

SECURITY TERRITORY AND POPULATION PART 5: GOVERNMENTALITY AND INTRODUCTION TO FOUCAULT'S METHOD

In the fourth lecture in *Security, Territory and Population*, Michel Foucault introduces the idea of governmentality. He begins this lecture with a discussion of the change in the idea of governing that began in the 16th Century, when writers of the day began saying that the word covers a number of different relationships.

There is the problem of government of oneself.... There was of course the problem of the government of souls and of conduct, which was, of course, the problem of Catholic or Protestant pastoral doctrine. There is the problem of the government of children, with the emergence and of the great problematic of pedagogy in the sixteenth century. And then, perhaps only the last of these problems, there is that of the government of the state by the prince. How to govern oneself, how best to be governed, by whom should we accept to be governed, how to be the best possible governor?

Foucault sees these issues as the intersection of two trends, the breakup of feudalism and its gradual replacement by a centralized state; and the dispersion of religious belief brought on by the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. Foucault says that the leading text is Machiavelli's *The Prince*, both for its own ideas and for the range of texts disputing it. He says that the central idea of *The Prince* is that the Prince's position as sovereign is external to his principality. He took the position by force,

or by connivance with others, and his central object is retaining his power, protecting it both from external and internal threats.

Those reacting to Machiavelli emphasized the art of governing, as opposed to the art of neutralizing opposition. They observe that many people are in a position of governing, the father with the family, the teacher with the child, the master with the apprentice or employee, the judge, the mayor, the superior in a convent. Foucault points to a typology of government identified in the 16th Century by the French writer La Mothe Le Vayer. There are three levels of government, the governance of the self, which is the subject of morality; the governance of the family, which becomes identified with the economy; and the governance of the state.

These levels of governance bear on each other. If the self is well-governed, then the family is well-governed, and the state will be well-governed. If the State is well-governed, that leads to the good governance of the family and of the self. Foucault says that in this idealized arrangement the idea of the economy as a principle object of government begins to emerge. He traces this development through the 18th and 19th Centuries as the idea of the economy begins to take on the meaning it has today.

Foucault points to another writer, Guillaume de La Perriere, who wrote "Government is the right disposition of things arranged so as to lead to a suitable end." This means first that governors act primarily on things, and not specifically on people. A suitable end is not necessarily the best end, but one that is achievable. The important point to Foucault is that government has to do with the relations between people and things, and the steps those who govern take with respect to those relationships.

There is a good bit more of this kind of exegesis of texts on the art of governance from the 16th to the late 18th Centuries, all in a

similar vein. But for this theory to come into full practice, various obstacles had to be removed, and the apparatuses of security had to be developed more thoroughly. One of the barriers was the idea of sovereignty.

But we could also say that it is thanks to the perception of the specific problems of the population and the isolation of that level of reality that we call the economy, that it was possible to think, reflect and calculate the problem of government outside the juridical framework of sovereignty.

Another important factor was that the model of the economy should be the family. Foucault says that as the focus of government became the population and not the individual subject, the family lost its status as the model and became simply an element of the population, one useful for achieving some of the goals of the government.

And then, of course, there was the need to develop better understandings of the world and thus better apparatuses of security.

Finally we get to the definition of governmentality. Foucault says that it means three things.

1. "...[T]he ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument."
2. The pre-eminence of government as the dominant form of power, which has led to the development of a series of specific apparatuses ... and the development of knowledges."
3. The process by which the state of law in the Middle Ages was transformed into what Foucault

calls the security state, the form of government we have in the West today.

Governmentality becomes the focus of the rest of the lectures.

Commentary

1. I think the first definition is directly useful for understanding what Foucault is driving at. If so, why doesn't he use a term like "art of government" or "governmental practice"? That leads me to think that the idea of mentality is important. There is a mental state that is conducive to the application of the security regime, both for the governor and for the governed. In the next lectures we take up the question of what that mentality might be.

2. In the second definition, Foucault uses the terms "knowledges" and "apparatuses". Foucault's method is described briefly in Section 4.3 of this article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

...[S]ystems of thought and knowledge (epistemes or discursive formations, in Foucault's terminology) are governed by rules, beyond those of grammar and logic, that operate beneath the consciousness of individual subjects and define a system of conceptual possibilities that determines the boundaries of thought in a given domain and period.

There is much more at the link. Apparatus is described here.

Foucault generally uses this term to indicate the various institutional, physical and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures, which enhance and maintain the exercise of power within the social body.

From the text, I would have described it as the institutional and operational forms of

knowledges in a specific society, so the difference is the addition of last phrase relating to exercise of power. To that end, we get this description of “power-knowledge”

One of the most important features of Foucault’s view is that mechanisms of power produce different types of knowledge which collate information on people’s activities and existence. The knowledge gathered in this way further reinforces exercises of power.

That explains his method of looking at old texts. He is trying to see the forms that knowledge took in prior times as a way of understanding the past and then teasing out the changes in ideas from time to time. It helps to see this because the lack of empirical data in the text might put off those people who see “facts” as the only form of knowledge.

3. Knowledges change from time to time, and the first part of Foucault’s method is to understand those changes; that’s the historical or archeological part. Why they change is the more difficult problem. Foucault takes that up under the term genealogy. The Stanford site has this:

Foucault intended the term “genealogy” to evoke Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals, particularly with its suggestion of complex, mundane, inglorious origins—in no way part of any grand scheme of progressive history. The point of a genealogical analysis is to show that a given system of thought (itself uncovered in its essential structures by archaeology, which therefore remains part of Foucault’s historiography) was the result of contingent turns of history, not the outcome of rationally inevitable trends.

As a simple example, for a number of years, Keynesianism was the form of knowledge about the

economy. Then it was replaced by neoliberalism. That's the historical situation as I see it today. Why it changed, the genealogy of that change, is open to discussion. One strand of the discussion can be found in Philip Mirowski's *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go To Waste*.

4. Foucault suggests that the family as a model for the economy had to be overcome and replaced by operations on the population as a whole. As we know, the idea of the family as model for both government and for government of the economy as a whole has not died out, but like most bad ideas will never die.