



The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality

Michel Foucault (Editor) , Graham Burchell (Editor) , Colin Gordon (Editor) , Peter Miller (Editor)

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With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault

Based on Michel Foucault's 1978 and 1979 lectures at the Collège de France on governmental rationalities and his 1977 interview regarding his work on imprisonment, this volume is the long-awaited sequel to *Power/Knowledge*. In these lectures, Foucault examines the art or activity of government both in its present form and within a historical perspective as well as the different ways governmentality has been made thinkable and practicable.

Foucault's thoughts on political discourse and governmentality are supplemented by the essays of internationally renowned scholars. United by the common influence of Foucault's approach, they explore the many modern manifestations of government: the reason of state, police, liberalism, security, social economy, insurance, solidarity, welfare, risk management, and more. The central theme is that the object and the activity of government are not instinctive and natural things, but things that have been invented and learned.

The Foucault Effect analyzes the thought behind practices of government and argues that criticism represents a true force for change in attitudes and actions, and that extending the limits of some practices allows the invention of others. This unique and extraordinarily useful collection of articles and primary materials will open the way for a whole new set of discussions of the work of Michel Foucault as well as the status of liberalism, social policy, and insurance.

The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality Details

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From Reader Review *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* for online ebook

Garrett Hoffman says

Good overview of governmentality and a lot of Foucault's other work. Some authors in this anthology I think may have stretched some of his ideas too far, though. But, what do I know?

Trevor says

One of the things a friend of mine at work says you need to do if you are to become an academic is to be cited a lot. And one way to get cited a lot is to come up with a new word that people find hard to avoid using. Because if they need to use it they are going to have to cite your work and the new maxim in academia (taking over from publish or perish) is be visible or vanish. Foucault was 'ahead of the curve' here coming up with governmentality.

Governmentality means a lot of different things, he actually lists three on pages 102-3 here. But basically he means by governmentality 'the state'. So, other than 'because that is what philosophers do' why would you take a one syllable word like state and change it into a six syllable word? Well, mostly because Foucault is also arguing that 'the state' doesn't really exist. What really exists is a series of institutions interested in the exercise of power – particularly economic power; that is, power of people and their relationships with things – in ways that are determined by administrative processes. What he means is power in the sense of an acceptance by the governed of the right and justice of the law – rather than power as an exercise of violence.

Foucault looks at issues like this from a distinctively historical perspective. That is, he looks at when people started talking about these issues and what it was they thought was important. Then he traces what was said elsewhere and later about the same issues and how what was said changed. But most importantly, he is looking for how these ideas are manifest in the world. What is it that is actually done by people? It is in this lived experience that the truth of our ideas makes sense and gains power. This is why Foucault doesn't really believe in the state – the state, to Foucault, is a kind of abstraction. It implies a sort of meta-body, not unlike those notions of consciousness that ultimately depend on a kind of homunculus – a little man that orchestrates the various separate faculties of human consciousness. Foucault's point is that there is no overarching state, there is just the various instruments and actions of government - the state is an abstraction from these actions.

Foucault sees the development of government after Feudalism as coming out of notions of a ruler over a territory, or rather, over the actions that take place in a territory, towards one concerned with the administration of a population. This is a change in metaphor for governance as well as a change in role. Prior to governance becoming about administration the defining metaphor of the governed was the family. And the point of the role of the sovereign was to sustain their rule – essentially as the head of the family. Foucault discusses this with reference to the changing criticism of *The Prince* by Machiavelli. The Prince was to gain power and to keep power. The society the Prince controlled was comparable to a family, with the Prince at the head, and then an identity was supposed to exist between the Prince's will, the law and the duty of the citizen to embody that unity.

But with the Eighteenth Century came other tools for constructing notions of government – and by this

Foucault doesn't mean instruments of war, but rather literally instruments of government. First and foremost, he is talking about statistics. It is with the growth of this science (and notice it isn't an accident that 'statistics' starts with 'state') that the citizenry stops being comparable to a sort of family and instead becomes a population. Statistics give a means by which to move beyond concrete ideas of the roles of citizens towards more abstract understandings. That is, categories can be created for classes of people and it now becomes the task of the ruler not so much to enforce the law on these people, but to find ways to ensure this population lives out 'the best interests' of the whole population. Government, then, becomes directed at administration and administration is only possible on the basis of 'facts'. And those 'facts' are inconceivable without ways of statistically rendering people and things in ways that makes clear their relationships. Welfare, then, is no longer about the happy functioning of the family of the state, it is a measureable improvement in the wellbeing of the population – and that can only be understood on the basis of statistics that are defined, collected and analysed.

