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THE AUTHORITARIAN DOWNSIDE OF A NEW STRATEGY. FOUCAULT, MARCUSE, AND THE NEOLIBERAL TRANSFORMATION*

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LA DESVENTAJA AUTORITARIA DE UNA ESTRATEGIA NUEVA. FOUCAULT, MARCUSE Y LA TRANSFORMACIÓN NEOLIBERAL

Abstract

In light of the recent debates about the authoritarian turn of neoliberalism, this article focuses on how Foucault and Marcuse critically reckoned with the emergence of a new political rationality in the wake of the crisis of governmentality that occurred in the early 1970s. Both thinkers pointed to the problematic relationship between liberal freedom and security. While Foucault tended to describe neoliberalism as an indirect art of government and did not foreground its conservative and anti-egalitarian aspects, Marcuse's reflections help to illuminate how the successful emergence of neoliberal strategies in response to the contestation of the postwar Keynesian and social

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democratic framework was linked to the mobilization of a conservative and authoritarian sensibility that tends to re-emerge when the functioning of the governmental management of society is challenged.

Keywords
critical theory; governmentality; neoliberalism; capitalism; crisis

Resumen
A la luz de los recientes debates sobre el giro autoritario del neoliberalismo, este artículo se centra en las formas en que Foucault y Marcuse analizaron con ojo crítico la aparición de una nueva racionalidad política tras la crisis de la gubernamentalidad que se produjo a principios de la década de 1970. Ambos pensadores señalaron la problemática relación entre la libertad liberal y la seguridad, pero mientras Foucault tendía a describir el neoliberalismo como un arte indirecto de gobierno y no ponía en primer plano sus aspectos conservadores y antiigualitarios, las reflexiones de Marcuse ayudan a aclarar cómo el surgimiento exitoso de estrategias neoliberales en respuesta a la impugnación del marco keynesiano y socialdemócrata de posguerra estuvo vinculado a la movilización de una sensibilidad conservadora y autoritaria que tiende a resurgir cuando se cuestiona el funcionamiento de la gestión gubernamental de la sociedad.

Palabras clave
teoría crítica; gubernamentalidad; neoliberalismo; capitalismo; crisis

"History had it that in 1968, the last disciples of the Frankfurt School clashed with the police of a government inspired by the Freiburg School, thus finding themselves on opposite sides of the barricades" (Foucault, 2008, p. 106). This observation made by Foucault in his lectures at the Collège de France of 1979 on the *Birth of Biopolitics* concludes a cursory reflection about the "double, parallel, crossed, and antagonistic fate" shared since the 1920s, by a decisive strand of contemporary neoliberalism such as the ordoliberal Freiburg School and an equally crucial strand of critical theory such as the Frankfurt School. As Foucault notes, both of them addressed the Weberian "problem of the irrational rationality of capitalist society" (Foucault, 2008, p. 105), but they did so from two opposite perspectives: During the crisis of the Weimar experience, in a striking parallel with Carl Schmitt, the ordoliberals advocated a "strong state" in order to depoliticize the economic sphere and guarantee the competitive order of the market against the unruly mass democracy and the social constitution of the short-lived German Republic;[1] in those same years, the Frankfurt scholars focused on the emergence of new authoritarian forms of domination as a symptom of the contradictions of modern and capitalist rationality, and they continued to reflect on this phenomenon both during their exile in the United States and in the postwar period up to the 1960s and 1970s.[2] The relevance of their positions has sometimes been reaffirmed in recent times[3] concerning the ongoing tensions between capitalism and democracy that have strongly manifested after the financial crisis of 2007, the successes of right-wing populist or nationalist political actors and parties, the global backlash of conservative values and the persistent defense of class, gender and racial privileges, the escalation of geopolitical tensions, but also the rise and the difficulties of new progressive and radical social forces.

Among the scholars who, in the wake of Foucault, have identified neoliberalism as the dominant political rationality of contemporary societies, the question has been raised of whether these phenomena can be seen as a collateral effect and a nihilistic "Frankensteinian creation" of a governance that has always identified markets and traditional morality as indispensable to freedom (Brown, 2019), or whether neoliberal politics has always been a kind of relentless demophobic war against all those forms of collective action and all those claims to social justice, equality, and democratic self-rule that have been perceived as an obstacle to economic freedom (Dardot et al., 2021).

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[1] See, among others, Bonefeld (2017), Malatesta (2019), Mesini (2023), and Zanini (2021). For the differences between Schmitt and the ordoliberals, see Galli (2019).

