

Governmentality

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In this article I provide a brief outline of the concept of governmentality, as I understand it. Then I move to a discussion of its limits as a form of power, and discuss how an awareness of limits opens up ways to examine governmentality ethnographically.¹

Governmentality

Defined succinctly as the “conduct of conduct,” government is the attempt to shape human conduct by calculated means. Distinct from discipline, which seeks to reform designated groups through detailed supervision in confined quarters (prisons, asylums, schools), the concern of government is the wellbeing of populations at large. Its purpose is to secure the “welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, et cetera” (Foucault 1991a:100). To achieve this purpose requires distinctive means. At the level of population, it is not possible to coerce every individual and regulate their actions in minute detail. Rather, government operates by educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs. It sets conditions, “arranging things so that people, following only their own self-interest, *will do as they ought*” (Scott 1995:202).² Persuasion might be applied, as authorities attempt to gain consent. But this is not the only course. When power operates at a distance, people are not necessarily aware of how their conduct is being conducted or why, so the question of consent does not arise.

The will to govern, and more specifically, the will to improve the welfare of the population, is expansive. In Foucault’s definition it is concerned with “men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with...wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with all its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, et cetera; men in their relation to...customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, et cetera; and lastly, men in their relation to...accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death, et cetera” (Foucault 1991a:93). Experts intervene

in these relations in order to adjust them. They aim to foster beneficial processes and mitigate destructive ones. They may operate on population in the aggregate, or on subgroups divided by gender, location, age, income or race, each with characteristic deficiencies that serve as points of entry for corrective interventions.

To improve populations requires the exercise of what Foucault identified as a distinct, governmental rationality. His neologism governmentality refers to a way of thinking about government as the “right manner of disposing things” in pursuit not of one dogmatic goal but a “whole series of specific finalities” to be achieved through “multiform tactics” (Foucault 1991a:95). The identification of appropriate “finalities” and the “right manner” of achieving them points to the utopian element in government—the search for better ways of doing things, better ways of living (Dean 1999:33). It points to calculation and the need for tactics finely tuned to achieve optimal results. It points to technique, since “thought becomes governmental to the extent that it becomes technical,” attaching itself to technologies for bringing improved states into being (Rose 1999:51). Thought and technique together comprise the ensemble of “institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics” through which governmental interventions are devised, and conduct conducted (Foucault 1991a:102).

An explicit, calculated program of intervention is not invented *ab initio*. It is traversed by the will to govern, but it is not the product of a singular intention or will. It draws upon, and is situated within a heterogeneous assemblage or *dispositif* that combines “forms of practical knowledge, with modes of perception, practices of calculation, vocabularies, types of authority, forms of judgement, architectural forms, human capacities, non-human objects and devices, inscriptions, techniques and so forth” (Rose 1999:52; see also Foucault 1980:194). Although there are occasions when a revolutionary movement or visionary announces a grand plan for the total transformation of society—the kind of plan James Scott describes as “high modern,” more often, programs of intervention are pulled together from an existing repertoire, a matter of habit, accretion and bricolage.³

Understanding governmental interventions as assemblages helps to break down the image of government as the preserve of a monolithic state operating as a singular source of power and enables us to recognize the range of parties involved in attempts to regulate the conditions under which lives are lived. These parties include not only diverse state agencies with competing visions, mandates and techniques, but missionaries, scientists, activists and the so-called NGOs, both national and transnational,

involved in arenas such as public health, welfare, agricultural extension, conservation, good governance and, increasingly, conflict management, elements of the hydra-headed endeavour we have come to know as development. To what extent various governmental initiatives are concentrated in, or co-ordinated by, the official state apparatus, is an empirical question. Rather than envisage power as a thing stored in the bureaucratic apparatus and the top echelons of the ruling regime from which it spreads outwards across the nation, and downwards into the lives of the populace, the analytic of governmentality asks “how different locales are constituted as authoritative and powerful, how different agents are assembled with specific powers, and how different domains are constituted as governable and administrable” (Dean 1999:29).⁴

Limits

Governmental interventions are important because they have effects. They seldom reform the world according to plan, but they do change things. They may be resisted, but not from spaces or positions outside power. In place of the familiar and often spatialized dichotomy, power here, resistance there, the analytic of governmentality draws our attention to the ways in which subjects are differently formed and differently *positioned* in relation to governmental programs (as experts, as targets), with particular capacities for action and critique. Governmental power is not homogenous and totalizing. It has limits, and a focus on these limits, I argue, opens critical terrain for ethnographic analysis. To order an inquiry into limits, I propose four axes.

