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## Generalizing Resistance: The Coalition Politics of Foucault’s Governmentality Lectures

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**Abstract:** This article interprets Michel Foucault as a thinker of political coalition. While Foucault is often associated with a localist “micro-politics,” he also sought to help dispersed struggles “generalize” themselves into bigger, cohesive movements. Foucault gave his fullest account of the politics of generalization in manuscripts and drafts associated with two courses at the Collège de France, entitled *Security, Territory, Population* (1978) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1979), which are well known to political theorists for their discussions of “governmentality.” Intellectual historians have recently generated controversy by proposing that Foucault used his governmentality lectures to flirt with neoliberal positions. By reconstructing Foucault’s coalitional project in the late 1970s, this article offers an alternative contextualist account of his purposes, while encouraging political theorists to reappraise the lectures as the basis for a Foucauldian theory of large-scale alliance politics.

Michel Foucault’s thought has often been seen as inimical to large-scale political action. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault traced the history of the modern “micro-powers” which shaped individual behavior and subjectivity at the local level. Spurning the tradition of political theory which took the state as its central object of analysis, he instead focused his analytical gaze on “capillary” sites like the school, the prison, and the clinic. Early critics of Foucault’s political thought like Michael Walzer argued that merely “local resistance” of the Foucauldian kind would falter when faced with the central power of the

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state.<sup>1</sup> More receptive readers have also expressed anxieties about the limitations of Foucault's emphasis on localism and specificity. Ladelle McWhorter values Foucault's attention to the particular and the discontinuous—he was “a splitter, not a lumpier.”<sup>2</sup> Yet she fears that this orientation might foreclose “opportunities to form and consolidate alliances” with people unlike ourselves.<sup>3</sup> In historical terms, Foucault's poststructuralist celebration of difference, specificity, and micro-politics has been associated with the “disintegration” and “fracture” said to have troubled capitalist societies and fragmented the global worker's movement in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

This article offers a new account of Foucault as a thinker of coalition. Rather than being a willing catalyst of 1970s social fragmentation, he offered an alliance-building response to it. The fullest account of Foucault's alliance politics is to be found in interviews, notes and manuscript drafts linked to two lecture series at the Collège de France: *Security, Territory, Population* (1978) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1979).<sup>5</sup> These courses reveal a Foucault more interested in macro-level politics, looking beyond micro-powers to offer the closest thing to a Foucauldian theory of the state.<sup>6</sup> He analyzed the early modern discourse of *raison d'état* and contemporary neoliberalism as rationalities which established the principles governing state activity, and which regulated exchanges between the state, society, and the natural world. He called these rationalities forms of governmentality. Rather than taking the state as a starting point for political thinking, he argued that states were only an outgrowth of governmentality, this broader set of “institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics” which regulated the exercise of power both locally and on the national scale.<sup>7</sup>

The circulation of excerpts from these courses since the late 1970s and their full posthumous publication in 2004 has informed the scholarly field of governmentality studies, which has applied Foucault's insights to the analysis of contemporary liberalism and global governance. An increasingly pressing

<sup>1</sup>Michael Walzer, “The Politics of Michel Foucault,” *Dissent*, no. 30 (1983): 481–90.

<sup>2</sup>Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 10–11.

<sup>4</sup>Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso Books, 1987); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 102–10.

<sup>5</sup>Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007) (hereafter *STP*); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008) (hereafter *BB*).

<sup>6</sup>See Thomas Lemke, “An Indigestible Meal? Foucault, Governmentality and State Theory,” *Distinktion* 8, no. 2 (2007): 43–64; Stephen W. Sawyer, “Foucault and the State,” *Tocqueville Review* 36, no. 1 (2015): 135–64.

<sup>7</sup>*STP*, 108.

question, however, is why Foucault chose to stray beyond his usual remit in 1978–79 to address national government, liberalism, and the state. He was, at the time, drafting a volume of the *History of Sexuality* which charted the emergence of modern conceptions of sexual subjectivity in confessional manuals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while beginning to take an interest in Church Fathers like Augustine, Jerome, Cyprian, and Ambrose.<sup>8</sup> These interests would eventually merge into *Confessions of the Flesh*, a fourth volume of the sexuality project left nearly complete at Foucault's death in 1984 and published posthumously in 2018.<sup>9</sup> Elements of this research spilt over into passages of *Security, Territory, Population*, but the governmentality lectures substantially diverged from Foucault's writing projects. More than a rough draft for future publications, these lectures read like an intervention into contemporary politics, spurred by "critical morality."<sup>10</sup>

Most scholars have assumed that Foucault intended to facilitate more nuanced critiques of the modes of liberal governance emerging in 1970s France, which he associated with German ordoliberalism and American neoliberalism.<sup>11</sup> A number of intellectual historians have proposed, to some controversy, that he endorsed aspects of neoliberal government as an emancipatory project.<sup>12</sup> These scholars suggest that Foucault was attracted to neoliberalism's curbing of state power and its more tolerant, less normalizing approach to minority individuals, which he is meant to have vaunted as a preferable alternative to the "statist and bureaucratic" socialism of the French Socialist and Communist parties then approaching office in an electoral "Union of the Left."<sup>13</sup> Michael Behrent proposes that Foucault's

<sup>8</sup>Archival material is cited from the fonds Foucault at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, beginning with the number of the collection. For the confessional manuals project, see above all the drafts preserved in NAF28730, boxes 87, 88, and 89. For Foucault's growing interest in early Christianity, see Michel Foucault, "Sexualité et pouvoir" (1978), in *Dits et écrits, 1954–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), (hereafter *DE*), 565, and the notes on Jerome, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine from September 1978 and April 1979 in Foucault's journals: NAF28730, box 92, folders 19 and 20.

<sup>9</sup>Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 4, *Confessions of the Flesh*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 2021).

<sup>10</sup>*BB*, 186.

<sup>11</sup>See, e.g., Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso Books, 2014); David Newheiser, "Foucault, Gary Becker and the Critique of Neoliberalism," *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (2016): 3–21; Nicholas Gane, "Foucault's History of Neoliberalism," in *After Foucault: Culture, Theory and Criticism in the 21st Century*, ed. Lisa Downing (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 57.

<sup>12</sup>See especially Michael C. Behrent and Daniel Zamora, eds., *Foucault and Neo-liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

<sup>13</sup>Serge Audier, *Penser le 'néoliberalisme': Le moment néolibéral, Foucault, et la crise du socialisme* (Lormont: Le Bord de l'eau, 2015), 457.

normative “suspicion of the state” gave him a “deep affinity” with neoliberalism, which he presented favorably in order to “attack French socialism’s unreconstructed statism.”<sup>14</sup> These claims suggest that far from being an abidingly useful resource for the left today, Foucault’s antistatist, culturally liberal political thought led him into sympathy with the neoliberal project which has transformed capitalist societies in the intervening half century. Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora treat Foucault’s alleged neoliberal flirtation as a cautionary tale about the limits of “a Left politics underscored by the anti-statist and anti-bureaucratic valorizations of civil society, social movements and identity politics” in our own neoliberal age.<sup>15</sup>

It is highly misleading to align Foucault with an antistatist left potentially receptive to neoliberal ideas, given his scornful criticism of contemporary antibureaucratic antistatistism in his governmentality lectures. There is little convincing evidence that he “strategically endorsed” neoliberalism in 1979.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, this contextualist scholarship usefully reminds us that his remarkably neutral account of neoliberalism is hard to describe as a critique. Whether the neoliberal transformation of the state was good or bad, he said, was “not my problem.”<sup>17</sup> Though scholars today produce important critiques of neoliberalism in a Foucauldian vein, we may need to look elsewhere for the targets motivating Foucault himself in 1979, before the election of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States.

