Of 'strange synergies' and 'murky ferments': governance discourse and the taming of the Foucault effect

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Abstract

The paper explores the alleged links between contemporary understandings and uses of 'governance' and Foucault's ideas. Scholars working in quite diverse disciplines have asserted, with increasing frequency, their debt to Foucault for the idea of 'governance'. However, it is doubtful that Foucault ever used the word 'governance', or that he would have accepted having his ideas grouped under that term. This paper argues that positing Foucault as an intellectual progenitor of the concept of 'governance' conflates two quite different and incompatible discourses. The political effect is to undermine the emancipatory impulse embedded within Foucault's political philosophy. In effect, this serves to reposition him within a framework that de-radicalises his intellectual legacy and renders him safe for mainstream scholarship.

Introduction

Foucault's legacy of 'strange synergies' risks being de-radicalised by being fused with the 'murky ferments' of contemporary governance discourse. Many scholars, including those self-described as Foucauldians, treat 'Foucault' as a key source for contemporary understandings of the concept of 'governance'. Thus Beresford (2003, p. 83), Bernauer and Rasmussen (1988), Brass (2000, p. 315), Doornbos (2003), Hunter (1994), Hunt and Wickham (1994), Ingram (1994), Mayntz (1993), Mercer (2002, pp. 316–317) and Roberts (2000, pp. 275–276) explicitly name Foucault as their source. Some who owe varying intellectual debts to Foucault use the term without necessarily attributing it directly to Foucault (e.g. Bang 2003a, 2003b; Cruickshank 1993; Dean 1999, 1994; Gordon 1986; Hindess 1996; Hunter 1994; Rose 1999, 1996; Rose & Miller 1998; Stenson 1998; Valentine 2002). At a further remove, others suggest, but do not demonstrate, a connection: thus Marinetto (2003, p. 598) that Foucault's ideas have 'an intellectual affinity with governance theory', and Dean (2003, p. 118) that there is some warrant for the idea that Foucault 'perhaps anticipated our current concern with governance'. By dint of repetition, a 'governance' Foucault is created.

Yet within the broad, multi-disciplinary literature on 'governance', there is only one work (Edwards 1999, p. 10) that directly quotes Foucault using the word 'governance', and this would appear to be a misquotation. In Edwards' quotation from the 1991 version of *On governmentality* (a newer translation of Foucault 1979a), the phrase 'a form of governance and control' replaces 'a form of surveillance and control' (Foucault 1991, p. 92). In Foucault 1979a (p. 10) the phrase was rendered 'a form of surveillance, of control'. In the two French versions of the lecture (Foucault 2001, p. 642 and 2004, p. 98) the phrase is 'une forme de surveillance, de contrôle', with the only difference being a minor textual emendation of no consequence for the present discussion. In the 2007 translation of the 1977–78 lectures on *Security, territory and population* the passage is rendered '[exercising] surveillance and control', with a footnote indicating that 'exercising' was an editorial emendation for Foucault's word 'having' (Foucault 2007, p. 95). The 1979a version of the phrase followed the original French versions, whereas the 1991 and 2007 versions used 'surveillance and control'. This is a subtle difference but not sufficient to suggest that some sense of the contemporary notion of 'governance' lurks within.

A clear example of Foucault scholars putting the seal of governance on Foucault is to be found in Bernauer and Rasmussen, appositely titled *The final Foucault*. In their biographical chronology at the end of their edited collection, their entry under 1983 reads: 'Foucault's teaching concentrates on the theme of the governance of the self and of truth-telling (*parrhesia*) as a political virtue' (Bernauer & Rasmussen 1988, p. 165). Given that throughout the 'Chronology' they inserted comments or quotations from Foucault's work to illustrate significant points in the development of his thought it is reasonable to conclude that the 'concentrat[ion] on the theme of governance of the self' was their interpretation of Foucault's shift of focus to 'the care of the self'. There is no textual evidence offered that this was Foucault's own interpretation, rather it is simply their unsupported interpretation. There is no doubt that Foucault was certainly concerned with the self and the means to fashion its being in the world. Much of his work involved identifying and analysing the complex ways in which disciplinary regimes/practices shaped individuals and their subjectivities while simultaneously analysing the government of populations through the management of their conduct as individuals and groups (Foucault 2007; 1984; 1979a; 1979b). Underpinning this was a desire to avoid the traps that he saw as inherent in still dominant modernist political theories that emerged out of the 'strange synergies' of the Enlightenment ferment. Much of Foucault's work can be seen as an attempt to go beyond these conceptions to develop an understanding of power that would inform an emancipatory politics, one that would in effect 'cut off the king's head' (Foucault 1986, p. 121).

From the early 1970s Foucault grounded his conception of power in terms of a bio-political re-configuration of social and political practices (2008; 2007; 1984). The word that he coined to help him develop and explore these bio-political developments was 'governmentality', a term that he thought better captured the shifts in what he took to be the 'art of governing', the way in which one 'conducts the conduct of men' (2008; 2007; 1986; 1979a). Governmentality for Foucault was about the specific understandings and practices that those empowered to govern brought to bear on any given problem of political rule. The joining up of the idea of government with modes of thought (i.e. mentalities) provided Foucault with what he regarded as a 'method of decipherment', an 'analytical grid' (Foucault 2008, p. 186) with which he could uncover and analyse the specific and dominant rationalities of governing, and the technologies that enabled such rationalities to be made real. In order to achieve this understanding, however, Foucault argued that the idea of 'government' needed to

be returned to an older, more expansive meaning that would take into account the guiding of conduct in spheres other than the so-called political – such as 'the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick' (Foucault 2007, pp. 96–97). For Foucault, identifying the political rationalities underpinning the various arts of governing was essential if one aimed to develop any form of oppositional politics capable of effective resistance.