First, consider the limit to governmental power intrinsic to its characterization as a form of power rather than force. Power, as Foucault stressed, acts on actions: it is only power so long as the target of that power retains the capacity to act. Total control requires violence so extreme that it removes agency under threat of death, enslavement or torture. Power means

that “the other” (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relation of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up. [Foucault 1982:220]

In this passage Foucault pinpointed the capacity to act as the source of dynamism in social life. Total power is an oxymoron. Power, he proposed, is a relation of “reciprocal incitation and struggle,” a relation of “permanent provocation” (Foucault 1982:222). To follow through on Foucault’s insight raises, for me, some empirical ques-

tions: What actions does it provoke? How? Under what conditions? With what effects?

Second, consider the limit posed by the target of governmental power: population and, more specifically, the imbrication of “men and things.” This is obdurate terrain. “Men in their relations with wealth, resources, means of subsistence,” recognized by Marx and others as the fulcrum of class-based injustice and political mobilization, are somehow to be governmentalized, made the target of technologies to secure optimal arrangements. Climate, epidemics, territory—these are not passive objects. They are, as Latour reminds us, actants, dynamic forces in social life, constantly surprising those who would harness and control them (Latour 1993; Mitchell 2002:23, 28, 30). Men in “their customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking” are no less refractory. The sets of relations and processes with which government is concerned present intrinsic limits to the capacity of governmental interventions to rearrange things. There is inevitably an excess. There are processes and interactions, histories, solidarities and attachments, that cannot be reconfigured according to plan. To examine those processes, that excess, we need to attend to the particularities of conjunctures—specific times, places and sets of relations—the terrain of ethnography.

Third, consider the limits presented by the available forms of knowledge and technique. Foucault observed that governmentality’s principal form of knowledge is political economy, by which he meant the liberal art of governing the polity in an economical manner—intervening in the delicate balance of social and economic processes no more, and no less, than is required to adjust, optimize and sustain them (Foucault 1991a:93).⁵ Interventions must respect “the integrity and autonomous dynamics of the social body” (Hannah 2000:24). A claim of omniscience or the attempt to regulate or engineer social processes in totalizing fashion would be futile and counterproductive. Any governmental intervention risks producing effects that are contradictory, even perverse. For this reason, reflexivity and calculation of risk are intrinsic to government.

Discussions of reflexivity in the literature on governmentality tend to be rather abstract, but I see reflexivity as a practice that can be investigated ethnographically. Who reflects? What weight do the outcomes of previous interventions carry in their reflections? What are the risks of concern to variously situated subjects, and how do they figure in their calculations?

Fourth, consider the tense frontier between governmental rationality and the practice of critique. The institutionalized practices of planning, regulation, law mak-

ing and so on operate by attempting to transform contestation over what constitutes improvement, and how the costs and benefits of improvement should be distributed, into technical questions of efficiency and sustainability. Yet this does not mean that the transformation is successful (see Li 1999). On this point I diverge from scholars who emphasize the capacity of expertise to absorb critique, its effective *achievement* of depoliticization.

Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, among others, argue that expert knowledge takes “what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science.” For them expertise is closed, self-referencing and secure once a “technical matrix” has been established. Resistance, or failure to achieve the program’s stated aims, comes to be “construed as further proof of the need to reinforce and extend the power of the experts.” Thus “what we get is not a true conflict of interpretations about the ultimate worth or meaning of efficiency, productivity, or normalization, but rather what might be called a conflict of implementations” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:196). In the same vein, Nikolas Rose stresses the “switch points” where critical scrutiny of the practice of government is absorbed back into the realm of expertise, and “an opening turns into a closure” (1999:192).

For me the concept of limits points to the ever-present possibility of a switch in the opposite direction: the opening up of governmental rationality to a critical challenge. There are many potential sources of critical insight, among which I would list the co-existence of multiple programs, uncoordinated and possibly contradictory; the expectations generated by programs of improvement, especially when they are institutionalized as entitlements or rights; and the inevitable gap between what programs promise, and what they achieve. The possibility of a challenge and its likely sources is one of the risks that programmers must consider in their calculations. Thus politics is not external to government, it is constitutive of it.