Moving beyond the debate about whether Foucault intended to criticize or endorse neoliberalism, this article offers an alternative interpretation. The governmentality lectures, I propose, show Foucault trying to defend a large-scale coalition politics outside the party form. His discussions of governmentality were not a normative evaluation of the virtues of liberalism, but a kind of cartographic redescription of the possibilities for linking together activist struggles on the left. By remapping the political field in terms of governmentality, he revealed potential for alliances between isolated sparks of resistance. Radical movements stirring in the hospital, the prison, and the school need not see themselves as competitors: they all targeted the same rationalities of “government” which subjected them using isomorphic techniques. In capturing the “generality” of governmentality as a broad network which subtended numerous sites and practices of power, Foucault thus gave an account of how acts of resistance might themselves “generalize,” connecting and compounding one another to achieve society-wide impacts beyond the local level.

<sup>14</sup>Michael C. Behrent, “Liberalism without Humanism: Michel Foucault and the Free-Market Creed, 1976–1979,” *Modern Intellectual History* 6, no. 3 (2009): 545, 560–61.

<sup>15</sup>Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (London: Verso Books, 2021), 231.

<sup>16</sup>Behrent, “Liberalism without Humanism,” 539.

<sup>17</sup>BB, 191–92.

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Rather than reading Foucault's deflationary account of the modern state as a contribution to the antibureaucratic critique of state power, we can ask how it promoted a specific strategy for coalition politics on the left. Foucault was pushing back against the increasingly insistent imperative to coordinate dispersed activist initiatives through an electoral party. Since, on many contemporary accounts, the social totality had a commanding epicenter in the state, particular struggles would have at best a tangential impact if they stuck to confronting local representatives of power. To have transformative effects, they must be "totalized" by a party capable of capturing and using the state apparatus as an instrument of nationwide change. State-centric visions of the political field entailed party-centric visions of left-wing coalition. Foucault's notes demonstrate that he sought to articulate an alternative model of coalition outside the party form. Since governmentality, unlike the state, was an expansive but decentralized network of relations and practices, activist struggles against it could form a loose, decentered but nonetheless cohesive movement of movements. The stakes of the governmentality lectures thus lie less in an evaluation of liberalism than in a clash between two models of coalition among left-wing movements: totalization in the party versus generalization outside it. This claim may seem *prima facie* implausible, since Foucault's lectures said so much about liberalism and so little about coalition. Yet manuscript materials from his recently opened archives at the Bibliothèque nationale de France indicate, much more distinctly than the published lectures, how far he was preoccupied by a clash between party and nonparty models of left-wing coalition in the late 1970s.

The first section of this article draws on these materials to reconstruct Foucault's position in a debate about the relationship between parties and social movements in France in the run-up to the 1978 and 1981 elections. While several contemporaries pushed for left-wing parties to integrate movements like feminism into their electoral campaigns, Foucault sought to map pathways for ambitious social transformations which might circumvent the party competition over the state. The second section shows how Foucault tailored his account of 1970s neoliberalism to this conjuncture. By interpreting neoliberalism as a diminution of state interventionism, he argued that decentered activism was becoming no less important than party-political campaigns to seize or limit the state apparatus. The third section recovers Foucault's alternative vision of large-scale action outside the party competition over the state, which he conceived in terms of "generalization." He looked to early modern spiritual movements and the contemporary Iranian revolution as successful examples of such generalization, which started from local beginnings to achieve drastic social transformations. I conclude by reflecting on how political theorists might reappraise the governmentality lectures as the basis for a Foucauldian approach to political coalition. In his refusal of party mediation as a necessary step from localized to generalized political action, Foucault offers a distinctive contribution to debates on the relationship between grassroots activism and parliamentary organizing.

## 1. Parties and Social Movements in the Late 1970s

This section establishes why Foucault's account of the state in his governmentality lectures should also be understood as a refusal of the party. Following the Marxist thinkers Étienne Balibar and Rossana Rossanda, we can frame the lectures' context in terms of a "crisis of the party form" catalyzed in France by the 1978 legislative and 1981 presidential elections.<sup>18</sup> As socialist and communist parties in France, Italy, and Spain made promising moves towards office in the mid-to-late 1970s, numerous theorists encouraged them to compensate for the increasing fragmentation of European working classes by reforming the role of the political party, incorporating support from the new social movements which had proliferated since 1968.<sup>19</sup> These efforts met with hostility from extraparliamentary activists, including Foucault. The intellectual historian Serge Audier has suggested that Foucault was drawn to neoliberalism partly because the Socialists and Communists constituted an "old statist left" indifferent to the antinormative movements of the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> Yet Foucault's problem, I argue, was precisely that the left-wing parties were becoming too friendly to the new social movements, threatening to absorb the activist universe formed since 1968 into a narrower kind of party politics. The location of contemporary power was crucial to this dispute: Was it distributed in a network of Foucauldian "micro-powers," or ultimately centralized in the state? Was it, consequently, amenable to dispersed, discontinuous acts of resistance, or must left-wing forces be coordinated by a centralized party? By reconceiving the "generality" of the political field in his governmentality lectures, Foucault sought to prove that social movements could achieve ambitiously general political transformations without being channeled through party campaigns oriented toward the state.

Foucault was a champion of "diffuse and decentered" struggles like feminism and gay activism, with whose strategies he engaged closely and affirmatively in speeches and interviews in 1978–79.<sup>21</sup> Extraparliamentary movements over sex, subjectivity, and everyday forms of power offered a

<sup>18</sup>Étienne Balibar, "Après l'autre Mai," in *La gauche, le pouvoir, le socialisme: Hommage à Nicos Poulantzas*, ed. Christine Buci-Glucksmann (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 109–10; Rossana Rossanda, "Crise et dialectique des partis et mouvements sociaux en Italie," in *La gauche, le pouvoir, le socialisme*, 120.

<sup>19</sup>For this transnational history, see Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London: Tauris, 2010), 534–644.

<sup>20</sup>Audier, *Penser le 'néolibéralisme'*, 457.

<sup>21</sup>Michel Foucault, "La philosophie analytique de la politique," in *DE*, 2:542. This interview has been translated as "The Analytic Philosophy of Politics," trans. Giovanni Mascaretti, *Foucault Studies*, no. 24 (2018): 188–200. For Foucault's engagement with gay politics, see Michel Foucault, "The Gay Science," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 385–403; Julian Jackson, *Living in Arcadia: Homosexuality, Politics, and Morality in France from the Liberation to AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 226–28.

different kind of politics, separate from the “great battles around the state” like the “electoral campaign for the legislatures” of 1978.<sup>22</sup> This independence from electoral politics could not be taken for granted, however. Having initially been wary of the extraparliamentary student activism of 1968, the Socialist and Communist parties began to make overtures to *soixante-huitard* currents on the left in the mid-1970s as they strove to build a viable electoral coalition. At the 1975 *Assises du socialisme*, the Socialist Party sought to integrate contestation in schools and prisons, as well as the struggles of immigrants and sexual minorities, into their “global transformative project” aimed at the “conquest of the state.”<sup>23</sup> Jean-Marie Domenach, editor of the Catholic-left journal *Esprit*, observed approvingly that “actions undertaken outside of the terrain of classical politics must now link up with an effort to conquer power.”<sup>24</sup> In 1976 half of French women voted for left-wing candidates for the first time; they too were becoming an important electoral constituency to be courted by the left parties.<sup>25</sup> Communist leader Georges Marchais presented the PCF as “the party of women’s liberty.”<sup>26</sup> François Mitterrand explicitly sought to absorb the women’s movement into the Socialist Party, claiming that the “feminism” which had flourished since 1970 was only “the prehistory of women’s action” in the Socialist Party.<sup>27</sup> As Hélène Hatzfeld remarks, “feminism was becoming a possible electoral theme.”<sup>28</sup> Both parties also began to cultivate the “*vote homosexuel*” with policies and commissions on homosexual equality.<sup>29</sup>

After the Union of the Left split in September 1977 over unbalanced electoral gains, the Socialist Party redoubled its efforts to expand its constituency. It published manifestos on regionalism and the environment, and hosted a National Convention on the Rights of Women in January 1978.<sup>30</sup> In pursuing this *aggiornamento* Mitterrand aimed, as Jane Jenson and Mariette Sineau put it, to “channel ‘disorganized’ [*sauvage*], antiparty feminism and make the PS into the instrument of its institutionalization.”<sup>31</sup> In its search for a majority,

<sup>22</sup>Foucault, “Philosophie analytique,” 542.