[2] The very notion of "authoritarian liberalism" dates to the last years of the Weimar Republic, as it was coined by Hermann Heller (2015) to describe the German situation in the period of von Papen's cabinet.

[3] See, for instance, Brown et al. (2018), Hines et al. (2023), Lamas et al. (2017), Maley (2021), and Morelock (2018, 2021).

In this essay, I will argue that while Foucault's lectures of 1979 have undoubtedly provided seminal insights for the strands of critical theory that see the emergence of neoliberalism as a crucial factor for understanding how the coordinates of politics and society have been redefined since the last decades of the twentieth century, some aspects of his interpretation can be reconsidered by drawing from the contribution of the Frankfurt School and particularly from the later reflection of Herbert Marcuse. The "crisis of governmentality" experienced after 1968 has a crucial genealogical relevance insofar as it gave rise to new strategies of power that are still active today (Chamayou, 2018). Both Foucault and Marcuse have critically grappled with this process at the moment of its emergence, but while the former was essentially interested in analyzing the new governmentalization of the state, the latter focused on the continuities between neoliberal rationality and capitalist domination.

The first section will discuss Foucault's positions and contextualize them to show why, despite his awareness of the possible authoritarian implications of the problematic relationship between liberal freedom and security, he tended to describe neoliberalism as an indirect art of government and did not foreground its conservative and antiegalitarian aspects. In the second section, I will turn to the Frankfurt School's perspective to show how the successful emergence of neoliberal strategies in response to the crisis of the postwar Keynesian and social-democratic framework has been linked to the mobilization of a conservative and authoritarian sensibility that tends to re-emerge when the functioning of the governmental management of society is challenged.

Against an "Inflationary Critique": The Indirect Government of Freedom

Although Foucault is not the only relevant thinker who can provide intellectual tools for describing the genealogy and the features of neoliberal politics, his analyses have proved crucial for at least three interrelated reasons.[4] First, his perspective allows us to interpret neoliberalism as a "constructivist" project that has entailed an overall reconfiguration of the state rather than its simple retreat and has promoted new institutional practices and political logic rather than mere economic deregulation. Secondly, Foucault's analysis helps to reveal the discontinuity between classical liberalism and neoliberalism: While the former sought to impose a limitation on state action in order to let the "natural" and beneficial dynamics of the market unfold according to a *laissez-faire* principle, neoliberalism considers "the free market as organizing and regulating principle of the state,

4 See on this point Bazzicalupo (2010), Brown (2005), Dardot and Laval (2013), and Lemke (2001).

from the start of its existence up to the last form of its interventions" (Foucault, 2008, p. 116). Thirdly, Foucault has pointed out that the scope of neoliberal rationality cannot be "confined by definition to a precise domain determined by a sector of the scale," but concerns "the whole scale," from the level of micro-powers to the state's management of the "whole social body" (Foucault, 2008, p. 186): The economy and the market become the medium to reshape the entire realm of social existence and produce specific forms of life. From this viewpoint, *The Birth of Biopolitics* has contributed to creating and keeping alive a new "Foucault effect" several decades after his death.

Although Foucault's positions have been intensively debated only after his lectures were published twenty years ago, they cannot be dissociated from the main threads of his reflection and the political debates he engaged in at that time. *The Birth of Biopolitics* represents a turning point in his intellectual trajectory, for it was the conclusion of his investigations on modern governmentality and the only moment in his teaching when he focused directly on contemporary issues before turning to the problem of the government of the self and others through a lengthy investigation of Christian and ancient ethics. In 1979, Foucault was also at the turning point of a long decade of political activism that paralleled his theoretical research. About a year earlier, in the autumn of 1977, he got involved in the affair of Klaus Croissant, the lawyer of the German terrorist group Red Army Faction, who had been suspected of complicity with his clients and had sought asylum in France. Foucault took part in the demonstrations against the decision to extradite him, defended his right of "perpetual dissident" and criticized the exceptional measures taken by the West German government[5] but refused to sign a petition promoted by Felix Guattari that defined the German *Bundesrepublik* as "fascist" and dissociated himself from any justification of terrorism.[6] An echo of these events—which led to a bitter disagreement with Deleuze—can be perceived in Foucault's lectures: One of the conclusions of his discussion of the ordoliberal theories was that "if there really is a German model, it is not the frequently invoked model of the all-powerful state, of the police state, which, as you know, has so frightened our compatriots," but the "rule of law" understood as *Wirtschaftsordnung*, a constitutional legal framework designed to guarantee the dynamics of market competition (Foucault, 2008, p. 179).

