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# Governmentality

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**Abstract:** The term governmentality was coined by Michel Foucault in the context of his studies on governmental rationality in the late 1970s. In particular, he wanted to reveal the ways in which social power is constituted by the regulation and self-regulation of conduct. He insisted that the contemporary mode of government is not characterized by the state's encroachment of the liberties of society, but rather by a link between techniques that assure coercion and those processes through which free individuals themselves modify or construct self. The originality of the term lies precisely in its capacity to move beyond the dichotomy of freedom and constraint as two opposite forms of power. The concept of governmentality is often used in the analysis of neoliberal political practice. This research has shown that what today is often seen as the withdrawal of the state from its regulatory function vis-à-vis the civil society, can actually be understood as a new technique of government based on the reorganization and shifting of the state's regulatory task onto responsible individuals. The concept of governmentality has become influential in critical human geography, particularly in political geography research, the analysis of public health, and the theorization of environmental risks.

**Keywords:** biopolitics, Foucault, government, governmentality, individual, liberalism, neoliberalism, population, power, scale, self, state, territory

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## Introduction

The term governmentality was first used by the French historian of ideas and philosopher Michel Foucault in the context of his studies on governmental rationality in the late 1970s. The idea of governmentality reached the English speaking world largely through an English translation of Foucault's lecture on governmentality given at the Collège de France in February 1978. Published first in 1979 in journal *Ideology and Consciousness*, and again in 1991 in an edited volume *The Foucault effect*, the lecture gradually introduced governmentality to a widening audience of scholars in a range of social and cultural studies disciplines.

The concept of governmentality is key to several important aspects of Michel Foucault's thought. Foucault coined the term in the later years of his career, which ended prematurely to his death in 1984. Since the late 1970s Foucault had been working on issues related to individualization, subjectification, rationality, and government in attempting to clarify the regimes of power that work through the expansion of governmental rationality in modern societies. In particular, he wanted to reveal the ways in which social power is constituted by the regulation and self-regulation of

embodied action. He insisted that what best characterizes the contemporary mode of government is not the state's encroachment of the liberties of society, but rather the governmentalization of the state. The latter refers to a mode of scientific state government that takes the welfare of the population as its end as well as means.

While Foucault mainly discusses state government, the concept of governmentality does not point merely at the reality of the state, or even the population as a whole. Of equal importance are the subjectivities that governmental rationality impinges on individuals. Foucault insisted that the modern individual is not given, but constituted as a domain of initiatives and self-government that together operate the dispersed social power typical to modern Western societies. Instead of direct forms of repression and constraint, social control is achieved by means of subtler strategies of normalization, which produce self-regulating individuals. This power is operative not only on the individual level but in the context of the state government of population that Foucault calls biopolitics. Above all, Foucault claims that modern regimes of power operate to produce subjects who are both the objects and vehicles of power. Thus, the modern individual is not the opposite of power but rather one of its prime effects.

Hence, in analyzing governmentality, Foucault does not see the state as a singular all-powerful apparatus that exists in opposition to the civil society. On the contrary, he is critical to state theory that approaches society as external to the state, or seeks to reduce the state to one of its functions, such as the provision of security or the reproduction of relations of production. By illuminating how the modern state and the modern society are co-constructed the concept of governmentality works to bridge the gap between macro and micro levels of analysis of power.

### **‘Gouvernementalité’ - the birth of a concept**

In the early 1970's Foucault was preoccupied with the task of understanding forms of disciplinary power based on the disciplining of individual bodies. This mode of power was epitomized by the military rationality he analyzed in *Discipline and Punish*. He gradually extended his analysis of power from disciplinary to biopolitical regimes and the phenomenon of governmentality in two annual courses of lectures at the Collège de France titled *Security, territory and population* (1978) and *The birth of biopolitics* (1979). The term governmentality (in French *gouvernementalité*) appeared first in the concluding part of a lecture given in February 1978. Foucault summed up what he had described as historical movement in the art of government that brought about population as target of knowledge and governmental intervention. In this context governmentality refers to three things: 1) the institutional ensemble that allows the exercise a mode of governmental power that is not reducible to sovereignty or discipline; 2) the long term tendency of pre-eminence of this type of power over the other modes (sovereignty and discipline) resulting in the formation of specific

governmental apparatuses and respective rationalities throughout the West; 3) the process of the governmentalization of the modern state.