<sup>23</sup>See Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 119–20.

<sup>24</sup>Jean-Marie Domenach, “Les Assises du socialisme,” *Esprit*, no. 440 (Nov. 1974): 678.

<sup>25</sup>Jane Jenson and Mariette Sineau, *Mitterrand et les Françaises: Un rendez-vous manqué* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1995), 108.

<sup>26</sup>Georges Marchais, *Le parti de la liberté pour les femmes* (Paris: Parti communiste français, 1975).

<sup>27</sup>Mitterrand, November 20, 1977, cited in Jenson and Sineau, *Mitterrand et les Françaises*, 113.

<sup>28</sup>Hélène Hatzfeld, “Une révolution culturelle du parti socialiste dans les années 1970?,” *Vingtième Siècle*, no. 96 (2007): 80–81.

<sup>29</sup>Mathias Quéré, *Qui sème le vent récolte la tapette: Une histoire des groupes de libération homosexuels en France de 1974 à 1979* (Lyon: Tahin Party, 2019), 90.

<sup>30</sup>Hatzfeld, “Une révolution culturelle?,” 80.

<sup>31</sup>Jenson and Sineau, *Mitterrand et les Françaises*, 117.

the Socialist Party was moving far beyond the old-fashioned, socially conservative socialism which some scholars have claimed drove Foucault towards neoliberalism. The party was becoming much friendlier to the new social movements—but, by the same token, threatening their organizational autonomy.

These overtures to the social movements fueled a European debate about the role of the political party, in which Foucault's analyses of decentralized micro-struggles served as a point of frequent critical reference. Pietro Ingrao, an important Italian interlocutor for Louis Althusser and reforming "Eurocommunists" like Nicos Poulantzas, underscored the necessity of the party as the globalizing moment (*moment de globalisation*) for the feminist, environmentalist, and student movements, effecting their synthesis into a totality.<sup>32</sup> In an interview entitled "State, Social Movements, Party" (1979), Poulantzas criticized Ingrao's stance, arguing that "the student, feminist, regionalist, and ecological movements, neighborhood committees, citizen commissions etc." should not be fully integrated into the Communist Party.<sup>33</sup> But he equally criticized "the Deleuze-Guattari-Foucault current" for the "fragmentation" of their "singular micro-revolts, scattered resistances, isolated experimentations."<sup>34</sup> Citing the recent Portuguese revolution, where the Communist Party clashed unhelpfully with popular mobilizations, Poulantzas argued that the "parties need to be *actively present* in the new social movements," carefully managing their articulation with state-centric politics.<sup>35</sup> For these thinkers engaging with the left parties' coalitional programs, the question of how far the party should "transform itself in order to 'capture' the social movements" was among the most pressing intellectual problems at the turn of the 1980s.<sup>36</sup>

Similar debates were taking place around the Socialist Party. Several historians making the case for Foucault's attraction to neoliberalism have closely associated him with Pierre Rosanvallon and the so-called Second Left, a liberalizing tendency in French socialism, rightly noting their shared interest in *soixante-huitard* alternatives to traditional left-wing politics.<sup>37</sup> Yet they diverged significantly on the status of the party form. Like Poulantzas, Rosanvallon and his collaborator Patrick Viveret commended the new social movements to Mitterrand as a political resource. The "real risk" was

<sup>32</sup>Pietro Ingrao, *La politique en grand et en petit, ou les chances de la troisième voie* (Paris: Maspero, 1979).

<sup>33</sup>This 1979 interview was republished as "La crise des partis," in Nicos Poulantzas, *Repères* (Paris: Maspero, 1980), 175.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 182, emphasis original.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>Michael C. Behrent, "Foucault and France's Liberal Moment," in *In Search of the Liberal Moment: Democracy, Anti-totalitarianism and Intellectual Politics in France since 1950*, ed. Iain Stewart and Stephen W. Sawyer (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 156–60; Audier, *Penser le 'néolibéralisme,'* 454; Dean and Zamora, *The Last Man*, 65–72.

a “gap between governmental action and the new social movements.”<sup>38</sup> The Socialist Party, they argued, must become an “agent of articulation” between the two, assuming the “organization [*animation*] of political society” as well as of the state.<sup>39</sup> Too great a “gap” between the parties and the social movements would be “fatal for the left.”<sup>40</sup> While Rosanvallon and Viveret shared Foucault’s enthusiasm for movements like feminism, then, their emphasis on these movements’ coordination by the Socialist Party clashed with his vision of dispersed activism as an autonomous alternative to the “great battles around the state” exemplified by the Socialists’ “electoral campaign.”<sup>41</sup>

Thinkers on the extraparliamentary left, meanwhile, raised the alarm about a potentially terminal crisis: being swallowed by the welcoming embrace of the Socialist Party and reintegrated into a narrowly electoral form of politics. As Lisa Greenwald puts it, many activist women “believed they had much to fear from the Socialist Party’s adoption of ‘women’s liberation,’” resisting the party-political “takeover” of their cause.<sup>42</sup> When Antoinette Fouque took the extremely controversial step of trademarking “Mouvement de libération des femmes” in 1979, she defended her action as necessary to prevent the movement’s “obliteration” by the parties, citing comments by Michel Rocard, the leading second-leftist Socialist, about “incorporating women.”<sup>43</sup> For these women on the extraparliamentary left, the Second Left’s openness to feminism was something to fear, because it implied funneling their efforts into centralized, hierarchical party politics. Other feminists condemned the Socialists’ and Communists’ pro-women positions as “electoral channeling tactics” which would reduce feminism’s demands to “propaganda themes” in a party campaign.<sup>44</sup> Leading radical feminists therefore called for a spoils ballot at the 1978 elections. “What is at stake in such a question,” they argued, “is in fact the place, the status of the feminist movement, relative to what gets called ‘politics’ [*la politique*].”<sup>45</sup> Others responded, acknowledging that all the parties “are running after women. . . for obvious electoral reasons,” but arguing for participation to beat the right.<sup>46</sup> In 1981, Christine Delphy and the other materialist feminist editors of *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* observed that the legislative and presidential elections had rekindled debates about feminism’s “recuperation” or co-option by political

<sup>38</sup>Pierre Rosanvallon and Patrick Viveret, *Pour une nouvelle culture politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 139.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>41</sup>Foucault, “Philosophie analytique,” 542.

<sup>42</sup>Lisa Greenwald, *Daughters of 1968: Redefining French Feminism and the Women’s Liberation Movement* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 186.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>44</sup>Editorial, *Cahiers du Féminisme*, March 1976, quoted *ibid.*, 183.

<sup>45</sup>“Les féministes radicales face aux élections,” *Le Monde*, December 23, 1977.