More generally, Foucault sought to reject what he described as an "inflationary critique of the state," that is, the fear of the "unlimited growth of the state, its omnipotence, its bureaucratic development" and the constant evocation of the "seeds of fascism" beneath any

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5 See Foucault (1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d, 1994e).
6 See, for instance, Hannah (2012) and Senellart (2009).

state's intervention (Foucault, 2008, pp. 186–187). In his perspective, this "state-phobia" was paradoxically shared both by the neoliberals and by their far-leftist opponents but was actually introduced by the former in their struggle against Keynesian, welfarist, and socialist policies. Concurrently, Foucault attacked the idea—which he ascribed to Sombart and more implicitly to Marcuse and Debord—that the capitalist economy was destined to produce a condition of "one-dimensionality" in which individuals were entirely subject to a centralized administrative apparatus, forced into standardized mass consumption, and condemned "to communicate with each other only through the play of signs and spectacles" (Foucault, 2008, p. 113), because—as he observed—the goal of the "art of government programmed by the ordoliberals [...], and which has now become the program of most governments in capitalist countries" was not a society oriented towards "the uniformity of the commodity, but towards the multiplicity and differentiation of enterprises" (Foucault, 2008, p. 149).

This does not mean that Foucault was fascinated by neoliberal discourses or that he more or less implicitly endorsed them, as several scholars have recently argued.[7] He was certainly convinced that the power strategies existing in Western societies were changing, and consequently, new critical frameworks were needed to deconstruct their underlying "regimes of truth." In his 1978 lectures on *Security, Territory, Population*, he presented his analysis as an attempt to provide "tactical pointers" about the "lines of forces" and the possible "constrictions and blockages" for potential resistances rather than proposing normative or value judgments (Foucault, 2009, p. 3). In line with the discontinuist approach that characterizes all his research, Foucault's *wirkliche Historie* programmatically "deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics" as emergences of forces that "do not obey destiny or regulative mechanisms, but the luck of the battle" (Foucault, 1998a, pp. 380–381). As he explained in his writings on the Enlightenment, the purpose of this work of "eventalization" was to identify the conditions that make a certain system "acceptable" as well as the "lines of rupture" that "make it difficult to accept" (Foucault, 2024, p. 43; see also Lorenzini, 2018). Genealogical critique must always "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think" (Foucault, 1984, p. 46) in a field of power relations that is always "subject to reversibility and possible reversal" (Foucault, 2024, p. 47). In this sense, the call for a "critical morality" expressed in *The Birth of Biopolitics* was an invitation to grasp the specificity of the neoliberal governmentalization of the state and to avoid repeating the same fallacious arguments used

7 See, for instance, Pestaña (2011) and the essays collected by Behrent and Zamora (2016). A more nuanced debate can be found in the essays collected by Sawyer and Steinmetz-Jenkins (2019).

by the neoliberals themselves against Keynesian policies:[8] If the latter appeared to Hayek as the beginning of a slippery slope toward totalitarianism, Foucault—in line with Franz Neumann and Hannah Arendt—saw totalitarian regimes as a kind of "governmentality of the party" which was something different from the modern state and the interplay of powers and resistances that have characterized its history.

In his attempt to identify the novelty of neoliberalism, Foucault essentially presented it as an "art of government" that aims to work "according to the rationality of the governed themselves" (Foucault, 2008, p. 313) and essentially relied on indirect strategies of regulation. Foucault's account of the German social market economy mainly focused on what Müller-Armack defined as *Gesellschaftspolitik*, which identifies society as "the target and objective" (Foucault, 2008, p. 146) of a multiplicity of legal and political interventions operating on the framework of economic competition, for example, on "population, technology, training and education, the legal system" (Foucault, 2008, p. 141). This "framework policy" was aimed at preventing "the possible anti-competitive mechanisms of society" (Foucault, 2008, p. 160) rather than directly interfering in the market competition. While the French philosopher mentioned the ordoliberals' emphasis on the necessity of safeguarding a set of "warm" moral and cultural values that could compensate for what was "cold" and "mechanic" in the economic game (Foucault, 2008, p. 242), he did not insist on the communitarian and hierarchical moral perspective underlying their program, especially in the case of Müller-Armack, Röpke, and Rüstow:[9] In his interpretation, the ordoliberal strong state was essentially conceived as a guardian of the economic constitution. As for the American neoliberals of the Chicago school, Foucault essentially focused on the anti-disciplinary implications of their theory of "human capital," which allowed them to use economic and entrepreneurial logic as "a principle of intelligibility and a principle of decipherment of social relationships and individual behavior" (Foucault, 2008, p. 243), even in non-economic spheres such as marriage, crime, or education. For Foucault, the goal of this economization of life was not "the internal subjugation of individuals" in a society based on a "general normalization and the exclusion of those who cannot be normalized" but "an optimization of systems of difference, in which the field is left open to fluctuating processes, in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated" (Foucault, 2008, pp. 259–260). As the philosopher recognizes, neoliberal subjects are "eminently governable," but their supposedly

