausible to suspect that the voluntarism of a civil society is being actively instrumentalized in strategic ways. Faced with the potential materialization of such a scenario, one is called to seriously consider whether immediate collaborative practices are being in fact collaborative interventions or creating the society they are hoping for. As Andrea Muehlebach (2012) has contemplated, for example, in the case of Italy, the call for volunteering, selfless giving and Catholic compassion might constitute in this context the very means by which a post-welfarist state becomes persuasive, offering a fantasy of non-commodification that even socialist activists cannot refuse.

Second, the idea of not engaging in social critique at the level of strategics becomes impractical and rather irresponsible when there are others who do intervene at that level in a calculated way. Neoliberalism, as Foucault to some extent noticed through his study of organized initiatives like the journal *Ordo* and the Walter Lippmann Colloquium, is equally illustrative in this sense. Rather than simply being the result of 'contingent lash-ups of thought and action' (Rose, 1999: 27), we have come to recognize that neoliberalism was initiated and propagated by a particular 'thought collective' that sought to influence states and institutions in substantial ways (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009).

Third, the neoliberal blurring of the boundaries between the social and the market opens the path for new hybrid forms of community engagement that cannot be simply discarded for not fitting our current understanding of what a collaborative practice is. As Michael Schudson has argued in this sense, those who have been lamenting the decline of civic spirit in the last few decades, like Robert Putnam, are ignoring the fact that many forms of social participation that appear to be too convenient, private or transitory can still have 'far-reaching civic benefits' (Schudson, 2006: 604). The content of 'civic engagement' as a collective ideal must be redefined, in other words, with every historical age – even if it will always be tempting to assume that increasingly popular practices, like 'volunteer tourism' in our case, are not immediately collaborative.

And finally, fourth, even if a certain practice of social intervention is unmistakably 'neoliberal' and its purpose, in principle, is to facilitate the market mechanism, one still needs to consider whether its strategic value coincides with a post-neoliberal one. James Ferguson (2011) has recently made this very point departing from Foucault's call, made in his 1983 interview, to experiment with the social. As he has witnessed in southern Africa, there is increased interest among policymakers and humanitarian agencies in direct cash transfers to the poor rather than organized distribution of food aid. The theoretical support for such policies of basic income mainly comes from economic models that emphasize the distributive power of market forces. And yet, a technique that economically empowers the poor cannot be seen as necessarily obstructing alternative models of civil society.

Ultimately, one could say, whether a certain practice – a given civic initiative or policy intervention – is seemingly collaborative or not, what becomes relevant through this line of critique is the way said practice would be effectively constructing society. What would be socially criticizable, in this sense, is not the extent to which social practice seems to be genuinely virtuous or how ideal its vision for civil society appears

to be. It becomes paramount to explore its ultimate effects, to look at it ‘instrumentally’ one might say, even if its rationale, unlike in the case of the market, is seldom to neglect the means over the ends. The point is not that ‘everything is dangerous’ (Foucault, 1997: 256), that we should suspect even the social. Rather, it is that it becomes dangerous in neoliberal times not to think strategically – to overlook untapped sources of collaborative potential as much as moralistic locales of unjustifiable complicity. It is the trivialization of the social as a reliable way of solving things on its own that is precisely at stake.¹¹

Conclusion

During the last four decades, the lens of governmentality has encouraged social critics to be wary of assuming a constraining form like ‘the social’ through the blind acceptance of such container categories as ‘culture’ or ‘society’. At the end of his 1979 lecture course, however, Foucault arguably explores how to go beyond a purely skeptical posture towards such cardinal referents for the human sciences (see Dean, 2007). For him, as mentioned earlier, society was not ‘sacred’, something that was supposed to have one form. Yet he manages in this lecture course to fixate on this intrinsic plurality by focusing on a ‘subject of interest’ that can act socially as well as economically, competitively as well as collaboratively. By revisiting some of the classical texts on civil society, he lays out the potential schematics that would be necessary for us to imagine a different, more flexible, architecture of the social.