<sup>46</sup>“Législatives . . . ça urne!,” *Question Féministes*, no. 2 (1978): 104.

parties.<sup>47</sup> Rather than finding political expression in a party, the editors claimed that feminism must involve a “redefinition of *the political*” (*redéfinition du politique*) to support “autonomy” and direct action outside electoral politics.<sup>48</sup>

As Antoine Idier has shown, many gay activists similarly doubted that their interests would be adequately valued by parties pursuing majority votes. A 1977 pamphlet for the main Paris Groupe de libération homosexuelle acknowledged that gay groups faced a difficult decision: “rejection of all political parties, tarred with the same brush because they evacuate the problem of homosexuality? Or long-term battle so that this question is really taken on board by all the organizations of the workers’ movement?”<sup>49</sup> Others dismissed the “laughable game” of party politics (*la politique*), “where the political [*le politique*] is never touched upon.”<sup>50</sup> Some rejected elections altogether as the wrong model of political action for marginalized groups. The “Pink Army Faction” attacked “pro-electoral” homosexual organizers as “a heterosexual movement in disguise.” “Elections, dick-trap” (*piège à bites*), they wrote.<sup>51</sup>

These thinkers were not engaged in a debate about the virtues of liberalism compared to old-fashioned, statist socialism. They were debating the status of the party within the constellation of movements on the left. Indeed, the problem was precisely that the Socialists were no longer an old-fashioned left, and were reaching out to the feminists, gay activists, regionalists, and ecologists mobilized since 1968. While second-leftist Socialists around Rocard and Rosanvallon sought a “renewal of the role of political parties” to integrate and draw strength from the new social movements, extraparliamentary leftists like Delphy called for a “redefinition of the political” to support autonomous struggle outside the parties and beyond the electoral competition over the state.<sup>52</sup> It is in the context of this debate that we should read Foucault’s refusal to endorse a party in the run-up to the 1978 elections, just like the feminists who called for a spoilt ballot. At a September 1977 conference which brought together members of the Second Left, he spoke on “neighborhood-level healthcare,” pleased that no one in his working group “said the word ‘March 1978’ or the word ‘elections.’”<sup>53</sup> Second-leftist interviewers at the conference asked for his party-political

<sup>47</sup>Editorial, “Féminisme: quelles politiques?,” *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, no. 2 (1981): 4–5.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 3, emphasis original.

<sup>49</sup>Quoted in Antoine Idier, *Les alinéas au placard: L’abrogation du délit d’homosexualité* (1977–1982) (Paris: Éditions Cartouche/TMR, 2013), 32.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>52</sup>Rosanvallon and Viveret, *Nouvelle culture politique*, 137; “Féminisme: quelles politiques?,” 3.

<sup>53</sup>Foucault, “Une mobilisation culturelle” (1977), in *DE*, 2:330.

views, pressing him on his “total refusal of the political.” Foucault insisted on a broader conception of politics: the “cultural mobilization” which his work addressed—something a little more modest than a “cultural revolution”—was “irrecuperable” by the parties.<sup>54</sup> “If the work accomplished over the last fifteen years has been fruitful,” he wrote for *Politique-Hebdo*’s 1978 elections special, “it is insofar as we have tried to open our eyes, to efface the traditional political prism [*grille*] which parties and electoral games imposed on us. We will not, at present, translate the work done into electoral terms.”<sup>55</sup>

Foucault’s reticence to endorse a party in 1978 need not be read as an implicit denunciation of the Socialists. In fact, come 1981, he publicly celebrated their eventual victory.<sup>56</sup> Interviewed in 1984, he again said that he would cautiously give his support to the Socialists, but that intellectuals should keep a certain distance from electoral politics.<sup>57</sup> His abstentionism in 1978 was a common position among feminists and gay activists who, a decade after 1968, sought to resist “recuperation” by what he called “parties and electoral games.” Foucault was not attacking the Socialist program, but refusing the assumption that radical political initiatives must be “translate[d] . . . into electoral terms” to be taken seriously.<sup>58</sup>

It was in this context that Foucault delivered *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics* to an audience of activists, researchers, and protégés at the Collège de France. The governmentality lectures supported his refusal of party politics by reconceptualizing the bounds of the state. The concepts of state and party were tightly linked. In the discourse of Eurocommunists and second-leftists, the party derived its importance from the preeminence of the state over other forms of social or interpersonal power. Poulantzas asked: “Does the party have a central role? Of course it has a central role . . . as long as the state has a central role.”<sup>59</sup> His *State, Power, Socialism* (1978) developed a new theory of the state which underscored the need for the Communist Party to “equip itself” with support on “fronts that used to be wrongly called ‘secondary’ (women’s struggles, the ecological movement, and so on).”<sup>60</sup> The text incorporated themes familiar from the discourse of the social movements and from Foucault’s work, like “disciplinary normalization,” “phallocracy,” and “the struggle between men and women.”<sup>61</sup> But whereas Foucault had presented these relations as

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Michel Foucault, “La grille politique traditionnelle” (1978), in *DE*, 2:506–7.

<sup>56</sup>Michel Foucault, “Est-il donc important de penser?” (1981), in *DE*, 2:997–1001.

<sup>57</sup>Jamin Raskin, “A last interview with French philosopher Michel Foucault,” *City Paper* 8, no. 3 (1984): 18.

<sup>58</sup>Foucault, “La grille,” 506–7.

<sup>59</sup>Nicos Poulantzas, “Interview with Nicos Poulantzas” (1979), in *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State*, ed. James Martin (London: Verso Books, 2008), 401.

<sup>60</sup>Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso Books, 2000), 263–64.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 148, 163.

being dispersed among micro-powers, Poulantzas incorporated them into a theory of the state in its “unity-centralization.”<sup>62</sup> Not all power was reducible to state power, but various sites of power which Foucault and Deleuze “imagine to lie wholly outside the state (the apparatus of asylums and hospitals, the sports apparatus, etc.) are all the more sites of power in that they are included in the strategic field of the state.”<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, despite the ongoing “crisis of the party form” provoked by “the development of social movements” among other factors, Althusser’s disciple Étienne Balibar insisted that the “*very idea of the party*” remained pertinent in a society “where forms of exploitation and domination are not reducible to a diffuse network of ‘micro-powers,’ but rather are organized around formidable apparatuses of the centralization of power in the economy, in social communication, and in the state.”<sup>64</sup> The second-leftist Rosanvallon likewise complained that Foucault “eliminates the decisive question of the state and political society” by dissolving power into “universally dispersed ‘micro-powers’” — “which can only lead to an impasse.”<sup>65</sup> Balibar, Poulantzas, and Rosanvallon made the case for a politics organized around the nucleus of the party by explicitly rebutting Foucault’s vision of distributed micro-powers, insisting on the relative centralization of social power in the state.

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault directly addressed this key theoretical question underlying the debate on the party form: “After all, do not these general technologies of power . . . ultimately fall under a global, totalizing institution that is, precisely, the state?”<sup>66</sup> By way of reply, he inverted the proposition. The state, he argued, was only an outgrowth of a general network of power relations which far exceeded it. Foucault discussed the manifold problems of “government” which preoccupied early modern thinkers: the government of young learners, of the family, of the religious flock, of oneself.<sup>67</sup> The modern state had emerged from this diffuse field of relations of government, from “relations of power that gradually take shape on the basis of multiple and very diverse processes which gradually coagulate and form an effect.”<sup>68</sup> As such, “the state, doubtless no more today than in the past, does not have this unity, individuality, and rigorous functionality, nor, I would go so far as to say, this importance”<sup>69</sup> accorded to it by thinkers like Poulantzas. Denying the apparent unity and primacy of state power which helped his contemporaries argue for the necessity of party organization, Foucault dissolved the state

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 136–37.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 36–37.

<sup>64</sup>Balibar, “Après l’autre Mai,” 112, emphasis original.

<sup>65</sup>Pierre Rosanvallon, “Une nouvelle culture politique,” *Faire*, no. 13 (1976), cited in Behrent, “Foucault and France’s Liberal Moment,” 159.

<sup>66</sup>*STP*, 118.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 120–22, 231.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 248.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 109.

into a diffuse, decentralized ensemble of relations of government, making the case for an equally decentralized model of resistance.