8 In the lecture held on 7 March 1979, Foucault (2008) clearly takes the distances from Hayek's position by stating that "the welfare state has neither the same form, of course, nor, it seems to me, the same root or origin as the totalitarian state, as the Nazi, fascist, or Stalinist state" (p. 190).
9 See on this point, Zanini (2021), particularly pp. 315–370.

free behaviors can be controlled and directed by operating on the social environment and modifying its variables (Foucault, 2008, p. 270). The economic game itself becomes the source of a kind of voluntary servitude, but it also entails a production of "games of truth" and subjectivity, which was the most relevant aspect for Foucault. The lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* suggest that the notion of human capital, understood as a set of skills and qualities that cannot be separated from their individual bearer nor reduced to abstract labor (Foucault, 2008, pp. 219–227), underlies a framework in which the whole of life and subjectivity is involved in the process of valorization.

Thanks to this interpretation, Foucault identified the struggles against the "government of individualization" and the invention of new forms of subjectivation as a fundamental political stake. The more power appeared as a set of actions that operate "on the field of possibilities in which the behavior of active subjects is able to inscribe itself," the more politics could be described as an agonistic interplay in which the "conduct of conducts" is constantly challenged and provoked by an "intransigence of freedom" (Foucault, 2000c, pp. 341–342) that cannot be reduced to market freedom but is always "an actual relation between governors and governed" (Foucault, 2008, p. 63; see also Chignola, 2006, 2014).

To be sure, Foucault was far from denying the possibility of authoritarian rather than consensual forms of rule (Foucault, 2000c, p. 340), and by the same token, in his perspective, the emergence of new apparatuses and tactics of power never linearly replaces the other configurations that preceded them: Sovereignty and disciplines can be articulated with neoliberal governmentality in multiple ways according to necessity (Foucault, 2009, pp. 11, 107–108). The liberal arts of government cannot be univocally characterized as more flexible and tolerant, for at their core, there is always a complex interplay between freedom and security: Liberal and neoliberal freedom must be produced and organized through "the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion" (Foucault, 2008, p. 64), whose extent must be calculated each time. As the French philosopher explained in some interviews that shortly preceded his lectures on governmentality, contemporary states tended to extend their apparatuses of power beyond the rule of law precisely in the name of a new "pact" of security (Foucault, 1994c, pp. 385–387). Danger and anxiety are integral to the liberal and neoliberal economy of power when seen as government practices (Brindisi, 2020), and the delicate balance between freedom and security can be easily disrupted.

This perspective was consistent with Foucault's attempt to understand power in productive rather than repressive terms and to go beyond Marxist critique of ideology. Nonetheless, it remains that—notwithstanding these aspects and probably in response

to the political controversies that surrounded his inquiries on modern governmentality—at least in *Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault did not emphasize the conservative, reactive, or authoritarian features of neoliberal theories and the role these aspects have played in their political implementation. In this sense, he overshadowed certain aspects of the genealogy of neoliberalism, such as the role played by the so-called Chicago Boys in Pinochet's Chile or the invitation to limit "the indefinite extension of political democracy" expressed by Crozier et al. (1975, p. 115) in the first report of the Trilateral Commission. More generally, Foucault's lectures did not explore how, behind the libertarian façade and the depoliticization of society, neoliberal programs restrict the agency and the means of pressure of the subaltern groups and intensify power asymmetries throughout the entire field of social relations, as recently observed, among others, by Gregoire Chamayou (2018), who also noted that the neoliberal strategy was not so much "an alternative to the welfare state" but to the radical demands that were challenging it (p. 267). The theoretical elaboration of the Frankfurt School, and especially Marcuse's later reflections, can provide some useful elements to complement Foucault's insights and shed light on the authoritarian trends that have emerged in reaction to the crisis of governmentality that gave rise to neoliberal rationality.

