

Review: *State Phobia and Civil Society: The Political Legacy of Michel Foucault*

By Mitchell Dean and Kaspar Villadsen. Stanford University Press, 2016.

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For many social and political scientists today the concept of the state has turned into a kind of ‘no-go’ zone. Analytically as well as politically, the demise the nation-state has been recurrently diagnosed, drastically lowering its attractiveness as an object of study. Especially scholars writing from a poststructuralist perspective often refuse to see the state as *the* center of control and power. In support of this refusal, the works of Foucault and in particular his lectures given at the College de France are a popular point of reference. Despite warnings of Foucault himself, many ‘young Foucauldians’ have come to take on a ‘state-phobic’ attitude, carefully avoiding the concept in their works.

Against the current background of shrinking welfare states, growing transnational networks, and the laudation of civil society as the flexible alternative, Foucault experts Mitchell Dean and Kaspar Villadsen examine why and how scholars use his work for their antistatist positions. At the center of their discussion is the popular claim that analysis in terms of the state as well as the binary language of the state and civil society needs to be abandoned. The authors, who are both affiliated to the Copenhagen Business School, recover Foucault’s perspective and political views on this question by primarily discussing his lecture series on race wars, biopolitics, governmentality, and neoliberalism (Foucault 2003, 2007, 2008). In Foucault’s own time these lecture series, in which he expounded on his groundbreaking ideas, were already widely known and hotly debated. Since their publication in English, the lectures have received renewed attention, as scholars still consider them to be highly relevant to our current society.¹

While mainly examining Foucault’s own thoughts, and their possible interpretations, Dean and Villadsen also discuss the work of other scholars who have adapted his lectures to their own views. As the authors try to cover several different perspectives to the central topic of state-phobia, the chapters of the book are thematically structured. This is beneficial as most of the book’s chapters can quite easily be read separately from each other. On the other hand, the

¹ An example is the recurrent use of the concept of governmentality that was introduced by Foucault in one of his lectures.

compartmentalization of the chapters can, at times make it hard to follow the overarching argument of the authors.

With reference to Foucault's own methodological convictions, Dean and Villadsen open in the first chapter with a discussion of the context in which Foucault made most of his statements on state and civil society. They rightly emphasize that the 1970s' intellectual climate was considerably different. Of particular importance is the fact that neoliberalist thought, with its inherent antistatism, had not yet gained dominance. After this contextualization in the first chapter, Dean and Villadsen dedicate two chapters to the examination of two prominent post-Foucauldian approaches to state and civil society as an example of the different forms of state-phobic thought. Firstly they discuss the thinking of Nikolas Rose, after which they turn to the joint work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Both lines of thinking try to dissolve the state as an analytical object by showing that the distinction between the state and civil society is artificial, or analytically unfitting. An illustration of such an attempt is the observation by Rose that political power is not centralized in the state, but is actually exercised today by a profusion of shifting alliances between diverse authorities in projects of governance, hereby rendering the state useless as an analytical object (Rose and Miller 1992).

Already in these first chapters the authors intimate their viewpoint on state-phobia, as they criticize the almost 'romanticist' focus both the examined works lay on the self-unfolding energies of civil society which would be able to flourish if they would not be obstructed by the institutions of the state. Convinced of the skepticism with which Foucault himself approached antistatism and civil society, Dean and Villadsen are highly critical towards both antistatist works. Chapter four is a point in case, as the authors examine whether Foucault is justly referred to as the 'saint' of civil society. Confronting this claim, they convincingly show how Foucault was in fact highly skeptical about the positive working of civil society. In his eyes civil society was pervaded by relations of struggle and domination, and imbued with microdisciplinary mechanisms.

The chapters five to seven form the most analogous part of the book, as the authors discuss the different approaches through which Foucault came to his decentralization of the state. In chapter five they start with his political historicism, through which he undermined the universalizing claims of the nation state. In the subsequent chapters the decentralization of the state is further explored, as Dean and Villadsen examine how he decomposed the state into multiple, heterogeneous and often contradictory social propensities. To explain the meaning of this decomposition, they employ Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of the *dispositif*, a term Foucault uses to define governmental mechanisms. Combining the perspectives of Foucault and Deleuze, the authors describe how the state in the end becomes nothing more than the fragile effect of multiple governmentalities. Despite the theoretical complexity of the subject matter, the authors manage to

provide a highly illuminating account of Foucault's work. In addition to this account, they go beyond merely giving a descriptive account. An illustration is their warning that Foucault's approach of viewing the state as a multiplicity of governmentalities or *dispositifs* bears with it the risk of not only unjustly ignoring the state as a specific set of institutions that exists separately from rulers, but also of underestimating the role of rulers themselves.

The last part of the book, the chapters eight, nine, and ten, deal with several themes that are related to Foucault's thoughts on the state and civil society. Chapter eight for example, discusses Foucault's explanation of civil society as a governmental innovation: an imaginary object that is propagated from the liberal governmental rationality. In chapter nine, the authors take on a more analytical approach, and draw an interesting link between Foucault's critique of political and economic theology, and his genealogy of governmentality. In their view, this genealogy can itself be characterized as a sort of relative eschatology.² In the last chapter, Dean and Villadsen make a particularly interesting effort to understand Foucault's view on neoliberalism. Handling this subject is as interesting as it is important, as contemporary studies recurrently use the content of the lectures to criticize the excesses of neoliberalism. The claim made by the authors that will most likely surprise several readers, is that it is highly probable Foucault actually had a rather fundamental affinity with neoliberalism, and in particular with the theory of human capital. While surprising, Dean and Villadsen contend that their conclusion fits within a larger trend, as in the past years Foucault is increasingly interpreted as a supporter of neoliberalism.

The last chapter is a point in case for the plea of the authors for a more extensive debate on the interpretation of Foucault's work. Challenging the popular antistatist interpretations of his lectures, they make a convincing case for a more careful and thought through use of Foucault's main concepts. To avoid turning them into generalities that can be applied in any situation, Foucault's lectures and other writings need to be read in relation to their context. Although the book by Dean and Villadsen can be at times a tough read, due to its highly theoretical level and the somewhat compartmentalized chapters, it is highly recommended for those with a general interest in the works or lectures of Foucault. For scholars using Foucault's work, this book is a must-read as Dean and Villadsen make an important and highly convincing case against the simplification and generalization of a 'form of thought so experimental and ready to change' (Dean and Villadsen 2016, 169).

² A belief concerning death, the end of the world, or the ultimate destiny of humankind.

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