

## **Liberalism and history**

**Barry Hindess**

### **Abstract**

The paper addresses two problems in Foucault's work. One concerns his treatment of liberalism in *The birth of biopolitics* (2008), but probably more familiar through the work of the governmentality mob, and the other concerns a comment on relations between the West and the rest in *The order of things* (1970) that expresses an insensitive Eurocentrism. I argue that we cannot make sense of liberalism without grasping the place of this Eurocentrism in eighteenth/nineteenth-century western thought.

I can hardly write about Foucault without acknowledging that he produced lots of interesting and provocative work, much of it in interviews and lectures that he did not prepare for publication. With that kind of output, there are bound to be a few problems. This paper addresses two of them.

One concerns Foucault's treatment of liberalism, mostly in *The birth of biopolitics*, published in English in 2008, but long familiar indirectly through the literature on governmentality (Burchell 1996; Gordon 1991; Rose & Miller 1992; Rose 1999; and, here in Australia, Dean 1999; Hindess 1995). Here I argue that Foucault's discussion is confused and misleading (Hindess 2009) and that the governmentality literature has picked up only one side of his argument. Now most of what Foucault has to say on liberalism is in *The birth of biopolitics* (2008), lectures that someone else edited for publication, without the usual author's concern to produce a picture of consistency and coherence.

The second problem concerns a curious comment on relations between the West and the rest in one of Foucault's most important books *The order of things* (1970). He referred, for example, to western culture's 'fundamental relation with the whole of history', a relation that, after a certain point, 'enabled it to link itself to other cultures in a mode of pure theory' (1970, p. 376).

This observation appears in the penultimate chapter of a long and complex argument, but there is nothing in Foucault's earlier discussion to prepare us for this blunt assertion of European insensitivity. Where did it come from? Was it his own view, or was he simply reporting the views of Europeans in the period he was writing about – or even suggesting that this view followed directly from the switch he identified from the classical to a modern episteme?

It would be difficult to argue that this view follows from the alleged Kantian revolution in philosophy – there is too much continuity here with views expressed in Foucault's classical period. Yet there is plenty of evidence that educated late Europeans in the late eighteenth century took such a view of the rest of humanity. Here, for example, is Edmund Burke writing in June 1777 to the historian William Robertson about the results of the European voyages of discovery: 'Now the Great Map of Mankind is unrolled at once; and there is no

state or gradation of barbarism, and no mode of refinement which we have not at the same time instant under our View' (1958, p. 351). If I had more space, I could cite other eighteenth-century Europeans – for example, Schiller and Kant, who Foucault probably got the idea from – expressing similar thoughts.

Now, the trouble with Foucault's discussion is that he made no attempt to explain where this developmental view of humanity came from or how it fits into his story of a switch in epistemes. I will suggest that we cannot make sense of liberalism without grasping the place of this bizarre Eurocentrism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western thought.

Now back to my first argument: the confusions of Foucault's treatment of liberalism. I should begin by saying that my readers will have attended enough lectures, or even given them, to know that it is hard to expect coherence in a single lecture, let alone in a course of lectures. Once we recognise this, it is no great criticism of Foucault to say that the published course is a mess.

What is liberalism? The first lecture in the course identified liberalism with Benthamite utilitarianism. This, Foucault said, is 'broadly what is called liberalism' (2008, p. 20). This, in effect, is the view presented by governmentality. This view effectively denies the conventional political theory story that liberalism is all about the defence of individual liberty and that there is a canon of great liberal thinkers running from Locke through Hume, James and Mill, Constant, Humbolt and so on.

Later in the course, Foucault ran a second line: that liberalism has confused freedom as a matter of principle with freedom as a pragmatic matter, even suggesting that the two perspectives come together to focus on a 'new ensemble' ('civil society', which encompasses individuals as both subjects of right and economic actors) 'that is characteristic of the liberal art of governing' (2008, p. 295). Foucault left little doubt that the second perspective has been more important than the first, and that it 'has been strong and held out, while the other has receded' (2008, p. 43). Yet, if both views of freedom – as a matter of principle and as a practical issue of government – really belong to liberalism, then we would have to say that the conventional political theory story is not entirely false.

