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Governmentality

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Governmentality

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Governmentality is concerned with the art of government, or more specifically, how people are made governable through the examination of “the conduct of conduct.” It is used by social scientists to examine the operation of modern forms of government, particularly the neoliberal form typical to Western nation-states from the 18th century onward; however, it has been used to examine different forms of government, including Chinese communism. It was first developed [p. 395 ↓] by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault published his study of governmentality in 1979 and further developed it within a series of lectures given at the College de France between 1977 and his death in 1984.

Foucault discusses how from around the 16th century onwards an ever-growing number of treatises were published on the governance of the soul and the self, the family and the state. This occurred against an increasingly complex background of technological development, rapid social change, and political and intellectual upheaval. It should not be surprising to learn that major transformative historical events, such as the Reformation, the rise of modern science, the emergence of the Enlightenment period, as well as the concurrent development of industrial capitalism, together led to a growth in the writing of treatises that sought to answer fundamental problems of rule: how strictly, by whom, to what end, by what methods, and so on.

Foucault examines how over time these treatises focused more and more upon the idea that good governance had as its aim the common welfare and salvation of all. In short, it came to involve securing the security, health, welfare, and happiness of the population, as the population, en masse, rather than a distinct political elite, came to appear above all else as the ultimate end of government, Foucault notes that among social and cultural elites in Western nation-states notions of what constitutes good governance became increasingly tied into a liberalist conception of economics.

In short, the art of good governance increasingly became to be held to be economical, both fiscally and in its use of power. Classical liberalism emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries through the works of a variety of writers, including Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith, Thomas Locke, Jeremy Bentham, and Herbert Spencer. It is possible to identify at the center of classical liberalism the underlying concept of “possessive individualism.” Foucault notes that for these thinkers the individual and her

capabilities are held to prefigure the circumstance into which they are born. In short, their talents and who they are owe nothing to society, rather, they own themselves and they are morally and legally responsible for themselves and themselves alone.

They are naturally self-reliant and free from dependence on others. They only enter into relationships with others because others help them pursue their self-interests. According to this viewpoint, society is a series of market-based relations made between self-interested subjects who are actively pursuing their own interests. Only by recognizing and supporting this position politically and economically will the greatest happiness for the greatest number be achieved. In short, classical liberalism emerged as a critique of state reason that sought to set limits on state power. And it is the rise of this conception of what constitutes good governance that Foucault is concerned with examining as a particular type of governmentality, not least of all because it has been highly successful in the fields of economics and politics over the last 300 years.

Importantly, Foucault notes how the development of new forms of expertise that emerged during the 19th century as a result of the Enlightenment and industrialisation, what he refers to as “dubious human sciences,” such as psychology, medicine, and sociology, are tied up with this need to govern the population to ensure its betterment. This was because as industrialization continued apace an increasingly complex administrative and bureaucratic layer of government emerged from which it was possible to identify that the population possesses its own regularities, its own rate of deaths and diseases, its cycles of scarcity, and so on. Consequently, novel forms of expertise in the fields of public health hygiene, mental health, and mass surveillance emerged in concert with developing government policies and programs that were intimately involved in the construction of governable realms of social reality. Hence, the emergence of the modern professions of medicine, dentistry, nursing, social work and law, and their associated training and regulatory arrangements, are for Foucault an emergent aspect of the formation of a liberal form of governmentality that has as its target the population and its welfare, and which itself was synergistic with the growth of capitalist industrial economies and new forms of political ideology across Europe from the 19th century onward.

Foucault notes that two other forms of power, sovereignty and discipline, are tied up with the development of the power of a [p. 396 ↓] population-focused form of

governance, with its concern for the conduct of conduct, to enable the promotion of the security, health, wealth, and happiness of individual subject-citizens.

Sovereign “command” power is exercised over subjects through the juridical and executive arms of government. Historically, sovereign power is related to monarchical rule, with its executive mechanisms of constitutions, laws, and parliaments. Over time, these were made into more representative institutions through the development of democratic ideals, with allegiance to the monarch becoming transformed into allegiance to the rule of law. The power of discipline goes back to ancient religious, military, and educational practices. As Foucault noted in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), its expansion over the population during the 17th and 18th centuries is tied up with a growing administrative and institutional need to survey and make docile individual and collective bodies. Disciplined individuals have acquired habits of action and thought which enable them to act in appropriate and expected ways and to do so through the exercise of self-control. Without this, society could not function at a day-to-day level.

“Good governance” is about how to best align the sovereign power of command and productive disciplinary power in order to achieve the primary object of securing the health, wealth, and happiness of the population. This is why Foucault argues that the power of governance does not replace the power of discipline or sovereignty. Rather it recruits them. Indeed, Foucault argues that individuals need to see things not in terms of the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a disciplinary society and the subsequent replacement of a disciplinary society by a society of government. In reality, there is a triangle—sovereignty-discipline-government—that has as its primary target the population. It is this insight which underpins the power of the concept of governmentality to help individuals explore the history of the present in relation to how society is governed over time.

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See Also:

- [Criminology, Critical](#)
- [Foucault, Michel](#)

- [Legitimacy](#)
- [Natural Law](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Power](#)

Further Readings

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