The manuscript of *The Birth of Biopolitics* indicates the extent to which this rethinking of the state was geared towards the ongoing debate on the party form. In drafts, Foucault explicitly connected his methodological refusal of universals like the state to a politics beyond the party: “Historico-political nominalism . . . is also a practical attitude. It starts from a decision—which is of a theoretical order, the elision of universals; and of a practical order—a whole series of things which go hand in hand: the refusal of the party, the refusal of a threshold that would be the political, the refusal of the division between the peripheral and the central.”<sup>70</sup> Foucault here suggested that to think nominalistically, to fold universals like the state back onto historically specific formations like governmentality, entailed refusing party politics. There was no center of the political field which required a struggle centralized in the party and which rendered other struggles peripheral; the state was only a certain demarcation of relations of government which stretched far beyond its bounds. Nor was there a normative “threshold” of the political which made some actions prepolitical. Politics was defined not by the presence of the state nor by that of the Schmittian enemy, but by “the generality of relations of power.”<sup>71</sup> Politics was everywhere “because everywhere there is resistance, an escape route, an uprising against governmentality.”<sup>72</sup> If politics was defined by the presence of governmentality, then it was a broad, decentralized field, and struggles in any of its points might upset the contingent balance of the whole.

Mapping French political discourse in the late 1970s around a clash between old-fashioned, statist socialists and antistatist liberalizers is not the most pertinent way to understand Foucault’s context. This section has offered an alternative way to frame the late 1970s, situating Foucault within a “crisis of the party form” as European socialist and communist parties tried to renegotiate their relationship to new social movements like feminism. Archival materials confirm that this relationship was at the forefront of his mind as he prepared his governmentality lectures. His lecture manuscripts explicitly tied the notion of governmentality to the “refusal of the party.”<sup>73</sup> They attacked narrow conceptions of the political which marginalized activist initiatives indifferent to the electoral competition over the state. By folding the state into the expansive networks of governmentality in his Collège de France lectures, Foucault reimagined the political field to suit a decentralized activist politics outside the party form. In the next section, we shall see how his account of neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics* further buttressed his defense of dispersed activist movements by reimagining the historical moment he inhabited.

<sup>70</sup>NAF28730, box VIII (cours 78–79), folder 2, 195.

<sup>71</sup>Note from January 19, 1979, NAF28730, box 92, folder 20.

<sup>72</sup>NAF28730, box VIII (cours 78–79), folder 2, 194.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 195.

## 2. Neoliberalism, the State, and the Party Form

The dispute between Foucault and contemporary proponents of electoral participation was not only a theoretical disagreement about the nature of politics or the state. As we shall see in this section, it was also a diagnostic disagreement about the direction in which French politics was heading. Poulantzas charged that a Foucauldian vision of scattered, capillary powers was becoming obsolete during France's long crisis of the 1970s, when state power was voraciously expanding and taking over other social relations. "What is truly remarkable," he wrote, "is the fact that such discourse, which tends to blot out power by dispersing it among tiny molecular vessels, is enjoying great success at a time when the expansion and weight of the state are assuming proportions never seen before."<sup>74</sup> As well as offering a theoretical alternative to state-centric discourse with the notion of governmentality, Foucault crafted counter-narratives which diagnosed the late 1970s as a much less statist moment than most of his contemporaries gauged. Neoliberalism, in Foucault's eyes, was greatly diminishing the unity and centralization of social power in the state, undermining the need to centralize left-wing struggles in the party.

Poulantzas coined the term "authoritarian statism" to describe the politics emerging from the crisis of the 1970s, involving "intensified state control over every sphere of socio-economic life" and a hollowing out of democratic institutions.<sup>75</sup> This diagnosis helped Poulantzas make the case for a party politics centered on the state, since "*all contemporary power is functional to authoritarian statism.*"<sup>76</sup> The apparently separate loci of power targeted by new social movements were in fact being integrated into ever more expansive statist strategies. Poulantzas was not alone in perceiving an ongoing amplification of the power of the state. On the anarchistic left, Pierre Clastres and Gilles Deleuze spoke of the mounting "fascism" or "neo-fascism" of the state machine.<sup>77</sup> On the Second Left, Rosanvallon and Viveret complained that French civil society had been "absorbed by the state."<sup>78</sup> André Gorz cited Rosanvallon in his discussion of totalitarian societies like Nazi Germany where "the state has totally ousted civil society and become a 'total state,'" arguing that "we have virtually reached that stage."<sup>79</sup> The most extreme suspicion of the state came from the *nouveaux philosophes* who stormed the media

<sup>74</sup>Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, 44.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 203–4.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 239, emphasis original.

<sup>77</sup>Pierre Clastres, *The Question of Power: An Interview with Pierre Clastres*, trans. Helen Arnold (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 56–58; Gilles Deleuze, "Le Juif riche" (1977), in *Deux régimes de fous: Textes et entretiens 1975–1995*, ed. David Lapoujade (Paris: Minuit, 2003), 125.

<sup>78</sup>Rosanvallon and Viveret, *Nouvelle culture politique*, 7.

<sup>79</sup>André Gorz/Michel Bosquet, *Écologie et politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 48.

in spring 1977 with antitotalitarian polemics playing on concerns that the Union of the Left would put pro-Soviet Communists in government.<sup>80</sup> The leading *nouveaux philosophes* André Glucksmann and Bernard-Henri Lévy plied an alarmist antistatism which elevated the state to an almost divine supremacy. “In the beginning was the state,” according to Lévy: “like the God of the theologians, it is creator not created.”<sup>81</sup> The totalitarian state, he claimed, was not the opposite of the liberal state, but “*the truth of its essence*.”<sup>82</sup>

The *nouveaux philosophes* drew heavily on Foucault’s work—Glucksmann, for example, called the state a “panoptic prison.”<sup>83</sup> This connection has become an important talking point in the debate on Foucault’s stance towards neoliberalism, as evidence that he belonged to an antistatist, increasingly liberal section of the left.<sup>84</sup> Certainly, Foucault initially showed sympathy for Glucksmann, writing a positive review of his *The Master Thinkers* in early 1977 and seconding its attack on the Marxist tradition.<sup>85</sup> But his position changed drastically after the dissolution of the Union of the Left in September 1977. The Communist Party was very unlikely to win power alone, and was bested by the Socialists at the ballot box in March 1978. Now the *nouveaux philosophes*’ anticommunism was less useful, and their inflated denunciations of the state became a bigger problem for Foucault’s vision of the political. One acquaintance recalls that Foucault, “highly troubled to be taken hostage . . . wanted very clearly to demarcate himself from the ‘*nouveaux philosophes*’ who were deforming his thought.”<sup>86</sup> We can detect an attack on Lévy’s inflationary rhetoric in *Security, Territory, Population*, which tried “to put a stop to repeated invocations of the master as well as to the monotonous assertion of power . . . neither one nor the other as God.”<sup>87</sup> In a 1978 interview, Foucault said that “I don’t know much about the New Philosophers,” but their thesis that “the ‘master’ is always the ‘master’ and we are trapped no matter what happens” was “exactly the opposite of mine.”<sup>88</sup> His discussion of neoliberalism in 1979 was not in keeping with his earlier proximity to the new philosophers and the liberalizing movement they represented. It coincided with his turning sharply against their alarmist antistatism.

<sup>80</sup>Christofferson, *French Intellectuals*, 184–228.

<sup>81</sup>Bernard-Henri Lévy, *La barbarie à visage humain* (Paris: Grasset, 1977), 74–79.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 157, emphasis original.

<sup>83</sup>André Glucksmann, *Les maîtres penseurs* (Paris: Grasset, 1977), 111, 115.

<sup>84</sup>Michael Scott Christofferson, “Foucault and New Philosophy: Why Foucault Endorsed André Glucksmann’s *The Master Thinkers*,” in Behrent and Zamora, *Foucault and Neo-liberalism*, 6–23; Dean and Zamora, *The Last Man*, 47–51.

<sup>85</sup>Michel Foucault, “La grande colère des faits,” in *DE*, 2:277–81.

