

PASTORAL POWER

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In his paper *The Subject And Power*, Foucault moves from a focus on individual resistance to power to a focus on the power of the state. There is no transition, but we can draw an inference. The examples he uses are personal and individual, women resisting male oppression, children struggling against the authority of their parents, and sick people struggling against the medical profession. For centuries, oppressed people looked to religion for surcease from their earthly misery. Now, both the dominant and oppressed people appeal to the State to support their positions. Foucault thinks the state can respond to the demands of the oppressed because it has assumed what he calls “pastoral power”.

We first saw the concept of pastoral power in one of my early posts on Foucault, a discussion of a series of his lectures published as *Security, Territory and Population*. The first part of that post gives a good picture of the pastoral power, and some of its implications.

In his lecture of February 8, 1978, Foucault takes up the issue of “pastoral power”. He says that the idea that one could govern men has its origins in the Mediterranean East, Assyria, Egypt, the Levant, and Israel, where it applies both to the government of souls by religious leaders and to the government of societies by secular rulers, both claiming the authority of the Almighty. The model for pastoral power is the New

Testament figure of the Good Shepherd.
"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." John 10:11.

Most people are familiar with this set of ideas about governance, as it is common in religious groups, and in secular governments as well. It is fundamentally beneficent ...

In the paper, Foucault points out that the pastoral power is directed at the individual, specifically at the spiritual salvation of the individual. The pastor will do anything to insure salvation for each member of the flock, including self-sacrifice. Foucault says that the pastor can only succeed by knowing everything about the individual. Thus, the power is individualizing, as well as totalizing.

The ecclesiastical form of pastorate doesn't have the same power it did 300 years ago, but the form has shifted to the secular power. In theory, at least, the goal of the secular pastorate is to insure human flourishing, in the language we use today. The state may not be willing or able to sacrifice itself to secure human flourishing, but it does demand the right to total knowledge, or something close in practice.

Foucault thinks the modern state should be seen from its birth in the late 1700s

... as a very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns.

Over time, all of the institutions of society are reorganized to include the forms of pastoral power, the police, private institutions (professional associations, corporations, foundations, universities), the family, and even

to some extent the economy. At least in theory, they all take responsibility for creating conditions suitable for individual flourishing. Foucault writes

...the multiplication of the aims and agents of pastoral power focused the development of knowledge of man around two roles: one, globalizing and quantitative, concerning the population; the other, analytical, concerning the individual.

Foucault's concern is that the totalizing State has the power to tie people to specific identities, which bind and limit people, and which can be used to restrict fundamental freedoms. Foucault asks what kind of human develops in this setting. What are we? Not what am I, as Descartes asks, but what is the nature of humans in this setting. This is the conclusion of this section of the paper:

The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state's institutions but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.

Discussion

1. The concluding statement takes us back to the project laid out in *The Dawn Of Everything*: how did we get stuck in this place? What other forms of society have existed in the past that might shed light on new possibilities? As we will see there is a connection between the priestly/pastoral power and the mammoth increase in organized wheat cultivation in the Nile Delta

beginning around 4500 BCE. See p. 404 et seq. The connection also extends to the origins of a kind of state power.

Roughly the story is that the priests started teaching that dead kings required offerings of wheat beer and leavened bread in order to cross over to the afterlife. Gradually everyone wanted the same food and drink for the journey of their own beloved dead. The increased demand for wheat led to more intensive agricultural practices and to the cultivation of less arable land. That required different social organization. Poorer people went into debt to get these essentials, and that led to a more complex economy.

All this was in furtherance of a religious belief, a belief that was only, if vividly, imaginary. I'll come back to this in discussing Chapter 10.

2. Foucault doesn't use the term "human flourishing", but that's what we call it now. One question we might ask is are there ranges of human flourishing that we can't perceive because we are so wrapped up in the totalizing power of the pastorate as instated in our contemporary capitalist society? To start with an easier form of this question, consider the movies. Currently we are swamped with superheroes, and our screens are dominated by chiseled bodies and preposterous plots. I'm a bit worried that this does affect our collective imagination.

3. Not everyone loves the idea of a pastoral government, Some people don't want to help others. Some really hate the idea that, in Lincoln's formulation (not Jefferson's), all men are created equal. Some believe government should not take care of people because that's the role of religion and charity as it was in some early Christian societies. All of these people resist the current vision of the pastoral power of the state.

These and others have worked assiduously to persuade people that state exercise of pastoral power is illegitimate. That's one way to read

the political history of the US since the Reagan Administration. The pendulum has been swinging away from pastoral power to power based on strict market discipline. Maybe some of the other events we've seen lately are signs of people pushing back against what they perceive as illegitimate state exercise of pastoral power.

- Chinese anger over zero-Covid policies
- The uprising against the morality police in Iran
- The rise of authoritarians like Victor Orban supported by the very rich
- Our barely functioning politics coupled with judicial overreach working together to limit the power of the federal government to help people flourish