

FOUCAULT NEWS

Governmentality studies observed

Interview with Colin Gordon by Aldo Avellaneda and Guillermo Vega
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Colin Gordon

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Colin Gordon is considered one of the key references of what, in a rather generic although recognizable way, has come to be called "governmentality studies". He has been involved since the late 1970s in various projects dealing with Foucault's work and has drawn attention since then to the particularities and advantages of Michel Foucault's study of "arts of government". Among his key works we can mention the editing, in 1980, of *Power/Knowledge* (one of the first compilations and translations in English of Foucault's work on power) and the co-editing in 1991 – with Graham Burchell and Peter Miller – of *The Foucault Effect* (TFE). He has also published over the last thirty years many articles and papers about the reception of Foucault in Britain, Foucault and law, the relation between Foucault and Weber, amongst other topics. And in so doing, he has become one of the most relevant contributors to the reception of Foucault in the Anglophone world.

During the second half of the last year we undertook, with some colleagues and friends, the reading and translation into Spanish of the well-known introductory chapter by Colin Gordon in *TFE*, "Governmental Rationality. An introduction" (published in [Revista Nuevo Itinerario](#) in September 2015). After we finished it, we decided to make contact with its author in order to discuss the possibilities of a Spanish edition. The interview we present below accompanies that translation and is the result of numerous emails we exchanged since February. Our main intention was to present the author's thoughts about a wide range of topics related to governmentality studies, although we've tried to focus particularly on its present situation and its analytical effectiveness.

We thank Colin Gordon for his friendly and continuing cooperation.

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A.V. For those who decide to immerse themselves in governmentality studies and look for some kind of continuation of the work of Foucault, your texts along with those of N. Rose, A. Barry, P. Miller, M. Dean, etc. represent some key resources. Mostly, they come from the eighties and nineties. What kind of vitality do you think this type of work still preserves, especially if one considers the field of dispersion of interests and problems in recent years? Is it possible to indicate some lines which characterize this dispersion?

C.G. I see a few tendencies that one can maybe identify. During the last decade it seems that, after producing some valuable and innovative work, a number of people who were promoting governmentality studies as a distinctive form of inquiry have moved on or begun to shift their interests elsewhere. On the other hand the publication of Foucault's lectures, combined with the crash of 2007-8 and its repercussions has stimulated a big new wave of interest particularly in Foucault's work on neoliberalism. And then there has been a widespread and sometime concerted effort to apply the notion of governmentality in postcolonial studies – outside the territories studied by Foucault himself or by scholars like Nikolas Rose.

One of the less noted features of the earlier governmentality studies school was actually the tendency to avoid discussing neoliberalism *per se* but to speak about something more general which Nikolas Rose (reusing a French government formula from the seventies) called 'advanced liberal' government – which could include the various kinds of New Democrat, New Labour and 'Third Way' approaches in the 1990s and since, which at that time many people hesitated to label as neoliberal. This was linked to a kind of partly conscious, partly overt choice to depoliticise the material (loosening the analytical connections between descriptions of governmental techniques and investigation of their associated political actors and strategies), something which of course has resulted in criticism. Some people see themselves as doing a new kind of political analysis where old forms of critique are inappropriate or disqualified; people's own ideas about the critical function of this kind of work can often seem unclear, and this may reflect either honest uncertainty, the detachment of the research project from any kind of political problematisation, or both. I gave in *The Foucault Effect* an overview of what Foucault had said about the German and American neoliberals (I omitted his interesting comments on the French version, and unfortunately others have subsequently done the same!) but at the time that didn't seem to stimulate people to go and research those schools and their impact.