The term governmentality consists of two parts (*gouverner* and *mentalité*), which underlines a semantic link between the acts of governing and modes of thought underpinning them. Understanding this link requires a wider conception of government not restricted to state's politics alone. Foucault shows that before the 19<sup>th</sup> century the question of government was discussed not only in relation to state government, but also in a broad array of contexts ranging from philosophical to religious, medical and pedagogic texts. The art of government thus refers to the general reflection of conduct, or the conduct of conduct, seeking guidance in various aspects of life ranging from individual self-control or the management of family all the way to the government of population. In revealing that self-government of individuals (technologies of self) and the government of population (technologies of domination) are two sides of the same coin, the concept of governmentality offers novel insight into the nature of social power.

The originality of the term lies in its capacity to move beyond the dichotomy of freedom and constraint, or consensus and coercion, as two opposite forms of power. Governmentality points at a power that operates not simply by forcing people to obey the will of the governor, but rather by balancing between techniques that assure coercion and those processes through which individuals themselves modify or construct self. In governmentality the direction of the conduct of individuals and a population is based on forms of power that is exercised over subjects who are free. With the history of governmentality Foucault purports to show that instead of being opposites, the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual are historically co-constructed, reflecting the expansion of governmental rationality throughout the West. Hence, what Foucault calls the governmentalization of the state refers to a development by which state power gradually came to rest not merely on sovereignty and discipline but also on government, i.e. the link between the autonomous individual's capacity for self-government and rational political objectives.

Mentality is key in the formation of this link in so far as it is through the internalization of particular political rationalities that individuals come to govern themselves in ways that serve politically convenient ends. For example, a person's concern for her or his health and all actions to improve it, may first seem choices made by an autonomous individual. However, at the same time matters pertaining to personal health are enfolded within the state's interest to govern public health. This attempt to manage health on the level of the whole population produces a wealth of knowledge providing guidance for individuals on how to lead a healthy life; how to care for oneself, how to eat, exercise, work, engage in sexual conduct, and so on. In Foucault's thought this notion is captured by the concept of biopolitics, which refers to state actions to govern population and the underlying rationality that links, for instance, individual's care of self with the state's care for the public health.

## **The rise of governmentality**

From the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century political theory was predominantly concerned with the relationship between the ruler and the sovereign territory, seen in juridical terms. For Foucault the emergence of doctrines about the reason of state in sixteenth-century Europe single out the starting point of modern governmental rationality. At that time the notion of state is distinguished from and set above religious considerations, and the new secularized state is given immanent autonomous principles that it should necessarily follow. To know how to govern would then require a knowledge of the state and its interests, neither of which are self-evident. Hence, governmental rationality starts to build on specific forms of knowledge that observe both the praxis of government and the nature of what is governed.

The first body of knowledge that fully articulates the reason of the state as the science of government is the eighteenth-century Germanic *Polizeiwissenschaft*, or science of police (i.e. policy). This corpus of theory aspired to maximize the strength of the state by nurturing the real basis of this strength, the population and life in general. This objective resulted in endless lists of matters pertaining to people's happiness and prosperity that the state should concern of, ranging from the police of health, of foods, of highways, to the police of commerce, of poverty, of religion, etc.

While the science of police now seems too indefinite and chaotic to really serve governmental policy making, it nevertheless paved the way for the increasingly detailed state intervention into various fields of social life. The multitude of foci that still characterizes the science of police in the seventeenth century is gradually replaced by a more coherent system of thought centered on political economy by the middle of the eighteenth century. Foucault distinguishes a turning point in the break up of conceptual link between family and economy, whereby the latter no longer means the management of family property. The new concept of political economy pertains to a totally different, much larger plane, that of the population as a whole. According to Foucault, it was the science of political economy that enabled the identification of problems that are specific to a state's population, and thereby fostered the reflection of the problem of government outside the juridical framework of sovereignty.