Foucault's governmentality approach, 'a method of decipherment' for analysing the arts or techniques of governing, enabled him to challenge the view of resistance as singularly opposed to power in some binary manner, in which resistance says 'no' to power. He substituted for that widespread view a more nuanced relational account in which resistance was theorised as being intrinsic to the exercise of power. Foucault argued that 'when one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others', as government in the broadest sense, then one must of necessity include freedom (Foucault 1982, p. 790; 2000, p. 292). This meant that 'at the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom' (Foucault 1982, p. 790). The key here is Foucault's view of power (as distinct from domination) as a relationship that can only be exercised 'over free subjects' who, when 'faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized', have the capacity to choose from among the possibilities (p. 790). Insofar as government meant 'the conduct of conduct, relations of power (at least where human beings are involved) have to be conceived as operating over and between agents, as individual or collective subjects' (p. 790), who have greater or lesser capacities to choose or act, and in some fundamental sense they must be free.

Foucault did not deny that many relations of power were asymmetrically constructed, often to the detriment of individual subjects. Hence the problem was to understand both the specific form taken by particular asymmetrical power relations and the rationalities and techniques that made such relations possible. Rather than aiming 'to dissolve [power relations] in the utopia of completely transparent communication', Foucault urged the radical approach of developing practices of freedom, including the possibilities of resistance, that would 'allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible' (Foucault 2000, p. 298). Hence his subsequent concern with 'the care of the self', with theorising the capacity of subjects to form themselves in ways that would empower them to resist or refuse 'the type of

individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries' (Foucault 1982, p. 790) because the political rationality of the freedom embedded within most modernist political thought reproduced the very rationalities that give rise to and sustain oppressive behaviour in the first place. For Foucault the problem facing an emancipatory politics was to derive a logic of emancipation or a form of political reason that would not at the same time reproduce the logic or rationalities of oppression. Hence he developed his idea of 'governmentality', a 'method of decipherment', to enable him to call into question the commonly accepted understandings of the constitution and exercise of power (Foucault 2008; 2007; 2000; 1982), and his concern with the seemingly removed individualism inherent in his so-called ethical writings about the care of the self (Foucault 2000; 1990).

It might be objected that there are numerous instances in the history of ideas where specific words have post-dated the concepts that they have come to be accepted as naming. As Richter has argued, 'an individual or group may possess a concept without having a word by which to express it' (1995, p. 9). Thus one might argue that the term 'governance' names a Foucauldian analytics, even if Foucault himself was not aware of it. Secondly, it might also be objected that an older meaning of 'governance' as the 'conduct of life or business, mode of living; behaviour, demeanour', especially where it involves 'discreet or virtuous behaviour; wise self-command' (*OED*, 1989, p. 710) is quite consistent with Foucault's emphasis on care for the self. However, neither objection carries much weight. The various patterns of uses and meanings within the multiple strands of the governance literature would suggest that any resemblance between the conceptual field of the latter and that of Foucault might be superficial at best. Indeed, the resemblance is more a forced fusion than a natural identity. As for the comportment aspect, Foucault's emphasis on care of the self loses its political point if it is not understood as part of the conceptual field mapped by his work on governmentality. Finally, as Rose has pointed out, 'the ethos of analytics of governmentality is very different from that of sociologies of governance', and the principal difference is that governmentality studies have 'the power to open a space for critical thought' (1999, p. 19). This is not to say that governmentality studies have cornered the market on critical thought, or to deny that they might still bear traces of the 'utopian critique[s] of power' that they aimed to undermine (Hindess 1996, p. 156). Like many sociological accounts of governance, many governmental studies lack a sufficient degree of critique. Nonetheless, one of the key things separating Foucault's idea of 'governmentality' from the prevailing notions of 'governance' is this idea

of critique that informed Foucault's writing (cf Foucault 1997). It is also what helps demarcate the idea of 'governmentality' from that of 'governance'.

Contemporary attributions of 'governance' to Foucault thus are misplaced for several reasons. First, they assert a degree of commonality for discourses that may well have little else in common besides the use of the term 'governance'. Second, a careful analysis of the sources of attribution establish that Foucault did not use the term 'governance' as a distinct term in any of his published works. Nor did he use it indirectly as an un-named cluster of ideas that are now understood as 'governance'. Third, Foucault's governmentality discourse had within it an agenda that was not simply about describing surveillance and control, and the rationalities, programs or methods through which they might be manifested. That was only part of the governmentality story. The more significant and radical part concerned developing an understanding of those methods so that appropriate knowledge/practices could be pursued that would enable individuals to refashion themselves in ways that would not reproduce 'the type of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries' (Foucault 1982, p. 790). This was the point of his theory of governmentality, 'strange synergies' of knowledges, theoretical objectives and practices that were distinct from those commonly to be found within the 'murky ferments' of contemporary discourses of 'governance'.

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