

## Comment

# Convergent discourses: neoliberalism, technoscience and journalism

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Before constructing a translation of scientific discourse in lay terms – and with this, calling forth the ghost of the public’s ignorance about science and technology – the operation which makes up the main task of specialized journalism in the coverage of related topics consists in the construction of a discourse of its own. However, this discourse frequently only amplifies and legitimates socially that which scientific laboratories and high tech companies offer as new, without critical opinions or contextualization. In addition to this, it is also generally characterized by linguistic operations which suppress uncertainties, doubts and considerations, thus contributing to the strengthening of the authority of specialists and of the distance which has been established – “by force” – between science and society.

However, with or without reflection, scientists, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Second Industrial Revolution), contribute with their research in order to raise what could be considered the “hidden pillar” of the watchful form of capitalism. This being the case, there is no isolation: they are part of the game, not just mere observers who are free and neutral. Munitioning medicine, industry and the military with miraculous or deadly (or miraculous and deadly) inventions, science contributes to the construction of a world in which technology and capital are pervasive, dominating, and seem to have a life of their own and an inexorable destination. Nonetheless, science projects itself as an apolitical space, forging truths which legitimate themselves.

Part of the discourse of technoscience is very similar to that of capital. Contaminated with the most diverse determinisms (technological, genetic, environmental, social), it seals destinies and, inevitably, excludes, in the case of technoscience, the multitudes of ignorant lay people;<sup>1</sup> in the case of capital, those who have neither income nor good human capital. The genesis of the discourse on “human capital” was examined by Michel Foucault in the course that he taught in 1979, recently published with the title *Naissance de la biopolitique*.<sup>2</sup>

In the book, the result of a compilation of until then unpublished recordings of classes which were taped by students and of the notations that guided each class, Foucault analyzes the conditions of possibility, in other words, the theoretical, practical and discursive development of liberalism and, afterwards, of neoliberalism in the forms in which they were forged in France, Germany and the United States of America. The analysis begins with European mercantilism of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. However, this return to the past has, in truth, its eyes on the present, on the intelligibility of the moment in which capital is the Sovereign, the market is all powerful and the people begin to see themselves as businesses (juristic persons).

Apparently, neoliberalism is only the old liberalism which has been “reloaded” or re-edited. For Foucault, however, the similarity is superficial and deceiving. For example, it would seem that the theory of *homo oeconomicus* is returned to as one of the partners in the exchange process in which the classic conception is based. In truth, an important displacement is in operation:

In neoliberalism – and it does not hide it, it proclaims it – we are also going to find a theory of *homo oeconomicus*, but the *homo oeconomicus*, in itself, is absolutely not an exchange partner. The *homo oeconomicus* is a businessperson and a businessperson of him/herself. And this thing is so true that, practically, this is going to be the bet of all the analyses that the neoliberals make, substituting at every moment the *homo oeconomicus* exchange partner for the *homo oeconomicus* businessperson of the self, being for oneself one’s own capital, being for oneself one’s own producer, being for oneself one’s own source of income.<sup>3</sup>

In the branch of neoliberalism which today creates visible effects of subjectivization, the whole being of the human is transformed in capital. Human capital, but capital nonetheless. Each one should work in the direction of increasing this capital, increasing the return in the form of income. One sees oneself repeatedly in the face of strategic choices in relation to investment, to the allocation of rare resources which should be made for alternative ends – a calculation of which not even pleasure, considered “production of satisfaction”, escapes. Such strategic choices would even fall on the reproduction of individuals. After all, a good genetic inheritance passes on to a child a good initial contribution of human capital. And all else which customarily makes up the education of a child – caring, medical care, school, extracurricular courses – can be evaluated in terms of investment and constitutes the “acquired” component of human capital. Such calculations, done by sociobiologists, caused repugnance, hate and heated debates in the 1970s. Being one’s own businessperson, the worker did not abolish exploitation – it never had been so intense. And Foucault, although it not be mentioned in his work, was also concerned about the possible resistance in the face of this new configuration. If there had been a radical change in the way in which human life sees itself implicated in the art of governing, it is also necessary to renew the forms of resistance.