This gave rise to a new and progressively more intimate relationship between the state and society. In contrast to pre-modern government confined mainly to aspects of territorial sovereignty, modern government had the general welfare of the population as its purpose, which grew into an ever-extending field of state interventions. These governmental policies not only targeted the population but also used techniques immanent to the population as their means, including the stimulation of birth rates, the prevention of diseases, the promotion of healthy diet, the direction of the

population into certain occupations and industries, and so on. This productive governmental rationality Foucault calls biopolitics, i.e. the attempt to secure growth by means of designing interventions in the field of economy and population.

Summing up this development Michel Foucault states that the modern state was governmentalized throughout roughly by the end of the eighteenth century. While the term governmentality is not restricted to any one historical period or power regime, it is often used by Foucault, as well as many of his followers, in referring to advanced Western liberal democracies. Hence, the notion of governmentality applies particularly to neoliberal societies characterized by dispersed power structures and emphasis on the freedom of choice based on the predominance of market mechanisms. In the context of neoliberalism individuals have an active role in determining the course of their lives and the state appears as the provider of social welfare services and various possibilities for the fulfillment of each individual's full potential. Neoliberal governmentality nourishes the population by influencing the practices and rationalities of autonomous individual's self-regulation.

### **Studies in governmentality**

In the English-speaking world interest in the concept of governmentality arose after the publication of an English translation of Foucault's lecture on governmentality in the early 1990s. Since then governmentality studies have expanded across the whole specter of humanities and social sciences, ranging from anthropology to critical criminology, from nursing science to social psychology, from sociology to political science. Arguably, governmentality is one of the major legacies of Foucaultian thought in contemporary critical social science research.

However, as is the case with Foucault's corpus throughout, there exists no single common way of appropriating his conceptual tool box. The interdisciplinary field of inquiry into modern governmental rationality has brought about a number of different approaches to governmentality. Some of these weigh on the analysis of knowledge production in relation to the rationalities of rule (how regimes of truth constitute the social world as governable and administrable), while some emphasize more the technologies and practices of government (the operationalization of governmental rationalities in material processes and acts). In the former approach attention is focused on the mentalities and rationalities that underlie rule – the ways in which problems are defined, expertise recognized and enacted, information construed and codified, participants identified and organized, and codes of conduct arranged and circulated. The second approach focuses more on how techniques of the self interact with structures of domination. Attention is paid to government seen as an ensemble of institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections that facilitate

the exercise of this complex form of social power through the activities of actually existing governments.

While there is no single one paradigm, some major themes can be distinguished in the governmentality approach. First, scholars in this area have charted the changes in the state-civil society relationship brought about by the reshaping of government under neoliberalism. This work has shown that political power is exercised today through a multitude of agencies and techniques, many of which are not associated with the formal organs of state. Hence, what in neoliberalism is frequently seen as the withdrawal of the state from its regulatory function vis-à-vis the civil society, can actually be understood as a new technique of government based on the reorganization and shifting of the state's regulatory task onto responsible individuals. Seen as a specific form of governmentality, neoliberalism is revealed as a rationality that encourages individuals to demand an increasing scope for self-determination and autonomy – i.e. self-regulation – in areas which had hitherto been the domain of state agencies specifically responsible of regulation. Yet, in so far as the state continues to have an interest in the outcomes of this market-like regulation (e.g. its citizens' health, education, socioeconomic well-being, productivity, innovativeness etc.) the neoliberal development marks not the end but a transformation in societal regulation and a fundamental change in the relation between state and civil society actors.