Investigating politics returns me, once again, to ethnographic terrain. What causes shifts in relations of power? How do the governing and the governed come to position themselves as adversaries? What can we discover about the conjunctures when reversals occur? Questions such as these require us to combine study of governmental rationalities with the examination of concrete cases and particular struggles—conjunctures at which power can be examined empirically, in its diverse forms and complex multiplicity, its instability, and above all in its historical and spatial specificity.

The reluctance of scholars exploring governmental rationalities to conduct empirical studies of particular con-

junctures introduces an odd inconsistency in their work: an interest in politics as a hypothetical possibility that is not carried into an interest in politics as a concrete practice.⁶ Nikolas Rose, for example, argues for the study of governmental rationalities and *against* what he calls sociologies of rule—studies of the ways in which rule is actually accomplished, in all their complexity (1999:19). Rose’s approach yields attention to politics as an afterthought, the excess of government. In his landmark study *Powers of Freedom* his main discussion of politics is confined to the conclusion titled “Beyond Government.” There he argues that “analysis of the forms of contestation might help us understand the ways in which something new is created, a difference is introduced into history in the form of a politics.” This, he says, is not to seek to

identify particular agents of a radical politics—be they classes, races, or genders—or to distinguish once and for all the forces of reaction from those of progression in terms of fixed identities. Rather, one would examine the ways in which creativity arises out of the situation of human beings engaged in particular relations of force and meaning, and what is made out of the possibilities of that location. [1999:279]

I find this a very clear statement of a critical research agenda worthy of our attention, but it is not one that Rose himself pursues. The reason for this is methodological: it can best be pursued through sociologies, histories and ethnographies that examine constellations of power in particular times and places, and the overdetermined, messy situations in which creativity arises. The study of politics demands, in short, a research strategy Rose rejects. Foucault also rejected ethnographic study. Why is this so?

Questions of Method

To study government, Rose argues, is not to start from “the apparently obvious historical or sociological questions: what happened and why. It is to start by asking what authorities of various sorts wanted to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques” (Rose 1999:20). Similarly, Foucault stopped short of inquiring into the effects produced on the targets and the arena of intervention, and his exploration of practice was also truncated. Since this was no oversight I briefly review Foucault’s position on method, which he explained with reference to the disciplinary practices of incarceration:

You say to me: nothing happens as laid down in these “programmes”; they are no more than dreams, utopias,

a sort of imaginary production that you aren’t entitled to substitute for reality. Bentham’s *Panopticon* isn’t a very good description of “real life” in nineteenth-century prisons.

To this I would reply: if I had wanted to describe “real life” in the prisons, I wouldn’t indeed have gone to Bentham. But the fact that this real life isn’t the same as the theoreticians’ schemas doesn’t entail that these schemas are therefore utopian, imaginary, etc. One could only think that if one had a very impoverished notion of the real. For one thing, the elaboration of these schemes corresponds to a whole series of diverse practices and strategies... For another thing, these programmes induce a whole series of effects in the real... they crystallize into institutions, they inform individual behaviour, they act as grids for the perception and evaluation of things. It is absolutely true that criminals stubbornly resisted the new disciplinary mechanism of the prison; it is absolutely correct that the actual functioning of the prisons, in the inherited buildings where they were established and with the governors and guards who administered them, was a witches’ brew compared to the beautiful Benthamite machine. But if the prisons were seen to have failed, if criminals were perceived as incorrigible, and a whole new criminal “race” emerged into the field of vision of public opinion and “justice,” if the resistance of the prisoners and the pattern of recidivism took the forms we know they did, it’s precisely because this type of programming didn’t just remain a utopia in the heads of a few projectors.

These programmings of behaviour, these regimes of jurisdiction and veridiction aren’t abortive schemas for the creation of reality. They are fragments of reality which induce such particular effects in the real as the distinction between true and false implicit in the ways men “direct,” “govern” and “conduct” themselves and others. To grasp these effects as historical events... this is more or less my theme. You see that this has nothing to do with the project—an admirable one in itself—of grasping a “whole society” in its “living reality.” [Foucault 1991b:81-82]

The importance of studying the rationale of programs as “fragments of the real,” and the real nature of their effects—the fact that things happen because of them that would not happen without—is amply justified here. What I find problematic is the claim that this inquiry can be entirely separated from what goes on inside the “witches’ brew.” Foucault describes the specificity of the historical conjuncture at which the prison system emerged—new forms of criminality, urbanization, a concern in France to consolidate the state apparatus. But surely one of the strands influencing how incarceration was revised,

adjusted and made into a system that has endured for more than a century despite recidivism and other obvious failures, lies in the details of what actually happens inside prisons. If prisoners devise their own practices and their own critiques, these have effects. Their capacity to act is intrinsic to the nature of power as a relation of “permanent provocation.” The exercise of power carries within it multiple possibilities, including the possibility of opening up a governmental strategy to critique, and the incitement to act.