The fact that Foucault apprehends a larger understanding of society through the study of an economicist rationality like neoliberalism should not detract from what could be seen as an enduring critical project. Suggesting that the social is in principle advanced by subjects that are also ‘of interest’ means that social critique can start from individual practice rather than a generic value or morality, and from that basis explore, as Foucault put it elsewhere, ‘the future formation of a “we”’ (1997: 114) – even within the neoliberal market. The ultimate effect of those popular initiatives that, since the privatization of the welfare state and globalization of donor-driven quasi-markets, increasingly fall within the scope of ‘active citizenship’ or, more recently, ‘social entrepreneurship’ does not need to be assumed in advance. There is no reason to presume, from a constructionist angle on the social, that these practices either correspond to an immediately evident kind of global civil society or necessarily mobilize a neoliberal form of governmentality.


In Foucault’s last 1979 lecture, one is faced with the recognition of ‘strategics’ as a historically available way of approaching the social problematic. Such an insight can be said to refer us to Foucault’s own critical project at least to the same extent as he suggested, in this lecture, that Adam Ferguson conceived of civil society in analogous terms to the market. There are enough grounds to infer an enduring interpretive project from this lecture course, even if the author does not fully grasp its coherence and potentiality. It is a critical project that, moreover, does not have the need to introduce an external value or normative argument into the historical architecture of the social, but that rather attains a critical angle through an ethos of historicization or what Foucault called an ‘ontology of the actuality’ (2007b: 95). Likewise, it is a project that helps to mark a contrast with those projects of social critique that we have known for a long time

Foucault disagreed with, whether one refers to the utopian interventionism of Marx, the anti-market anthropology of Polanyi or the communicative idealism of Habermas. Finally, it is a critical orientation worth articulating to the extent that it helps to give definition to the call that many readers of the lectures have been inspired to make for a strategic reworking of neoliberalism beyond its mere rejection or denunciation (Beaulieu, 2010: 810; Blencowe, 2013: 23; Feher, 2009: 38; Ferguson, 2011: 66; Lemke, 2011: 39). While many Foucauldians and non-Foucauldians may have used a strategic angle before, as was briefly illustrated, the historical architecture found in *The birth of biopolitics* makes it possible to apprehend this line of social critique in its positivity – as a matter of ‘constructing society’ – incrementing thus the possibility of making out of it an actual, unified, not just latent, critical ‘project’.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. ‘Ethics’ and ‘strategics’, it must be warned from the beginning, serve only to mark here the contrast between two ways of going about solving the social problematic. They are not meant to have a critical charge on their own. In spite of their ‘obviousness’, to put it bluntly, their role is heuristic, a descriptive effort from a meta-level.
2. The use of a term like ‘embeddedness’ to characterize a neoliberal doctrine may be objected to, considering how it represents the very opposite of a market-oriented tradition. And yet, I think it is justifiable since, first, what Foucault finds in ordoliberal thought is precisely this kind of anti-market ideal lodged in the notion of a society made of small, fraternal, self-owned enterprises (see Bonefeld, 2013b); and, second, given how open to ambiguities the very notion of embeddedness is (Robotham, 2009).
3. Rather than reducing this grid to what from a Weberian interpretation could be brushed off as a split of instrumental- from value-rational action (cf. Rabinow, 2003: 38), Foucault concedes that directed thought, thought that seeks to render itself practical for a certain end and reach a ‘true rather than a false conclusion’, is always confronted with ‘scarce resources – a symbolic system, a set of axioms, rules of construction, and not just any’, which makes it susceptible to an analysis in terms of ‘optimal allocation’ (Foucault, 2008: 269).
4. He only made this orientation truly explicit in the second to last lecture, when he started to wrap up the course by stating that there are ‘interesting’ and ‘important stakes’ when ‘domains that are not immediately and directly economic’ extend ‘the grid of *homo oeconomicus*’ to ‘every social actor in general’ (Foucault, 2008: 268). The only other moment he signaled his curiosity was towards the beginning of the course, when he called for an account of modern liberalism that did not require the polarization of the social against the utilitarian, but that instead could ‘establish the possible connections between disparate terms which remain disparate’ (ibid.: 42).