Second, studies in governmentality have worked to show that neoliberal political economy operates on multiple political scales demanding responsiveness not only from the individual body, but also from various collective bodies and institutions (for example universities, corporations, non governmental organizations, and public institutions). All these bodies may be called upon to be in shape, flexible, productive, and self-organizing by a rationality that conceals its multi-scalar power geometries. Critical of the idea of scale as a fixed arena of politics, the governmentality approach facilitates the analysis of micro-level and macro-level politics as implicated in each other through the internalization of a particular mentality of rule (such as neoliberalism) by individuals and collectives alike. The construction of new domains of action in society, including codes of conduct and new roles and identities, often cuts across various scales of action. For instance, new forms of regulation in health care may pass directly from the national medical regulation into the practices of clinical work.

A central avenue for the emerging interlinkages between different scales of bodily self-regulation is the apprehension of particular knowledge as true. Studies in governmentality purport to reveal the politics of truth that underlie neoliberal rationalities, such as the need to be attractive in order to succeed in competition, be it over a good job or foreign direct investments in a city. Moreover, the concept of governmentality has the capacity of highlighting the intimate relationship between representations and agency, thought and action, both in the governmental and non-governmental realms

of social life. This enables a sharper analysis of the effects of neoliberal government not simply in terms of the reproduction of existing social asymmetries, but also through the invention of new social mechanisms of domination on the basis of emerging political rationalities and forms of society.

Third, the analysis of governmentality has distinguished subjectification as a technology that tends to conceal the power of self-regulation from the autonomous individuals themselves. Rather than government simply dominating individuals, in neoliberal governmentality subjects actively participate in their own subjectification. This is primarily because the technologies of self, that subjects are called upon to practice as the autonomous members of liberal democratic societies, are imbued with governmental aspirations for the shaping of individuals' conduct so as to produce desired effects. Hence, there is a double bind between subjection (the relations of governmental power) and subjectification (the construction of the individual subject), a bind that operates through the naturalization of certain forms of identity and agency, such as the consumer, manager, investor, customer, or entrepreneur, as a fulfillment of inherent qualities of the human nature and society.

Foucault addressed this duality inherent in the construction of subjects using the French term *assujettissement* (translated in English variously as subjectification, subjection, or subjugation). In liberal democratic societies individual and collective subjectivity is expanded, incorporated and organized as an integral part of government, so that subjection and subjectification are layered upon each other in complex ways. The institution and proliferation of self-reflexive subjects with the capacity to act channels autonomous human agency into a resource for, rather than obstacle to, governing. In a neoliberal society the reflexive subject emerges as a strategy in the promotion of freedom understood in terms of the capability of an autonomous individual to establish an identity. Freedom is seen as the capacity to realize one's desires, to fulfill one's potential and to shape a meaningful everyday life through acts of choice. This entails that one becomes a subject whose freedom is a condition of subjection, and at once, subjection a condition of freedom. Hence, subjectification and subjection intertwine and condition each other. In a sense this intimate relationship culminates in the discourses and practices of personal self-assessment. As an awareness of how to evaluate and act upon ourselves to remedy various personal and social problems, self-esteem is a technology of self par excellence.

### **Governmentality in human geography**

Interest in the concept of governmentality within human geography research has grown steadily since the middle of the 1990s. The concept started to gain ground first in the context of political geography where it was used within wider debates about the role of knowledge production in the



constitution of the geopolitical world. While critical of the conventional understanding of the state as the single most important locus and scale of politics, much of this research took the state government as its starting point. The critical analysis of geopolitics has shown that the practices of statecraft depend on and produce particular depictions, categorizations, analyses and hierarchies about the socio-spatial world portrayed as a patchwork of naturalized and mutually exclusive territorial entities, the states. The produced knowledge informs practices of statecraft and foreign policy making, which have been subjected to much critical scrutiny by workers in the area.

The concept of governmentality has figured in this work in at least two important roles. First, it has shifted the emphasis from the 'what' to 'how' in the analysis of states' geopolitical practices. Consequently, there is a growing understanding of the ways in which the states not only represent and intervene in domains they seek to govern, but also constitute the geopolitical reality as governable, thus fashioning also the conditions of the possibility of knowing the world more generally. Despite the emphasis on state practices, attention has also been paid to the production of geopolitical world descriptions by media and other non-state actors, with interest in their role in the constitution of popular geopolitics. This analysis has helped in rethinking the scales of geopolitics, as well as how the mentalities of geopolitical rule are constituted, disseminated and internalized through popular cultural products such as movies, newspapers, cartoons, and internet websites.