Foucault calls attention to the fact that racism is not the largest problem brought about by the entrance of genetically inherited characteristics in the economic calculation, and what he says is relevant for the present discussion on therapeutic cloning and other techniques of biotechnology. As if he were speaking today, he displaces the question of the genetics of racism of the State to the level of the administration of each one over him or herself as human capital and, consequently, discusses the application of recombinant DNA technology in human beings:

I want to say this: it is that, if the problem of genetics brings about so much discomfort at the moment, I do not believe it useful or interesting to codify this discomfort for the purpose of genetics in the traditional terms of racism. If there is the desire to attempt to capture what there is that is politically pertinent in the present development of genetics, one should attempt to capture the implications at the present level itself, with the real problems which this poses. And from the moment in which a society will put forth for itself the problem of improving its human capital in general, there is no way of not producing, if not the problem of control, filtering, of the improvement of the human capital of individuals in function of, of course, the unions and procreations which will follow them [...] And it is then in terms of constitution, of growth, of accumulation and of improvement of human capital that the political problem of the utilization of genetics is placed. The so-called racist effects of genetics are certainly something which should be feared and which are far from being absorbed. This does not seem to me to be the greatest political wager at present.<sup>4</sup>

Another constant concern in the work of Foucault: the genesis of discourses and of truths. The French epistemologist who occupied the cathedra of “Systems of Thought” of the celebrated Collège de France (Paris), developed a study project of the “genealogy of the veracious regimes”, looking successively at the history of madness (1961), the birth of the clinic (1963), the practices of imprisonment (1975), the history of sexuality (1976), the care of the self (1984). As he makes clear, what he denominates the regime of truth installs itself by means of apparatuses of knowledge-power which are capable of inscribing in reality something that, “in itself”, does not exist; in other words, it is stripped of ontological substance – like madness, delinquency, sexuality. That which does not exist comes into existence as an effect of discourses, practices, knowledge.

Science and its advanced bastion, technoscience, are sources of discourse, practice, and knowledge which interact with the forces that are present in society – and they couple perfectly with those of the market. On covering science for the general public, a large number of media professionals do so in an acritical form, making the voices of scientists, be they independent or the representatives of industry and governments, resound with greater frequency, volume and impact, as several studies<sup>5</sup> in the area of science communication have made evident. Therefore, a new level of legitimacy is added to that which science itself bestows upon its members, and the incapability of the laity to deal with this is reaffirmed, either in silence or between the lines. If academic articles have, at this point, already tired of proclaiming the insufficiency of the focus placed on scientific knowledge by the public, the majority of articles presented by instruments of mass communication make it rise from the ashes daily.

The predominant discourse is what affirms the necessity of the public to know that which it does not know. It is only in this way that it will be apt to take part in the “conversation”. In order to operate exclusion, the supposed “adversaries of science” are, from the outset, disqualified and delegitimized as interlocutors. However, the “but” that Dorothy Neklin makes in the introduction of her compilation *Controversy: politics of technical decisions*<sup>6</sup> should be remembered, as well as that which some studies of the public perception of science confirm:<sup>7</sup> it is not a general distrust of science, but rather manifestations contrary to some of its applications. Those who are seen as adversaries many times seek only to exercise their rights as citizens.

*Translated by Robert Garner.*

## Notes and references

<sup>1</sup> C. Polino, “The wise and the ignorant, or a dangerous distinction for America Latina”, *Jcom*, (3) 3, set. 2004, F030303. Available at: <<http://jcom.sissa.it/archive/03/03/F030303-en/>>.

<sup>2</sup> M. Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique – Cours au Collège de France (1978-1979)*, Seuil/Gallimard, Paris, 2004, p. 355.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p.232.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 234-235.

<sup>5</sup> M. Nisbet, B. Lewenstein, “Biotechnology and the American Media: The Policy Process and the Elite Press, 1970-1999”, *Science Communication*, vol. 23, n. 4, jun. 2002, p. 259-391; M.W. Bauer *et al.*, “The dramatization of biotechnology in elite mass media”. In: G. Gaskell, M. W. Bauer, *Biotechnology 1996-2000 – the years of controversy*, Science Museum, London, 2001. p.35-52.

<sup>6</sup> D. Nelkin, *Controversy: politics of technical decisions*, Sage, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Newbury Park, CA, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in América Latina: C.A. Vogt, C. Polino (Eds.), *Percepção pública da ciência: Resultados da pesquisa na Argentina, Brasil, Espanha e Uruguai*, ed. Unicamp, Campinas, SP: Fapesp, São Paulo, 2003.

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