The Reactive Nature of a Capitalist Transformation

Foucault's inquiry on governmentality involved a shift in focus from the microphysics of power relations to the broader level of the political rationalities underlying the development of the modern state and an attempt to reintroduce the latter as a meaningful object of analysis, though not as an autonomous source of power.[10] Not coincidentally, then, the French philosopher began to situate his research in the same lineage of those reflections that, starting from Kant's writings on the Enlightenment, had tackled the problem of a rationalization that has characterized "Western thought and science" as well as "social relations, state organizations, economic practices drilling right down to individual behavior" (Foucault, 2024, p. 35). Although this approach to "political reason" sometimes led Foucault to acknowledge his debt to the Frankfurt scholars, his relationship with them, and with Marcuse in particular, has always been marked by a considerable distance: As it is well known, he constantly criticized his German colleagues for understanding power essentially in terms of repression (Foucault, 1978, 2003), for adopting a humanist notion of subjectivity (Foucault, 2000a, p. 274), and for proposing a monistic and unilinear interpretation of the process of rationalization (Foucault, 1998b, pp. 340–42; 2000b, pp. 299–300).

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10 See Jessop (2010) and Lemke (2012, pp. 25n-dash40).

This critique was essentially based on the masterpieces written by Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Eros and Civilization, or One Dimensional Man.* However, since the 1930s, the Frankfurt scholars developed a thorough analysis of how the exercise of governance in contemporary societies had changed after the economic and political crisis of the interwar period, the fall of the Weimar Republic, and the rise of new authoritarian and totalitarian regimes in Europe, although they never reached a common position.[11] While they all recognized the decline of the liberal and bourgeois political framework inherited from the nineteenth century, some of them, such as Horkheimer and Pollock, described the emerging domination as a new form of state capitalism that, in the attempt to hypostatize its systemic contradictions and the threat of class conflicts, had done away with the free initiative of individual entrepreneurs, thus replacing the anarchy of the market and the "primacy of production" with the rigid control and the "primacy" of political power (Horkheimer, 1978; Pollock, 1978). For other members, such as Neumann, Kirchheimer, and Marcuse, the crisis of the earlier liberal order and the tendency toward a regimented economy did not involve a structural transformation of capitalist relations of production, nor did it alter the competitive nature of the social system. In Germany, the dominant groups had to share their power with the new party elite but never lost "their decisive social and economic functions" (Marcuse, 1998, p. 69) and merged their economic power with political power beyond the formal structures of the modern state. The Nazi regime was thus interpreted by Marcuse as a tendentially "direct and immediate self-government by the prevailing social groups over the rest of the population," which, however, was not solely controlled by repressive means but "by unleashing the most brutal and selfish instincts of the individual" (Marcuse, 1998, p. 70), by transforming "stimuli for protest and rebellion into stimuli for coordination" (Marcuse, 1998, p. 88) as well as through a new "technical rationality" based on a brutal principle of efficiency.

From Marcuse's perspective, it is possible to sketch a different interpretation of the "general crisis" of liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008, p. 70) caused in the 1930s by the problematic relationship between the "production of freedom" and the necessity of security. While Foucault was mainly interested in showing how the ordoliberal and the American neoliberal discourses had originated by this crisis as reactions to totalitarian and Keynesian solutions, for Marcuse, once the liberal separation between state and society, the rule of law and the intermediate institutions became ineffective, both the

11. See Galli (2023a), Kellner (1989, pp. 55–82), and Laudani (2005, pp. 88-93).

traditional privileged groups and the lower classes accepted the new regime to protect some threatened interests. The former gave up the independence of their businesses to secure capital accumulation, pursue economic expansion through imperialistic war, and keep the labor force under control; the populace exchanged "the dangerous ideal of freedom" associated with the troubles and the uncertainty of the Weimar period "with the protective reality of security" (Marcuse, 1998, p. 83). It can be remarked that the ordoliberals did not frontally oppose this totalitarian transformation, although they rejected it in the postwar period. Despite their distance from Hitler's ideology, most of them kept their academic positions in Germany and collaborated with the regime's administration, attempting to influence its agenda in accordance with their approach. Although they criticized the interventionist and planning policies of the Nazi Party, they de facto welcomed the neutralization of the workers' movement and its dangerous claims for social justice (Mesini, 2023, pp. 77, 92–124).