<sup>86</sup>Serge Meitinger, “Deux tentatives de récupération de la ‘pensée-Michel-Foucault,’” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 6, nos. 1–2 (1994): 40.

<sup>87</sup>*STP*, 55–56.

<sup>88</sup>Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 173.

Foucault seems to have repudiated the *nouveaux philosophes* because he judged that antistatist narratives about a massive expansion of state power were an obstacle to the kinds of decentralized politics he favored. These narratives implied that activism indifferent to the state was becoming obsolete, ushering audiences towards a party politics centered on the overwhelming weight of the state apparatus. Foucault's anxiety about the vogue for antistatism is legible in drafts for the Tanner Lectures at Stanford University in October 1979, where he would introduce the notion of governmentality to an American audience. He criticized the "very marked tendency" to treat the "cold monster" of the state, "with its administration, its bureaucracy, its centralization," as "the origin of that excess of 'power' against which we are meant to struggle." Strikingly, Foucault claimed that "both a certain liberalism and many of those who are opposed to liberalism come to agree in this analysis." From the overwhelming centrality of state power, socialists drew "the conclusion that we must form political parties or instruments of struggle capable of capturing the state apparatus." Liberals "draw from it the conclusion that the first and foremost political task is to limit the power of the state in the most rigorous way." The French vogue for liberal antistatism in fact complemented the left parties' campaign to capture the state apparatus, since it too positioned the tremendous power of the state as the defining stake of politics. "Yet I would like to show that this liberal or revolutionary critique of the state does not concretely represent the movements which are presently calling the distribution of power into question. I would like to show that it is fundamentally a reality different to the state which is called into question."<sup>89</sup> This passage demonstrates why it is misleading to contextualize Foucault as part of a liberalizing, antistatist reaction against French socialism. He in fact lumped socialist statism and liberal antistatism together as equally problematic. The movements with which he aligned himself were not aimed at the excessive power of the state and its bureaucracy. They targeted dispersed, nonstate forms of power. The present "liberal reinterpretation" of his work, he complained in the same drafts, reduced his efforts to diversify the field of politics to "a reactivation of traditional and ancient struggles against the state."<sup>90</sup> Foucault thus took aim at antistatist discourse in the late 1970s in part because it paradoxically reinforced the urgency of party campaigns oriented towards the state by overemphasizing the centrality of the state apparatus.

These concerns translated directly into the governmentality lectures. As he prepared his course on neoliberalism in January 1979, Foucault lambasted the "critical poverty" of contemporary thought in his journal, mocking the "theoretical banalities" (*bons sentiments théoriques*) "about repression (which

<sup>89</sup>NAF28730, box 77, folder 4, for all this paragraph's quotations from the Tanner drafts.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

we hate), civil society (which we love), the state (which we hate).<sup>91</sup> Across *The Birth of Biopolitics*, delivered from January to April 1979, he attacked the “state phobia” of his contemporaries on the left, rebutting the antistatist anti-totalitarianism of the *nouveaux philosophes* above all.<sup>92</sup> Totalitarianism, he argued, was not “the generalization of state power, that is to say. . . . Solzhenitsyn on a world scale.”<sup>93</sup> On the contrary, totalitarianism derived from “a non-state governmentality” which effected “a limitation, a reduction, and a subordination of the autonomy of the state” in favor of the *party*.<sup>94</sup> The false idea that totalitarianism involved an “unlimited growth of state power” was in fact an “analytical *coup de force*” on the part of Hayek and German ordoliberalists like Wilhelm von Röpke, who used it to condemn social-democratic measures like the Beveridge Plan as a slippery slope towards Nazism.<sup>95</sup> The ordoliberalists, Foucault ambitiously claimed, were “the real source of this kind of anti-state suspicion, this state phobia that currently circulates in such varied forms of our thought.”<sup>96</sup> His antitotalitarian and state-phobic contemporaries were therefore only “following the direction of the wind,” lending legitimacy to the neoliberal attack on the welfare state.<sup>97</sup> The second-leftists who sought to defend “civil society” from the encroachment of the state were similarly playing a liberal game. Through studies of Adam Ferguson and of contemporary German *Gesellschaftspolitik*, Foucault depicted civil society as a conceptual invention which was “absolutely correlative to the form of governmental technology we call liberalism.”<sup>98</sup> Rosanvallon and Rocard were not exploring new possibilities of opposition; they were speaking the language of liberal government.

Fundamentally, Foucault argued, antistatist misread the present conjuncture. When thinkers “denounce the growth of state control, or the state becoming fascist, or the establishment of a state violence, and so on,” they were not describing contemporary reality.<sup>99</sup> Far from it: “what is presently at issue in our reality” under neoliberalism was “not so much the growth of the state and of *raison d’État*, but much more its reduction.”<sup>100</sup> It is therefore very hard to contextualize Foucault’s governmentality lectures within an “anti-statist left.” Complaining that “what is currently challenged, and from a great many perspectives, is almost always the state,” Foucault in fact encouraged his auditors to attend to figures of power which their alarmist

<sup>91</sup>NAF28730, box 92, folder 20.

<sup>92</sup>BB, 6, 186–89.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 112, 190–91.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 110–11.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 188.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 191.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 146, 291–316.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 191.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid.

“state phobia” had obscured.<sup>101</sup> The state was not absorbing civil society, nor could all forms of social power be reduced to its tendrils. There was therefore room for an autonomous activist politics not routed through the party competition over state power.

Reading the governmentality lectures as an intervention over new social movements’ relationship to parties helps us find political stakes in Foucault’s account of neoliberalism which go beyond the critique or endorsement of that mode of government. Without reducing Foucault’s multifaceted history of the neoliberal art of government to a merely tactical move, we can appreciate how it buttressed his arguments for nonparty activism with a novel diagnosis of ongoing changes in French government. As his notes indicate, Foucault was eager to neutralize the contemporary obsession with the ever expanding state, whose implications were either “that we must form political parties or instruments of struggle capable of capturing the state apparatus” or “that the first and foremost political task is to limit the power of the state in the most rigorous way,” obscuring the importance of decentralized activism which looked to powers beyond the state apparatus.<sup>102</sup> His interpretation of neoliberalism as a diminution of state interventionism was a scathing rejoinder to the “state phobia” which had overtaken his contemporaries and which had left micro-politics seeming an irrelevance in the coming age of authoritarian statism. The transformation of government in 1970s France, he argued, was not a slide towards statism which demanded a politics centered on the state: on the contrary, it was a decentralization of governmentality which made state-centric politics less pressing.

### 3. The Politics of Generalization

Throughout the last two sections, we have seen how Foucault displaced the state from its commanding position in contemporary politics. But his theorization of governmentality was doing more than rejecting state-centric party politics: he was crafting an alternative vision of large-scale action more amenable to social-movement activism. This movement-building vision is most evident in his manuscripts and interviews. This section reconstructs how Foucault’s account of the “generality” of governmentality promoted a specific kind of coalition politics, which involved the “generalization” of decentralized initiatives outside the party form.

Foucault’s concept of generality dated back at least to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), which had contrasted “total history,” organized “around a single center” like the *Weltanschauung*, with “general history,” which drew

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 186.

<sup>102</sup>NAF28730, box 77, folder 4.

up “tables” of relations between dispersed and heterogeneous elements.<sup>103</sup> The generality captured a coherent overall picture, without effacing the specificity of its elements or pinning them to a central theme. In a 1972 dialogue with Deleuze, Foucault translated this distinction into a contrast between two models of political coalition. He rejected the “totalization” of actions within the party, while still trying to capture the “generality” which revealed feminists, antipsychiatrists, workers, and homosexuals to be “allies” in a broad front.<sup>104</sup> As a political concept, generality thus supported relationships of alliance among a decentralized network of activists.