The relation of power to its others is not simply a contest of ideas—it is embodied in practices. Thus our exploration of practices cannot stop at those that follow from the prevailing rationality of government, the self-referencing, systematized, sanitized world of plans and documents. No space, person or social configuration is a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate awaiting inscription. In the passage just quoted Foucault observed, for example, that the inherited buildings, the guards and governors who retained their old ways of thinking were part of the witches’ brew. So what were their effects? How were rules adjusted to the materiality of what existed—in this case, a landscape of old prison buildings configured in a particular style? How were rules adjusted to take account of the embodied presence of guards and prisoners each with their “customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking”?

To pose questions such as these does not mean attempting to grasp the “whole society” as Foucault suggests. A prison is a delimited space. Governmental interventions are also specific: they engage with a particular ensemble of population, a definite set of relations that is to be directed and improved. No doubt the study of government is a more complex inquiry than the study of the effects of a disciplinary regime on a fixed group in a delimited space, because the target of government—population—is a set of processes and relations always in motion. Moreover the apparatus of security that supplies the principal technical means of government—means such as statistics, planning, monitoring—is nothing like a panopticon, still less a set of prison rules. Governmental strategies frequently operate at a distance—a distance that is both “constitutional,” as diverse forms of authority are invoked, and spatial, linking experts at distant sites (Rose 1999:50). They depend upon translations through which “alignments are forged between the objectives of authorities wishing to govern and the personal projects of those organizations, groups and individuals who are the subject of government” (Rose 1999:48). More so than the disciplinary regime of the prison, government presents the possibility noted by Foucault that the population may be “aware, vis-a-vis the government, of what it wants, but

ignorant of what is being done to it” (1991a:100) although, as I argued earlier, their ignorance or depoliticization should not be assumed. The effects of governmental interventions, and their reception by target populations, need to be teased out from, and situated in relation to, the multiple forces configuring the sets of relations with which government is engaged.

Concepts for Empirical Analysis

By way of conclusion, I outline some key terms that can help to orient an ethnographic inquiry into government that combines analysis of governmental interventions (their genealogy, their diagnoses and prescriptions, their boundaries and exclusions) with analysis of what happens when attempts to achieve the “right disposition of things” encounter—and produce—a “witches’ brew” of processes and practices that exceed their scope.

Programs generally receive the most attention in studies of governmentality. Simply put, a program is the goal to be accomplished, together with the rationale that makes it thinkable, and the associated strategies and techniques. In order to formulate a governmental program, the domain to be governed must be rendered technical, that is, represented “as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics...whose component parts are linked together in some more or less systematic manner by forces, attractions and coexistences” (Rose 1999:33). The relevant ensemble of population must be bounded, linked to a defined problem, and that problem linked again to an account of the mechanisms through which the problem can be addressed, the design for measures for evaluation and so on.

I take programs very seriously because they explain many practices, processes and events that would otherwise be utterly mysterious. As Foucault observed, programs are “fragments of the real,” and they produce definite effects. But they are not determinant. An ethnography of government would pay attention to how programs take hold and change things, while keeping in view their instabilities, fragilities and fractures, and the ways in which failure prepares the ground for new programming.

The *practices* that constitute an arena of intervention and render it technical are crucial to the formulation and implementation of a governmental program. But there is another set of practices that should be of equal concern: informal practices of compromise and accommodation, everyday resistance or outright refusal. Since there is always a gap between a plan and its realization; an ethnographic study of government would be attentive to the practices that form in, around, through or against the plan

(O'Malley 1996:311; see also Scott 1998:261 and Li 1999). Compromise, for example, might take the form of the tacit agreement to look the other way when rules are broken, the failure to gather information that contradicts the premises upon which an intervention is planned, or the construction of data to demonstrate unerring "success." Pat O'Malley refers to these as the "subterranean practices of government" (1996:311). To examine practices the ethnographer would ask some very basic empirical questions: What are people connected with a governmental program as proponents, implementers or targets, actually doing? How are their practices interpreted by differently situated subjects?