The late capitalist and advanced industrial countries of the postwar period did not put an end to the exchange between freedom and security and never restored the features of the earlier liberal and individualist bourgeois order. The Frankfurt scholars essentially described them as administered and monopoly capitalist societies, characterized, as Marcuse concisely pointed out in his *One Dimensional Man*, by the "concentration of the national economy on the needs of the big corporations, with the government as a stimulating, supporting, and sometimes even controlling force; hitching of this economy to a world-wide system of military alliances, monetary arrangements, technical assistance and development schemes"; by the "gradual assimilation of blue-collar and white-collar population, of leadership types in business and labor, of leisure activities and aspirations in different social classes," by the "invasion of the private household by the togetherness of public opinion; opening of the bedroom to the media of mass communication" and by the convergence of traditionally opposite political forces (Marcuse, 1991, pp. 21–22). In this way capitalism "discovered resources within itself that have postponed its collapse until the Greek Calends" thanks to "the immense growth in technical potential" and "the vast increase in consumer goods available to all the members of the advanced industrialized nations" (Adorno, 2003, p. 112), but at the cost of a "decline of individuality" which would be dominated by impersonal economic and social forces among high and low groups alike (Horkheimer, 2013, pp. 100–101).

This critical reflection on the totalizing social structures and ideologies that characterized both the Western capitalist countries and the Soviet bloc during the Cold War may seem very distant from the current trends of global capitalism. As we have seen, the idea of one-dimensional domination was strongly questioned by Foucault, who was

definitely right in identifying neoliberal policies as something different from the earlier model of welfare and consumer societies and their "comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom," as well as from their technocratic planning and the integration of labor into the capitalist system guaranteed by economic growth and full employment policies. However, the neoliberal "mobilization" does not represent in itself a radical break with the logic of the administered society: Marcuse's "performance principle," as well as the values of "profitable productivity, assertiveness, efficiency, competitiveness," have been pushed to the extreme and govern the entire field of social relations as well as the experience and even the psyche of individual subjects. The economy itself constitutes a permanent tribunal for evaluating individual choices and behaviors, as well as public decisions. However, the economic order must be backed by political powers and institutions, which are involved in close cooperation and negotiation with prominent economic actors and corporations. At the same time, the market acts as a medium that regulates their differences of interest according to its inherent laws. Science and technology are deeply embedded in the organization of capital production and the exercise of economic and political governance. The appropriation and destruction of nature–as well as the instrumental manipulation of human needs and the artificial production of scarcity and exploitation—are even more intense. The overall configuration of the existing social system tendentially "paralyzes people's ability to imagine the world in concrete terms as being anything other than it appears to be" (Adorno, 2003, p. 120).

But if neoliberalism has succeeded in imposing a new "closure of the political universe," this has been done through new discourses and practices. The relative stabilization achieved in the so-called golden decades of Keynesianism through the political regulation of capitalism and the institutional mediation of social interests was only, in fact, a "transitional balance" (Galli, 2023b, p. 72) that was soon declared unsustainable due to its fiscal costs and ultimately disruptive of the entire capitalist order. The inclusive project described by the Frankfurt scholars—which had at least allowed for "an increasing satisfaction of material needs" and made tangible the possibility of "a life without deprivation," as Adorno (2003, p. 118) had noted—has been progressively abandoned in the last five decades. As a result, social and political inequalities have been reasserted behind the seemingly neutral dynamics of the market: Today's capital relies on "heterogeneous forms of value extraction" that "organize the social in dissymmetrical ways" (Bazzicalupo, 2020, p. 111, more generally Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019). Neoliberal theories and policies justify these asymmetries as unavoidable outcomes of the economic game, while political institutions are called upon to guarantee the governability of the social system and to limit the "excessive" demands that could disrupt its supposedly

smooth functioning. Social conflicts are no longer watered down by granting social rights the "industrial citizenship" but through the fragmentation and the precariousness of labor and the individualization of everyone's risks and conditions. While such a condition breeds discontent, disaffiliation, cynicism, and insecurity, these elements are easily exploited for the implementation of regressive policies. As Wendy Brown has pointed out, the neoliberal attack on the social has generated "an *antidemocratic culture from below,* while building and legitimating *antidemocratic forms of state power from above*" (Brown, 2019, p. 28).