5. A range of interpretations have started to pay attention to this line of argument in the lectures, from the focus of Michael Behrent on neoliberalism's 'thin' anthropologism (2015: 383), to that of Alain Beaulieu on a 'post-biopolitical' neoliberal technology (2010: 807-10), and that of Andrew Dilts on how a neoliberal rationality 'pays attention to the subject *as a subject* and not simply as an object of power/knowledge' (2011: 143, emphasis in original).
6. Rather than being reducible to a market doctrine, neoliberalism is analyzable for Foucault as a liberal art of government that is more broadly guided by a 'principle of economy'. All forms of liberal government, besides wanting to maximize their financial and political costs as any other political rationality would, would follow 'the premise that government . . . cannot be its own end' (Foucault, 2008: 318). And this is the delicate role of civil society, to act as a 'transactional reality . . . at the interface, so to speak, of governors and governed' (ibid.: 297). Civil society is, in this sense, a necessary political construct as long as government wants to be 'economic' in its exercise of power and justify its role on the basis of something that is not the state itself.
7. This is a subtle causal link because to suggest that *homo oeconomicus* 'enabled' the development of civil society as a technology of government is not to say that the latter was bound to be the result of the former (see Ashenden, 2015). For Foucault, 'establishing the intelligibility of reality consists in showing its possibility', not its inevitability (2008: 34).
8. One can sense how this immanent conception must have entailed a significant shift during the 18th century in the transitional thought of Rousseau. In an initial unsuccessful draft of *The Social Contract*, he asserts with convincing irony that: 'If the general society existed . . . [it would be] a corporate *moral* Being that would have qualities of its own distinct from those of the particular Beings constituting it, rather as chemical compounds have properties that they do not derive from any of the elements that make them up . . . The public good or ill would not be merely the sum of private goods or ills as in a simple aggregation, but would reside in the bond uniting them and be greater than that sum' (Rousseau, 2012: 143-44, emphasis in original).
9. For a possible account of the 19th-century development of the social along the lines of an implicit strategic holism, see Christopher Herbert (1991: esp. 38-42), who finds in the idea of culture and society as a 'complex whole' a direct, if never fully articulated, correlate to the problem of collaboration that follows from the theological belief in the ungovernability of human desire. Christine Helliwell and Barry Hindess have made a similar argument by reference to Foucault's own thesis on the 'figure of man', inferring that 'an autonomous, self-directing subject of its own representations and behaviours' requires a larger mechanism like 'culture' or 'society' to become 'co-operative (i.e. "social"!)' (1999: 5-7).
10. Even though Foucault himself raised the option, at some point, of an analysis of practices of intervention at the level of what he actually called 'strategics', he never fully developed it and restricted its scope, in any case, to the reversibility of power relations (Foucault, 2007b: 65-6). Rather than a matter of governmental calculation, 'strategy' refers in our case to the ultimate, consolidated outcome of practice. The connection between the meaning of 'strategy' that is being used here and that of a governmentality framework goes beyond the scope of this article, but it is briefly captured by Foucault's own response when, in the 1983 interview, he was asked about the relation between the state and civil society: 'whatever scenario one takes, a power relation would be established . . . this relation being in itself neither good nor bad, but

dangerous, so that one would have to reflect, at every level, on the way it should channel its efficacy in the best possible way' (1988: 168, emphasis added).

11. A discussion of the multiple ways in which this critical project could be advanced is beyond the bounds of this already lengthy article. But, to mention one option that has gained traction in recent years at the level of global governance, one could consider as a type of social strategics the 'capabilities approach' of Amartya Sen as espoused by Martha Nussbaum (2011) – at least to the extent that it seeks to subject policy to a permanent critique that prioritizes a set of basic human functions or 'freedoms' as its minimally required ultimate effects (see Tobias, 2005).

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