Second, the concept of governmentality has helped political geography analysis to broaden its conception of the organization and politics of space. Foucaultian-inspired studies have brought into focus new forms or aspects of spatiality, such as mobility, fluidity, distance shrinking networks, and the circulatory spaces of security. By analyzing processes such as the geography of statistics production or the ordering of space through cartographic techniques or urban house numbering this work has shown that governmentality is a technology of power that is used to govern contingency and chance inherent in the complex relationships between population and territory. Political geography's traditional concern with territoriality has not been pushed aside by the emphasis on governmentality. Instead the research has purported to show that only by means of a detailed and consistent knowledge of the territory and everything in it has the state been able to develop systems of government that can be characterized by the term governmentality. Security in this context means enabling normalization and requires that the state is capable of opening up and liberating the use of space in the name of the circulation of goods, people and wealth, rather than restricting and enclosing territory. Although circulation and passage require some regulation, in liberal society this should be minimal and largely dependent on self-regulation on the level of autonomous individuals and bodies.

Besides political geography, the concept of governmentality has surfaced in human geography research in areas such as the regulation of biological risks and the disorder of biological life through biotechnology, and the social production of nature through the intersection of scientific, governmental and capitalist production. New areas of research also include urban government and planning practices. Specific attention has been paid to issues such as the role of the institutional spaces of statistics and strategic interdependencies in the construction of local-national governmental relationships.

Growing interest has also been directed to the spatiality's of the management of large scale socio-spatial processes (e.g. traffic systems or the public health). This work has shown that practices of governmentality may change in pace with the introduction of new information technologies. For example, governmentality based on information capture integrates data gathering mechanisms with the systems that they seek to monitor and regulate, and thus actively influence the experience of the practitioners involved. Automated management has the capacity to produce socio-spatial processes and formations that stretch across various scales from the micro-setting of components, through to operative environments, broader technological infrastructure, systemic assemblage and so on. This research has also charted the ways in which expertise inextricably linked to governmentality gets institutionalized, produced and embodied, and moreover, what spatial configurations the processes involve. Attention has been paid especially to the spaces in and through which health is problematised either in terms of knowledge production, education, therapy, or treatment. Governmentality framework has helped to consider for example how therapeutic sites shape individuals' health-related conduct by producing them as governable subjects.

## **Critiques**

The growing interest in governmentality studies shows that the analytical potential of the concept has not been exhausted. However, arising from heterogeneous works by Michel Foucault and subsequent scholarship, the relevance of the concept of governmentality has been challenged in the social sciences and human geography. Among the key debated issues is the historical sequence by which governmentality emerged as part of the democratic liberalization of Western societies. While Foucault contends that governmentality is a contingent phenomenon that belongs to Western modernity, authors such as Giorgio Agamben see it rather as an ontological grounding of modernity, which, thus, is much more deeply implicated in every aspect of the origin and development of Western political rationality as such.

A related contested issue is the balancing in Foucault's thought between territory and population as the nexus of modern governmental rationality. While some authors accept that population rather than territory is

the driving force in the governmentalization of the state, others argue that this represents a misleading ontological distinction between territory and population.

Yet another question that has provoked criticism is the difficulty that studies of governmentality have in accounting for resistance to the norms and rules of neoliberalism. It is claimed that emphasis on the technologies of self leads to early dismissal of the proactive role that socio-cultural change may play in shaping formal practices of politics, policy, and administration. Yet, freedom to govern and control may also afford subjects possibilities to resist and modify those norms and rules that are generated by governmental technologies of power. Critique notwithstanding, it seems that the validity of the concept of governmentality for understanding power relations in contemporary neoliberal societies has gained broad acceptance.

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