Marcuse was the only member of the first generation of the Frankfurt School who reckoned with the initial moments of this transformation, partly because he was the only one who continued to write and intervene in the public debate until the end of the 1970s, and because, he saw the wave of social struggles that began in the 1960s and the political and economic crisis of the following decade as the beginning of a new phase that required a readjustment of the analytical categories of critical theory. While Horkheimer and Adorno remained skeptical about the possibility of effective practical opposition to late capitalist society, Marcuse generally sided with the oppositional movements that emerged around 1968 (Laudani, 2005, pp. 251–308) and—like Foucault—took their resistance as a "catalyst" to illuminate and question power relations and strategies (Foucault, 2000c, p. 329). For the Frenchman, these movements contributed to the generation of an "immense and proliferating criticizability of things, institutions, practices and discourses" (Foucault, 2003, p. 6). For Marcuse, too, the New Left had primarily initiated a "transvaluation" of existing society's values and opened up a myriad of terrains of struggle on all fronts against the structures of domination of existing society (Marcuse, 2001a, p. 115). The pacifist protests, the environmentalist, feminist, and anti-racist movements for black liberation, and the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles of the Third World were not strong enough in themselves to overthrow the foundations of the system. Still, they had shown that it was possible to go beyond the one-dimensional political universe of the advanced capitalist societies and created a severe crisis in its apparatuses on both the local and the global level. Throughout the 1970s, Marcuse increasingly emphasized that these new liberating forces were not simply expressive of new ideological tendencies but of a new social composition. Due to the inner development of the productive system, the scope of capital valorization had expanded far beyond the traditional productive activities to involve new groups of educated laborers and people employed in the tertiary sector or in nonmaterial activities, which would now form "an ever more essential base of capitalist reproduction" (Marcuse, 2005, p. 145). In this context, the capital tends to "organize the entire society in its interest and

image" (Marcuse, 1972, p. 11), and the majority of the population "become the direct servants of capital, [...] while being separated from control of the means of production" (Marcuse, 1972, p. 9), but this situation also generates new vital needs that could not be satisfied in the existing configuration of society and threatened "to explode the capitalist framework" (Marcuse, 1972, p. 6).

Precisely for this reason, new forms of control were being devised by the ruling classes "to counteract liberation at its very roots in the mind of man" (Marcuse, 2001a, p. 118) and reimpose the "operational values" and the work ethic that had been contested. Especially after the re-election of Richard Nixon and the Watergate scandal, Marcuse argued that the establishment was responding to the potential threat of subversion and the increasingly acute contradictions of the capitalist system with a preventive counterrevolution. This manifested itself as a direct repressive attack on the centers of the opposition, such as universities and ghettos, and on those groups of black and brown activists, hippies, radical students, and intellectuals, who appeared as "disturbing aliens" (Marcuse, 1972, p. 28). However, more importantly, it entailed a comprehensive reorganization of the political and economic spheres: In order to reassert itself, the capitalist technostructure was intensifying labor exploitation and enlarging "investments in waste and profitable services [...] while neglecting and even reducing nonprofitable public services," such as education and welfare (Marcuse, 1972, p. 20). This was destined to create a sharp division in the working class between "a privileged population in the advanced capitalist countries, and an underprivileged population both in these countries and abroad" (Marcuse, 2014a, p. 394). On the political level, the ruling groups were trying to throw off the "legal, moral and political brakes" of traditional liberal democracy (Marcuse, 2001c, p. 176).

According to Marcuse, this preventive counterrevolutionary strategy was not ultimately a revival of past forms of fascism, although, in the global peripheries, it has often been implemented through military dictatorships. In the United States and the Western world, it essentially took the form of a gradual erosion of democratic principles. The "union of big capital and the state" was becoming so "immediate and overt" that "the notion of a conflict between private interest and public government is no longer taken seriously, and, if necessary, abolished by administrative fiat," and this "monopolization of the economy asserts itself in the concentration of power in the executive branch of the government." Moreover, there was a growing tendency to identify the persons of the leaders and the institutions they represented (Marcuse, 2001c, pp. 175–176).

This "regressive development of bourgeois democracy" was by no means a conspiracy of the establishment since it had a significant degree of popular support from the

"silent majority" and could rely on a widespread popular sentiment of "hatred against long hair and beards, any kind of Hippie life, against homosexuals, etc." and "a long tradition of accepting authority" (Marcuse, 2001b, p. 135). The same process that subordinates the lives and activities of the majority of the population to the apparatuses of capital valorization transforms the "amorphous masses" that "form the human base of American democracy" into "the harbinger of its conservatives' reactionary, even neo-fascist tendencies" (Marcuse, 2001c, p. 178). The people were willing to accept "inflation and unemployment, war crimes and corruption, a grossly inadequate health service, the continued rat race of the daily existence. (Marcuse, 2001c, p. 168)