Foucault’s conceptual contrast between totality and generality became acutely pertinent during late 1970s debates on the party form. In 1978, he gave a long, important interview to Duccio Trombadori, a journalist for the Italian Communist Party newspaper *L’Unità*, which contributed to the ongoing Franco-Italian debate on parties’ relationship to decentralized social movements. Trombadori prefaced the interview by commenting on the limitations of the “Foucauldian radicalism” emerging in Italy, arguing that a focus on micro-powers and “local and particular struggles” must not obscure the “decisive” question of the state.<sup>105</sup> He therefore pressed Foucault several times on “the extreme fragmentation or ‘localization’ of the questions” addressed in his work, which ended up impeding the “transition” from the micro-level to “a vision of the totality within which the particular problem is inserted.”<sup>106</sup> Foucault turned the tables on his interviewer: “Isn’t the rule of reason at least as general a question as that of the rule of the bourgeoisie?”<sup>107</sup> Problems should not be “defined as local or distracting” simply because they did not suit “the exigencies of the political parties.”<sup>108</sup> Political parties “only accept generalities which enter into a program, serve as factors which rally a part of their electorate and ultimately can be integrated into electoral tactics.”<sup>109</sup> Foucault applied himself to a whole field of issues not specifically useful to electoral politics but still ambitiously general in their application.

Indeed, he suggested elsewhere, the movements he supported might be capable of “generalization” into large-scale transformations outside the

<sup>103</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 9–10, emphasis original.

<sup>104</sup> Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, “Les intellectuels et le pouvoir,” in *DE*, 1:1183.

<sup>105</sup> Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 22.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>109</sup> I am quoting from the interview transcript, NAF28730, box 83, folder 1. The published version loses this specifically electoral focus: “the political parties, when all is said and done, accept only generalities that fit into a program, serve as factors of unity and consensus, or are suitable to this or that tactical occasion.” Foucault, *Remarks*, 166.

party form. He looked to the ongoing revolution in Iran as an example of dispersed movements multiplying and combining to produce a revolutionary transformation from the bottom up. Party hierarchies had been bypassed by the unrest: “no party, no man, and no political ideology can boast that it represents this movement. Nor can anyone claim to be at its head.”<sup>110</sup> Outside party organization, the people had nonetheless come together in coalition, forming “a single beam of light, even though we know that it is made up of several beams.”<sup>111</sup> In a 1979 interview, Foucault invoked the Iranian example to demonstrate that “one can have generalizations and cohesions which are produced out of quite different phenomena.” Relations between men and women, parents and children, had been mobilized against the political and economic domination of the shah and the oligarchy, producing “big strategic unifications” from heterogeneous beginnings.<sup>112</sup> Foucault acknowledged that the Iranian case “doesn’t happen every day.”<sup>113</sup> But it was a striking illustration of the “generalization” of dispersed micro-level struggles into a unified, coalitional force outside the party form, a “collective will” capable of profound social transformation.<sup>114</sup>

In other interviews from this period, Foucault compared the Iranian situation to the medieval and early modern “counter-conducts” he was studying in his research on governmentality, which he understood as forms of resistance to the modes of conduct and subjectivity imposed by the Christian pastorate.<sup>115</sup> The notion of counter-conduct was, Foucault suggested, a way to understand historic struggles over the “crucial problem of the status of women” and similar contestations of people’s subject status, prefiguring contemporary struggles like feminism.<sup>116</sup> In *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault criticized the Communist Party’s historic tendency “to channel revolts of conduct, take them over, and control them.”<sup>117</sup> But if he resisted the centralization of these struggles in a party, he still aimed to capture their generality, situating them “in the very general field of politics or in the very general field of power relations,” which involved attempts to

<sup>110</sup>Michel Foucault, “The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt” (Nov. 1978), in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, by Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 221.

<sup>111</sup>Michel Foucault, “Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit,” in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 257.

<sup>112</sup>Frank Mort and Roy Peters, “Foucault Recalled: Interview with Michel Foucault” (May 1979), *New Formations*, no. 55 (2005): 18.

<sup>113</sup>Foucault, “Spirit of a World,” 253.

<sup>114</sup>Michel Foucault, “A Revolt with Bare Hands” (Nov. 1978), in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 212–13.

<sup>115</sup>See, e.g., Michel Foucault, “Dialogue between Michel Foucault and Baqir Parham” (Sep. 1978), in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 186–87.

<sup>116</sup>*STP*, 196. On the term’s relevance to feminism, see Arnold I. Davidson, “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” *History of the Human Sciences* 24, no. 4 (2011): 32–33.

<sup>117</sup>*STP*, 199.

conduct other people's conduct.<sup>118</sup> Foucault thus underscored the shared nature of diverse struggles, drawing out "the dimension or component of counter-conduct that may well be found in fact in delinquents, mad people, and patients" alike.<sup>119</sup> This commensurability opened the possibility of alliances and generalizations: "the specificity of these struggles, of these resistances of conduct, does not mean that they remained separate or isolated from each other. . . . They are always, or almost always, linked to other conflicts and problems."<sup>120</sup> He cited the Reformation and the English, French, and Russian Revolutions as examples of very general transformations in which elements of counter-conduct were indispensable.<sup>121</sup> Early modern spiritual movements were proof that "it is entirely possible to arrive at overall effects [*effets globaux*], not by concerted confrontations, but also by local or lateral or diagonal attacks that bring into play the general economy of the whole."<sup>122</sup> These movements were localized and decentralized but, because their manifold dispersed actions challenged the "general economy of the whole" in comparable ways, they ultimately "toppled" the "way in which religious power was exercised in the West."<sup>123</sup>

In these discussions of generalization, Foucault was developing a model of the escalation of local struggles to achieve profound "overall effects" without being channeled through a party campaign to capture state power. Individual acts which were not organizationally coordinated could nonetheless amplify one another's effects because they engaged with the same general forms of power. "Local or lateral or diagonal attacks" on these general forms could converge and eventually produce revolutionary transformations.<sup>124</sup> By conceptually unifying the forms of power operating in social and economic policy, education, and interpersonal relations under the general rubric of "governmentality" in his lectures of 1978–79, Foucault laid the conceptual ground to forge connections between movements of resistance in diverse sites. Government in the family followed a rationality compatible with that of government in the school, which was in turn connected to government in the army by preparing its recruits, and so on.<sup>125</sup> Struggles in the family could therefore usefully be allied to those in educational or military institutions because they resisted and subverted the same shared governmentality. Movements could rise above the local level not by being centralized in a single organizational form like the party, but by targeting a general modality

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 202.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 196.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 228–29.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., 120n.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid.

<sup>125</sup>NAF28730, box VIII (cours 78–79), folder 2, 189–91.

of power which was itself distributed across different sites and open to autonomous yet allied forms of resistance.

These positions set up conclusions in the manuscript of *The Birth of Biopolitics* about the viability of coalitional politics outside the party form: "There is therefore no need to oppose local struggles to central confrontations, which only a party could coordinate. The globalization need not be achieved through the intermediary of an authority [*instance*], of a specific operator of globalization which would be the party and which would ensure either the taking of state power or the permanent denunciation of the enemy."<sup>126</sup> Foucault's language consciously or unconsciously inverted that of Ingrao, who had seen the party as the *moment de globalisation* of dispersed movements. Since politics was not centered on the singular Schmittian enemy or on the state apparatus, Foucault insisted, there was no need for a single, central operator of globalization like the party. Yet nor was mere localism the goal. Generalization could instead be achieved outside party organization: "The globalization must be made through procedures of generalization which can only form and develop on the basis of what brings politics to light. The generalization must not be made on the basis of an essence of the state nor of a definition of the nature of the political. But starting from the very practice which brings politics to light through the reversal of governmentality."<sup>127</sup> The general presence of governmentality entailed that local reversals of it might themselves be generalizable into a connected movement—"as in Iran."<sup>128</sup> Foucault thus argued for a general politics that would rise above the particular and the merely individual, avoiding "immobilization, or individual philanthropy."<sup>129</sup> He posed himself two questions that were inextricably linked in his political thought: "How to conceive the generality of a historical singularity. How to carry out the generalization of a political confrontation."<sup>130</sup> Theorizing the generality of governmentality, as a historically singular formation, was indispensable to supporting the generalization of local struggles into a bigger overall movement by revealing the shared logic subtending them all.

