



International Relations

Governmentality

Professor Ivan Neumann:

So in order to understand where governmentality comes from, we have to look at how Michel Foucault evolved this perspective. He talked about three basic merits of power. One kind of power has always been around, which is the game between individuals.

A wants to do that. B wants to do that. And you fight, and you do one of the things. I'm a married man, so this occurs all on a daily basis. The wife wants to go for a walk. I want to play tennis. And then we discuss what to do. And sometimes she wins, sometimes I win. When Foucault says that power is everywhere in everyday life, that's what he means, this form of power.

But then the early Foucault was doing work on another form of power that he called discipline, which is the kind of power you find in prisons, at the assembly line, even in hospitals and in boarding schools, where the situation is so tightly set up that it is no game. You have no game to play. You can resist, and you can do stuff, but it won't change the situation. You are being disciplined in the sense that you have been made into a docile body. You can do fairly little.

But that's not the end of the story. There is a third form of power, governmentality, which is radically different from discipline because it starts not with having people under your thumb, but having people as acting individuals and trying to orchestrate the way they think by suggesting to them over the long haul, socialising them into thinking that this is the natural thing to do. And it is that form of power that we are going to talk about today, the conduct of conduct as Foucault puts it, the orchestration of action, the indirect way of making people do what they would not otherwise have done.

Think about bringing up a child, for example. The entire idea is that the child should do what you want that child to do even when you're not there. So you inculcate a number of different ideas on what to do, what not to do. And after a while, once you've gone through this hundreds of times, you trust her to say thank you when she is being given something even when you're not there. That's governmentality. And for Foucault, that is a very important part of modern political life, that running societies will be done in that way.

So, since governmentality has hatched to understand early modern Europe, modern Europe, postmodern Europe, it has an affinity to liberalism, because liberalism is keen on looking at how free will is supposed to be the key theme of political life, that the good life is the life of the

free will and the free individual. Now, if you compare that to the governmentality perspective, governmentality analyses how that free will was made.

Let's start with Rousseau, who says how come that people are born free but are everywhere in chains? Well, look at the presupposition. People are born free. This is not true. I have been in loco parentis for a number of kids. They are not born free. They are born as little things that need help 24 hours a day. And we care for them. And we mould them. And we make them good citizens.

So their free will is basically the result of how we teach them. And we here would not only be parents. It would be society at large. So you can be for or against free will, and you can see it as a good thing or a bad thing. I'm rather partial to liberalism myself, but it's not the natural thing.

Free will is anything but free. Free will is a socially determined thing. And governmentality is able to demonstrate the specific parts of and techniques of producing that free will, if you like. So in that sense, governmentality is not an easy thing for liberals to deal with, because it takes what they think of as the key political theme and demonstrates that it's infused with power. And liberals don't like that, just like liberals don't like to be reminded that most people who have been living under liberal regimes have been unfree, slaves, colonials, women, children.

In most textbooks and most approaches to the discipline, post-structuralism and realism are looked at as two very different things. And I never quite understood that, because post-structuralists start from power realism. Post-structuralists are very, should we say, realists about the importance and even predominance of power. It's not that power is everything, but it is that power comes from everywhere.

And therefore we have to start analyses of social life by looking at power. But this whole idea that there are people outside power, as it were, that we could take, say, the American president or a mafia boss and say that they are the aide that makes all the rest of us do what we do is mistaken, simply because these people also incite a mentality, incite a specific world perspective.

So the idea is to analyse that perspective and see how it supports not only those who are being led but also the leaders, because they are in the throes of specific ways of thinking. So this whole idea that what is being done by powers that be is simply their own will and their own power is mistaken, because there is something about the, should we say, the bandwidth, the book ends, of a certain way of thinking about the world that gives you the leeway to do this or to do that. And this is one of the dramas of power.

Foucault was primarily interested in how this works within states as part of a state building project. Now, in an international relations setting, the key is to look at this in the realm

between states and in the transnational realm, global if you like. And the basic idea there is that we seem to have some kind of, should we say, cushion internationally.

So some kind of dense network of interaction between people begins to look like a global society. And how are states trying to regulate and govern the people who are making up that dense knot, if you like, that is global society. And then the governmentality perspective can be used.

Now, one thing one should always also of theoretical perspective is its area of validity. Where can it be used? Where in time and space can it be used? Because it is not the case that a theory can be effortlessly applied to any place in space and time. And the governmentality perspective was specifically evolved to understand politics in early modern, and modern, and I would add postmodern Europe. It has as its historical precondition the existence of a society, which means a group of people that can act relatively independently of the state and that the state will want to govern in some way independently.

Now, that's not necessarily the situation all over the globe as we speak. There is such a thing as a strong society. As a Scandinavian, I would say that Scandinavian societies are strong simply because they have the power to hit back when people try to govern them. They don't necessarily do it, because they are-- well, governmentality has worked swimmingly in Scandinavia.

But if you look at somewhere like Guinea-Bissau, for example, the situation would be different. There would not be the same action capacity on behalf of society, which means that analysing what's going on in terms of governmentality may not be as easy. However, and this is key to an IR scholar, when these states and these other actors meet in transnational pockets, the West sets the tone. The West equals the playing field, which means that the West will try and avail itself of governmentalities so the governmentality perspective is warranted.

So if you ask how those book ends have been changed, what people can and cannot do in international relations, I think a key example would be to do with sovereignty. Sovereignty is usually taught as the game in international relations. But if you look at how sovereign states have to answer to international economic organisations like the World Bank, what is frequently happening now is that the World Bank has evolved forms where they have indicators for good governance.

So when they meet the minister of finance or even the head of state from that particular lending country, they would go through and ask, so how are you scoring on this indicator for global good governance? And what are you doing on that indicator? What about the women? What about the children, et cetera. How many schools?

And the minister of finance will have to answer these questions. And that's the exchange.

That does not strike me as a sovereign talking or even a representative of a sovereign state

talking. This is the pupil answering to his teachers. So governmentality trumps sovereignty in the sense that there is a layer of liberal standards being superimposed on sovereignty. So sovereignty is not the only game in town. Sometimes it's not even the most important game in town. And this changes the way states work, both the states that are at the receiving end of governmentality but also the states that are exerting governmentality.