State and Society module: Foucault and the Development of Governmentality

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Introduction
Foucault’s studies of the rise of governmentality operate very differently to liberal political theory, which assumes the state and society as interconnected but separate realms. Foucault analyses the changing relationship between the two and how both the interconnection and the separation have changed historically. Perhaps this could be drawn out historically and logically by considering three forms of power – sovereign power, disciplinary power and governmental power or biopower – which crudely could be associated with the shifting understandings of governmental power under pre-modern, modern/liberal and neoliberal/contemporary regimes.

Governmentality
For Foucault power is a relation – both the subject/agent and its object/to be governed are co-constituted. (SMBD, 30) “The individual is not power’s opposite number; the individual is one of power’s first effects”. The state and the citizen are co-constituted differently in a modernist/liberal regime (of disciplinary power) and in a contemporary/neoliberal regime (of biopower). Different govern-mentalities operate in different ways by different means and constitute different objects of rule.

For example, pre-modern regimes governed territories through taxing a proportion of produce/labour in the interests of the state elite; modernist governance constituted technical and scientific disciplinary approaches of social regulation and control - taxing, subsidising, categorising - from the ‘top-down’; neoliberal/contemporary governance constitute new objects of rule – child self-esteem, resilience, environmental awareness – indirectly managed through shaping the choice-making environment, from the ‘bottom-up’. This could be understood as the development of governmentality – a historical shift from the centralised power of the sovereign to the recognition of the need to engage with society. The rise of society, Foucault calls the ‘governmentalization’ of the state (STP, 109).

The ‘state’ and ‘society’ which are taken for granted in liberal political theory, constituting a centralised sovereign power representing the interests of the whole are problematised and historised in Foucault’s work – which looks at how power increasingly operates in and through society, firstly through the disciplinary roles of social institutions and secondly, through the indirect interventions into social processes. Power becomes a hidden or technical question rather than openly coercive and clearly seen as hierarchical and oppressive. The political purpose is to reveal the power operations behind social forms of consensus, control and regulation – not in a structural Marxist sense of revealing the dictatorship of the needs of capitalism but to reveal the contingencies/conflicts/difficulties of rationalising and cohering practices of social domination.
Thus domination - ‘the state’ - is not just a fact of life, to be taken for granted, but a shifting articulation of practices of regulation and control continually contested and in search of coherence, seeking to become more ‘real’ and less a product of arbitrary force and domination. Rather than Nietzsche’s ‘cold monster’ the state becomes embedded in a ‘governmentalized society’ and is ‘fragile and obsessive’ (STP, 248).

**Sovereign power**

The state initially emerges as alien and antagonist to society. Ruled by an hereditary aristocracy – sovereign power applied to the land and what it produced – it was not calculative or concerned with efficiency. The aristocracy ruled on the basis of conquest, legitimised by their separateness, the source of racial distinction. Politics is war by other means (vs Hobbes view that power not based on conquest but social contract). Direct oppressive domination and hierarchy (STP, 91; 243). Machiavelli provides advice to The Prince – a private ruler. For Foucault, this is pre-modern political theory, the sovereign/Prince is separate, above and against society, but Machiavelli does begin to distinguish governing as an art. This art then becomes separated from the external/personal needs of the Prince and becomes transformed into the art of promoting the collective, public or national interest with the birth of the politics of modernity.

Sovereign power is often seen as the formal juridical aspects of state/society relations – where society is governed by the will or volition of sovereign law. For Foucault – the end of the sovereign is internal to itself, whereas “the end of government is internal to the things it directs” (STP, 99), and cannot be achieved by means of the law.

**Disciplinary power**

A modernist/liberal form of power, based on the nation – not based on open racial domination but collectivity ruling itself - the rule of the bourgeoisie, emerges C17-18th – disciplinary power is often seen as applied to bodies and what they do. However the key points that Foucault makes are 1) that power operates in the social and economic sphere rather than through the formal hierarchy and privileges of aristocracy – the freedoms of circulation/trade/ science/efficiency hide disciplinary mechanisms; 2) this form of power is ‘liberal’ in the sense of directing and controlling in linear and total ways – it may operate in the social sphere but it is still crude and problematic.

Disciplinary power not based on laws but norms and normalization – sciences – eco-political power. The surveillance and organisation of mass production is a classic example of disciplinary power, as is the discipline of the school or the military. Disciplinary power operates in the social sphere and operates to train and regulate individuals.

Disciplinary power is often distinguished from biopower as disciplinary power refers to the ‘top-down’ and direct regulation of bodies, of individuals while biopower is seen to emerge with the knowledge of social statistics taking society as a collective, with birth rates, death rates etc, the science and politics of population management.
**Governmental/Biopolitical power**

Biopower concerns the knowledge and regulation of social processes according to their own inner laws. Not a narrow desire to direct and control individuals. (A good example is STP, 19) the planning of towns. Disciplinary approaches design a town from scratch as if empty or a blank slate aiming at total control, typical would be a numbered grid system to enable police and paramilitary access to restore order. A biopolitical approach is concerned with security in a different way, 1) it starts from what exists, the air, water, location etc and seeks to maximise the use of natural aspects, 2) it does not aim at perfection but minimising risks on basis of social probabilities, allowing circulation, adaptability etc. Crime would be localised, under control but not eradicated, rather managed or coped with. Typical would be open public spaces and mixed housing with green areas and cycle-ways.

The key to biopower is work on the milieu (STP, 20-21) – not on individuals but the social and natural/environmental processes – “governance at a distance” – (see ‘Nudge’/environmental choice-shaping). The behaviour of people is changed through indirectly working to influence the environment – operating on the milieu. Biopolitics works on the nature of things rather than directing top-down from the state or leaving to market price mechanisms. In this way, it is work on the pre-conditions that enable markets to work effectively, governing for markets. Where disciplinary power demarcates, “disciplines, concentrates, focuses, and encloses” (STP, 44), a biopolitical approach ‘tries to grasp things at the level of their nature...grasping them at the level of their effective reality” (STP, 46-7).

**Conclusion**

As governmentality develops, society or the population become no longer passive objects to be directed and disciplined, as in the famous example of the centralised surveillance of the panopticon (STP, 66) but as a naturalised subject in its own right. Society must be known, made accessible, and governed through scientific knowledge of social processes – governed not as the abstract ‘man’ of juridical rights but as known, concrete, plural subjects of governmental reasoning. Under modernity/liberalism we see the spread of the art of governance - of biopolitics - through the use of new techniques generating knowledge of society – statistics etc and the science of social administration. In contemporary times, the focus on social processes extended to deeper work on the milieu and the preconditions for markets and states to operate, which Foucault termed neoliberalism (BoB) and more recently (since the death of Foucault) to the realities of social and environmental processes which necessitate further forms of adaptation to the biopolitical ‘realities’ of social processes.

**Readings**