These notes indicate how far the governmentality lectures should be read as sketches of a specifically Foucauldian vision of coalition politics. As second-leftists and Eurocommunists encouraged the parties to incorporate dispersed social movements into their electoral coalition, Foucault rebuffed their overtures. He rejected the premise that micro-political initiatives must be totalized by parties in order to reach beyond mere particularism. Simultaneously, he offered an alternative vision of large-scale action. An overall political movement could coalesce not around the central node of

<sup>126</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 194–95.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid., 196.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid.

the state, but around the diffuse network of governmentality. As an uncentered “generality,” governmentality accounted for how localized micro-politics could be generalized into joined-up, transformative effects without needing to be routed through a central operator of globalization like the party. Specific actions could compound one another by making convergent attacks on the same “general economy” subtending techniques of government in the church, the family, the school, and other spheres. Without first capturing the state, this snowball of activist initiatives could generate profound upheavals in the relations between pastor and flock, or between men and women.

#### 4. Conclusion: Foucault’s Alliance Politics

Situating Foucault within debates about party organization in late 1970s France opens a new perspective on the political project behind *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Most scholarly literature has foregrounded neoliberalism as the key political stake of the governmentality lectures, either as an object of genealogical critique or as an emancipatory alternative to the old-fashioned, statist left. Thirty years of governmentality studies have demonstrated the analytical power of Foucault’s approach to neoliberalism, but his public positions on that mode of government were not overtly critical. Intellectual historians have argued that he endorsed aspects of neoliberal governmentality, associating him with the *nouveaux philosophes* and the Second Left as part of an antistatist left receptive to liberal ideas. These claims are unconvincing. Collapsing Foucault’s extraparliamentarism into an antistatist liberalism is unhelpfully reductive. His very attachment to extraparliamentary activism in fact led him into scornful attacks on the liberal antistatistism which was fueling what François Châtelet called a “turn to the state” in late 1970s French political thought.<sup>131</sup> *The Birth of Biopolitics* condemned the “inflationary . . . anti-state suspicion” that had overtaken French political discourse.<sup>132</sup> Foucault’s notes show that he opposed the “liberalism” which claimed that “the first and foremost political task is to limit the power of the state in the most rigorous way,” and distanced himself from the critique of “its administration, its bureaucracy, its centralization.”<sup>133</sup> He was not arguing for or against the state, but refusing the grip which this binary had taken on French political discourse. Both positions, his notes claimed, prioritized the party competition over the state and obscured the importance of decentralized activism over nonstate forms of power.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>131</sup>François Châtelet, “L’origine et la fonction de l’État” (1978), repr. in *L’apathie libérale avancée et autres textes critiques (1961–1985)* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), 239–50.

<sup>132</sup>BB, 188.

<sup>133</sup>NAF28730, box 77, folder 4; see note 89 above.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid.

We should instead read Foucault's courses on governmentality as a critical response to the party politics which, in the late 1970s, seemed to be absorbing or displacing extraparliamentary activism over micro-powers in the family, sexual relations, educational institutions, and other sites. Constructing expanded electoral coalitions, the Socialist and Communist parties sought to integrate social movements committed to grassroots organizing and direct action into a more traditional contest over the reins of the state. Foucault's lecture manuscripts directly yoked his theorization of governmentality to "the refusal of the party."<sup>135</sup> Since the contours of politics were not defined by the centrality of the state but followed the decentralized networks of governmentality, he argued, there was "no need to oppose local struggles to central confrontations, which only a party could coordinate."<sup>136</sup> Yet it would be a mistake to conclude from Foucault's refusal of the party that he disdained large-scale politics altogether. We are better off understanding his position as an alternative route towards building political coalitions. Against totalization through the party form, he proposed an alliance politics of generalization, which revealed the points of confluence between different struggles without demanding their organizational integration.

The governmentality lectures should therefore interest political theorists not only as a Foucauldian approach to the state or to liberalism, but as the basis for a Foucauldian theory of coalition building, understood in terms of generalization. Various scholars have followed Foucault in tracing how certain modalities of power, knowledge, or subjectivity, like the financialized subjectivity of human capital theory, have proliferated across the social field to reach a hegemonic or general position.<sup>137</sup> Colin Koopman proposes that recovering these stories of generalization can undermine the apparent necessity of universal features of today's society, revealing them to have a contingent past and a contestable future.<sup>138</sup> Yet there is another, more concretely mobilizing reason why we might be interested in such cases of generalization: the construction of political coalitions. Demonstrating the generality of certain modalities of power may open the way to building stronger and more expansive movements of resistance against them. As Foucault put it in 1972, reflecting on the possibility of alliances between new social movements, "What makes for the generality of the struggle is the very system of power, all the forms of power's exercise and application."<sup>139</sup> It was precisely by tracing the generalization of isomorphic forms of power across hospitals, families,

<sup>135</sup> NAF28730, box VIII (cours 78–79), folder 2, 195; see note 70 above.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 194; see note 126 above.

<sup>137</sup> For an important theoretical assessment of this literature, see Jaeyoon Park, "Does Power 'Spread'? Foucault on the Generalization of Power," *Political Theory* 50, no. 4 (2022): 553–74.

<sup>138</sup> Colin Koopman, *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 10–11.

<sup>139</sup> Foucault and Deleuze, "Les intellectuels et le pouvoir," 1183.

prisons, and barracks that he could position women, prisoners, conscripts, and homosexuals as “allies” in a shared struggle against common targets.<sup>140</sup> The manuscripts of the governmentality lectures suggest that Foucault’s account of the generalization of governmentality was motivated by a similar question: “how to carry out the generalization of a political confrontation.” Activism was amenable to “procedures of generalization” based on the “reversal of governmentality” in numerous local domains.<sup>141</sup> Just as dispersed early-modern spiritual movements had precipitated the Reformation, so too could today’s feminists or gay activists achieve profound overall effects without first capturing the state, by reversing the generalized modes of government which guided people’s conduct and shaped their subjectivity across various sites in the social field.

Rereading Foucault as a theorist of generalization also affects where we position him in the history of political thought. Rather than associating his poststructuralist philosophy with disintegration, fragmentation, and particularism, we can read it as an attempt to assemble new collective subjects from the pluralized constituencies of the left after 1968. Foucault conceived his work as contributing to the “future formation of a ‘we,’” fostering a “community of action.”<sup>142</sup> Like his Gramscian contemporaries, he affirmed the need for oppositional forces to form alliances and, in rare cases, constitute a unified “collective will” capable of large-scale transformations beyond the merely local level.<sup>143</sup> But unlike Gramsci, Foucault did not conceive the political party as the nucleus of this will. His vision of alliance politics was not about gathering multiple agents into a single organizational hierarchy, but about ushering distinct, parallel movements towards common targets, combining their strength without diminishing their autonomy. The Foucault of the governmentality lectures therefore provides one alternative to the binary between the local immediacy of the “crowd” and the large-scale ambition of the “party” which has preoccupied many on the left since 2008.<sup>144</sup> His model of generalization is a starting point for thinking about how movements might rise above localism without subordinating their specific concerns to an electoral competition for the reins of the state.

<sup>140</sup>Ibid.

<sup>141</sup>NAF28730, box VIII (cours 78–79), folder 2, 194–96; see note 127 above.

<sup>142</sup>Michel Foucault, “Polémique, politique et problématisations” (1984), in *DE*, 2:1413.

<sup>143</sup>Foucault, “A Revolt with Bare Hands,” 212–13; see note 113 above.

<sup>144</sup>Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London: Verso Books, 2016).