Referring to the earlier studies of the Frankfurt School on the authoritarian personality, Marcuse focused on the instinctual and libidinal affinity that binds the subjects to their rulers and the sadomasochistic tendency that, in times of insecurity, leads the conservative and conformist majority to identify themselves with "institutionalized brutality and aggression" and with their rulers: "The real issues recede before the instinctual affirmation of the image," the "sex appeal" and "the business morality" of political leaders (Marcuse, 2001c, pp. 170–171). As the electoral process was increasingly dominated by economic power, the abuses and the corruption of those in power were no longer perceived as such: They were crimes only from an extrinsic "moral point of view—otherwise, they are requirements of national security, free enterprise, self-preservation" (Marcuse, 2001c, p. 171). Therefore, the ruling classes were becoming "a vast network (or chain) of rackets, cliques and gangs, powerful enough to bend the law or to break it where existing legislation is not already made or interpreted in their favor" (Marcuse, 2001d, p. 190).

For Marcuse, it had to be recognized that for the time being, the initiative was "with the force of repression" (Marcuse, 2001e, p. 201). Therefore, the New Left had to defend democratic freedom "while attacking its capitalist foundations" (Marcuse, 2001c, p. 177) and pursuing a "revolution of subjectivity" in order to liberate an emancipatory consciousness, transform the instinctual structures and the values that underpin the existing society (Marcuse, 2014b). This necessarily was a long struggle of resistance and reinvention, not so different from the critical politics of the self that Foucault envisioned in the last period of his life.

Conclusions

Both Foucault and Marcuse recognized that their contemporary political reality was transforming in response to a general crisis of the existing practice of government. They also observed that the disruption of the previous systems of regulation and integration

was due to the emergence of new demands and pressures from below, as well as the invention of new strategies of control from above. In the midst of the Nixon era and the immediate aftermath of the abandonment of the Bretton Woods system and the *Big Society* project in the USA, Marcuse could only perceive the beginning of a process that revealed its most apparent consequences only after his death and, consequently, he probably was less able than Foucault to grasp its novelty. However, his later reflections show that neoliberal capitalism did not merely set up a new strategy to conduct people's conducts through market-driven rationality and indirect actions on their social environment but also required a supplement of authoritarianism as a response to the contradictions and the cultural and material challenges that had emerged on a global scale during the previous decades.

This aspect was somewhat overshadowed in Foucault's account, but it helps to highlight that the rehabilitation of conservative rhetoric and morality, the verticalization of political power, the identification of "the people" with the figure of the leaders, and the promotion of authoritarian forms of subjectivation were not accidental in the implementation of neoliberal policies and state strategies. Looking at the context of the United States, Marcuse interpreted this process as a counterrevolution promoted by right-wing political actors such as Nixon. Still, neoliberalism permeated the entire political space in the decades following his death. Its policies have been widely implemented by liberal and social democratic governments and by the transnational economic institutions that laid the foundation for the processes of globalization and financialization of the economy in that period. As governmental rationality, neoliberalism can be combined with different programs and agendas: At times, it has exhibited libertarian traits identified by Foucault and has been presented as a modernizing force, not incompatible with the assertion of new cosmopolitan values and rights or with new forms of social justice and self-improvement for the disadvantaged groups. However, the possibility of a progressive neoliberalism has proved increasingly illusory, given neoliberalism's constitutive tendency to transform inequality into a "constitutional factor," to erase the social dimension and to prevent any possible modification of existing social relations through collective democratic action (Ricciardi, 2020, pp. 285, 289). Leftist programs and values can converge with this framework only when they can fully accommodate its requirements and underlying assumptions, that is, when they are deformed and presented as moral, symbolic, or cultural claims, liberal identity politics, or demands for recognition (Galli, 2022). On the other hand, neoliberal policies have "prepared the ground for the mobilization and legitimacy of ferocious antidemocratic forces" (Brown, 2019, p. 7) on the far right, whose mix of libertarianism, populist ressentiment, ethnic

and male supremacism and virulent disdain for vulnerable and minority subjects, as well as for all forms of social, racial, and environmental justice, sounds definitely more realistic, credible and consistent with competitive logic of the system and with the current tendency towards a "refeudalization" of society (De Carolis, 2017). Of course, this process is not without resistance: The constant rise of social and radical movements of protest around the globe over the last twenty years shows possible spaces for opposition. However, each time social demands and oppositional claims prove too incompatible with the existing order of the market and the existing forms of exploitation and accumulation, conservativism and authoritarianism re-emerge as a viable preventive strategy to "repel challenges to inequality" (Brown, 2019, p. 14).

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