My view is that Foucault and conventional political theory are both wrong about this. We need only consider liberal views on colonial government, or liberal views of how to govern the urban and rural poor at home to see that, with rare individual exceptions, liberalism was not exactly committed to the promotion of freedom as a matter of principle – although liberals were clearly concerned to free people from what they saw as the influence of tradition and superstition, in part by promoting the freedom of the market and reforming property relations – ‘Light taxes and good laws’, proclaimed James Mill in his *History of British India*, ‘nothing more is wanted for national and individual prosperity all over the globe’ (1975, p. 578). The disastrous consequences of this reformist approach are detailed in Ranajit Guha’s first major book *A rule of property for Bengal* (1996) and it was soon to be abandoned or applied more cautiously.

It was James’ son, John Stuart Mill, who famously argued in his *Considerations on representative government* (1977 [1865]) that the Indian people were not yet ready for self-government – not too long after the abolition of the East India company. We should never treat Mill or his father, another faithful servant of the company, as if they wrote simply as disinterested intellectuals. Again, it would not be difficult to show that Alexis de Toqueville, another famous liberal, was implicated in French rule in Algeria (Pitts 2000).

So by the early twentieth century liberals generally thought that the techniques of governing through the promotion of freedom – the techniques that governmentality identifies with liberalism – were not really appropriate to the greater part of humanity.

How can we understand this? Postcolonial critics (Guha 1997; Said 1992) have pointed to liberal hypocrisy. The trouble with this is that hypocrisy is such a common feature of human activity that it does nothing to explain any particular actions. I think that the answer to our puzzle lies in developmental views of humanity of the kind set out in Foucault’s *The order of things* (1970).

So, the question becomes: how could educated Europeans have come to believe in a developmental story that runs something like this:

1. Humanity is divided into societies.

2. These societies can be ranked along a developmental spectrum in which, as it happens, Western Europe is at the top.
3. Within the more advanced societies some people – the educated and mostly prosperous minority – have advanced further than the rest.

If you think that no-one could possibly buy such a story, just look at Hegel, Marx, classical sociology, modern development economics and standard Anglo-American accounts of Islam's backwardness. Just as seventeenth-century Protestant rhetoric portrayed Catholics as priest-ridden slaves to tradition (Fasolt 2004) so the West portrays the Islamic world today.

I have not left myself space to deal with this question properly, but the short answer is: 'America'. At the time of the first European invasions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Europeans generally followed the biblical view that all of humanity was descended from the sons of Noah, Shem, Japheth and Ham, who populated Europe, Asia and Africa (the biblical story does not tell us where their wives or other sexual partners came from). Since America did not belong to this biblical story, there was some debate about whether Americans were really human.

Finally, the Spanish Jesuit, Jose de Acosta, in his *Natural and moral history of the Indies* (2002 [1590]) provided the first historical framework in which it was possible to view Americans as belonging to the same history as the people of the Old World (Mignolo 2002). Acosta achieved this by drawing parallels between contemporary Americans and the Ancient Romans or Hebrews and the various uncivilised peoples described by Herodotus, Caesar and Tacitus. This move established the Americans' humanity by locating them in the distant western past. It provided a model for later western representations of non-western people.

We might see Acosta's argument here as an early version of the modern cosmopolitan view that our concerns should encompass all sections of humanity. Acosta's discussion includes Americans in the history of humanity precisely by placing them in the distant European past. The attractively inclusive move is at the same time a distancing one. Although it would take too long to make the argument here, I should say that one effect of representing others as living in the past is to suggest that they are less than fully human – but that is an issue for a different discussion.

**Barry Hindess** is Professor of Political Science in the Research School of Social Sciences at ANU. He has published widely in the areas of social and political theory. His most recent works are *Discourses of power: from Hobbes to Foucault*, *Governing Australia: studies in contemporary rationalities of government* (with Mitchell Dean), *Corruption and democracy in Australia* and *Us and them: anti-elitism in Australia* (with Marian Sawer). He has published numerous papers on democracy, liberalism and empire, and neo-liberalism.

[barry.hindess@anu.edu.au](mailto:barry.hindess@anu.edu.au)

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