The effects of governmental interventions are both proximate and indirect, planned and unplanned, and they can be examined at a range of spatial scales. Of particular interest to an ethnographer is the intersection between particular programs with their limited, technical field of intervention, and the many other processes that exceed their scope—the changing price of commodities on international markets, for example, or the influence of the media on patterns of consumption and desire, floods and droughts, accidents and diseases. While the will to govern is expansive there is nothing determinate about the outcomes. Ethnographers, in sum, have work to do.

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Notes

- 1 For a fuller discussion of governmentality and my attempt to study it ethnographically see *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development and the Practice of Politics*, Duke University Press (2007b). See also John Clarke's (2004) discussion of government as unsettled and unfinished, and the political stakes of overestimating its closure.
- 2 David Scott attributes this phrase to the "preeminent 'governmentalist'" Jeremy Bentham.
- 3 I situate Scott's approach in relation to studies of governmentality in Li 2005. Compare Cruikshank (1999:42) on government as an accretion of "small things" rather than totalizing systems. I offer an extended examination of practices of assemblage in Li 2007a.
- 4 For critiques of models of power as a stored resource located in powerful centers see Allen 1999 and Mitchell 1991.
- 5 Accounts of the relationship between governmentality and liberalism are found in Dean 1999; Hindess 1997; Mitchell 1998; Rose 1999; and especially Burchell 1991.
- 6 This point has been made by O'Malley 1996 and O'Malley et al. 1997:509. They argue that the critical edge in Foucault submerged in the literature on governmentality needs to be reaffirmed and linked to the study of sociologies as

well as mentalities, thus to expose and expand the arena of contestation or politics. See also McClure 1995 and Valverde 1996.

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Governmentality, State Culture and Indigenous Rights

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Tania Murray Li's commentary covers themes associated with the concept of governmentality and the state central to the work we do as anthropologists, and identifies the ethnographic study of how governmentality plays out in specific sites as the particular way we can contribute to the study of government. I see my comment as supplementing this larger contribution by showing how focus on the concept of governmentality, and on Foucault's theorization of the state provides insight into the problems and possibilities of resolving, justly, the political relationship between First Nations and Canada, a theme that has been the focus of my work over the past 30 years.

I came to enquire into the concept of "governmentality" because I was looking for a theory of the liberal state, a term defined by Trouillot as both "the apparatus of national governments," and "a set of practices and processes, and their effects" that need to be interrogated "whether or not they coalesce around the central sites of national governments" (2001:131), to help me understand the relationship that now exists between First Nations and Canada. And it is in Foucault's exploration of the liberal state as a "way of life" (*a culture* if you will) and how it came to be dominant in world affairs that I found it. Of particular value are his insights that the liberal state (to carry on with the anthropological analogy) justifies its jurisdiction on a type of origin myth that is categorically different from origin myths associated with nations, the conditions that gave rise to the hegemony of the state ver-

sion by the time Canada was established, and the consequences of that hegemony for the manner in which we live our lives today in Canada and elsewhere in the world. As it is directly relevant to what follows, let me recount this briefly.

In my reading, this aspect of Foucault's project is stated most fully in his 1975-76 lectures (1997). In them he revisits the well-worn field in political theory devoted to the role played by Hobbes' *Leviathan* in constructing the philosophical foundation for the liberal state as an institution of Modernity. Hobbes' argument rests on the distinction he makes between the State of Nature; a "thought experiment" (exemplified nonetheless in the world of the Indigenous), in which he posits that humans live in solitude, unable to form political communities; and the State of Society, exemplified by civilization, in which people live together in a community under a Sovereign. It is an origin myth, in which the "origin" is a dehistoricized moment of transformation from Nature to Society (the Social Contract), and the "myth" is constructed from juridical and philosophical principles deduced through "Reason."

Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* during the English Civil War and Foucault, following most commentators, sees it as devoted to resolving the issue of Sovereignty (or, speaking broadly, the community as defined through political allegiance) that lay at the centre of this conflict. As Foucault explains, the conflict was directly connected to two competing versions of an origin myth concerning Sovereignty based on a shared historical-political discourse that originates in the encounter between Normans and Saxons in 1066. Foucault argues that "what Hobbes wants to elim-