This book is not all Foucault – in fact, only three of the chapters are actually written by him – the rest of the book is a series of scholars using his methods to work through issues concerned with governmentality. There is a kind of history of statistics in one chapter – as you see already, this is particularly important. There is a history of the idea of risk and therefore also of insurance – I think this was the most interesting chapter in the book and I would strongly recommend reading this if nothing else here. Risk and insurance present a move away from the state of law, in a sense. Under a legal system, if something goes wrong it is someone's fault – and so, compensation, if it is to be paid, needs to be decided on the basis of a complex argument focused on attributable blame. In a class society this also implies workers, for instance, seeking compensation for the bad things that happen to them from their employers. This is a kind of child, parent relationship.

But that isn't what we do with risk. Risk comes about from the movement mentioned earlier of society moving to statistics and therefore administration. Tell an insurance assessor your age, occupation, address, smoking status and so on and they will be able to tell you (not when you will actually die) the level of risk you have of a whole range of risk factors. This is the law of large numbers – figure out the natural rates of accidents that occur in any population and then rather than having to worry about blame (and so, therefore also the law) you can encourage everyone to insure themselves against the abstract, but known rates of occurrence of those risks. Insurance moves the debate from who is in the wrong, to what is the proper compensation for a risk that is realised and therefore how much a population needs to pay as individuals to cover themselves from that risk.

This moves people in the direction those in power are always interested in moving people – away from them having interests join them as a group, to interests that are defined by themselves acting as individuals. And better still, you can also increase risks in ways you can't increase other kinds of production. As an emotional response, the sense (or fear, rather) of the risk of a certain occurrence improves the profitability of certain kinds of insurance, however tenuously that fear is related to likelihood. Terrorism anyone?

Governmentality, then, is realised in a lots of different ways, but chief amongst all of these is the idea of us becoming statistics. There is a wonderful example given of a process in France where women and their children are required to attend maternal health clinics. They are asked a series of questions related to marital status, where they are living, level of income, mental state and ethnicity and so on. On the basis of a set of correlations already decided from analysis of the whole population, the answers the mothers give trigger interventions and responses. The mother hasn't actually done anything yet, but on the basis of this assessment and a series of statistical correlations there is a state intervention as prevention. The state once only acted after the fact – you had to do something wrong before you were punished. Now, it isn't about 'punishment' necessarily, but rather ensuring you respond within prescribed and acceptable ranges of behaviour. It is about changing the future, rather than punishing the past.

I found this a fascinating read – the introduction is particularly useful. But the article called Governmentality, a lecture by Foucault, is well worth a close read. Foucault often receives a hard time from people. They say he is insanely difficult to read and a complete relativist. But he is often remarkably clear and easy to read. He is also interested in how structures come into being, their history and their purposes. He is not an irrationalist or an eclecticist either, even if he borrows heavily from Nietzsche, who is both of these things. Where Nietzsche is all madness, Foucault still allows method. If you are not likely to read all of this, I can recommend the four chapters I've highlighted in this review as particularly reading for the guts of what Foucault means by governmentality.

Sam Grace says

Pete says that the introduction is a must-read and a good summary of what's to come.

Joshua says

A MUST READ! Using an amalgam of M.F's work on "GovernMentality", emphasized from his lectures (now published) and framed by "Foufaultian" acolytes and, in particular, input from those who knew the work and man well, it is a useful discourse applicable today. Where will your schema take you?

Yue Zhao says

Great book. It analyzed the global forest governance till 2006. It gave clear overview of the existing actors, regime, instruments in this field. It's a provide a comprehensive knowledge structure for junior researchers.

Michael Schadinger says

Want to add depth and sophistication to your understanding of liberalism? Need to understand the difference between classical liberalism and neoliberalism? This book is a companion to Foucault's lecture series titled, "Birth of Biopolitics." Read both. There is something for everyone in this collection of essays, which ranges from topics of insurance to criminal law to statistics. Foucault and his protégés discuss liberalism in terms of the techniques of "governmentality" that emerge in liberal regimes. A must read for political scientists.