Foucault already said himself in 1979 that people on the left tended to contemptuously demonise, dismiss and despise neoliberalism in a way that dispensed them from actually studying it. I just happened to reread last night the opening of Rancière's interview with Foucault in 1977, when his first question is whether the public furore about Solzenitsyn's book on the Gulag is being orchestrated by the forces of 'neoliberalism and neo-populism'! France at that time had a centre-right government which was avowedly neoliberal. West Germany had had governments of centre-right and centre-left since 1948 operating under the system of the social market. People tend nowadays to think it's a miracle of 'prescience' on Foucault's part that he looked at these things in 1979, but he didn't need to have the gift of prophesy. As Wendy Brown puts it in her latest book, he could have noticed what was happening just by reading the newspapers! The question is not so much why he noticed and paid attention, it is why others didn't and haven't, both then and for a very long time since. And so one finds that the people who are inconvenienced by that awkward fact still have to do some clever footwork while they are complimenting Foucault for his prescience. It would be interesting, for instance, to know the reasons (other than ignorance) why an influential Marxist history of neoliberalism like David Harvey's chooses to airbrush the decades before Thatcher and Reagan – exactly

at the point where ground breaking work was being done by Walpen, Plehwe, Mirowski and others, following Foucault, in mapping the crucial history of those earlier decades. It is the prolonged, complacent indigence of the New Left's response, or non-response to neoliberalism which now calls out for a critical historical analysis.

What is it about Foucault's analyses themselves that capture interest now, in the years since their full publication? I would say: firstly, scholars are finding that they have stood the test of time quite well as analyses – although of course they were far from being exhaustive. Secondly, they made a conscious choice not to treat the subject matter as a pure hate-object – and Foucault was certainly concerned quite explicitly to resist a leftist view of neoliberal West Germany as latently or tendentially neo-Nazi. And third, Foucault picks out themes in the German and American materials such as the individual-as-enterprise and the notion of human capital which seem to many people today to tell us the story of our contemporary condition.

A.V. In your piece of 2011 “Governmentality and genealogy of politics” you trace a line of work that looks for a continuity with what you consider is an unfinished project. There, you argued that

“... the history of governmentality which Foucault and others undertook enables, implies and demands an accompanying genealogy of politics, in the specific form of a genealogy of forms of political culture, conduct, sociability and subjectivity.”

Can you see this kind of Foucault effect in the development of some lines of historical sociology, history, political science, in the last years? What kind of works, analytical advances, perspectives coming from the social sciences or philosophy do you find it more interesting to dialogue with?

C.G. I have been finding that the notion of a genealogy of the political is something that people are finding increasingly interesting. As I said in the talk you quoted, I think this is an aspect in Foucault's later work, a theme which he touches on repeatedly, although without giving it particular prominence, in the lectures published in the last decade, which has not yet had the attention it merits. I also think a genealogy of the political is a useful way to approach the history of the present and to analyse some current problems. One of these, certainly in the UK, is a prevalent disdain and distrust for the “political class” and the democratic political process, accompanied by concerns that democracy or the political have been denatured or “hollowed out”, in response to which we see various attempts or projects or calls for political and democratic revitalisation. I think a genealogical approach to these themes might help us, as Foucault might have put it, to reproblematised some of these current beliefs and perceptions. When we start to look at exactly how the political has been hollowed out and by whom, we find ourselves of course very much back in the history of neoliberalism and its allied systems of thought – namely public choice theory; though this very important area is not one which Foucault happens to have addressed. (The essential reference on this is S.M. Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism* (2004)).

I think – as I know Foucault himself thought – that a lot of other contemporary work has, or could have, very productive synergies with his own. I have mentioned some of these over the years in my writings about Foucault – Albert Hirschman for example, J.G.A Pocock, Keith Baker, Donald Kelley, James Tully, Peter Brown. Foucault's collaborator Arlette Farge wrote a marvellous book, *Subversive Words*, on police surveillance of popular opinion in the *ancien régime*, which perfectly complements his work on governmentality. There has been a whole generation of geographers working with Foucault's concepts, a

whole generation of people in postcolonial studies, and some fine work on aspects of liberal governmentality by literary and social historians like Mary Poovey and Patrick Joyce and their co-workers.

The notion of genealogy of the political is there in the governmentality lectures, indeed it is already there in *Society Must be Defended*, and it comes up again, importantly, in *The Government of the Self and Others*. I discussed this a bit in some talks given in Sao Paulo called "Plato in Weimar". My suggestion is that Foucault identified not one but multiple births of politics, multiple historical sites where the political as public space, a form of life, a field of resistance or competition, and indeed a practice of government find their conditions of emergence, and that these multiple and serial geneses constitute the complex spaces in which we experience the political today. In some ways we maybe need to recover a partly lost understanding that Foucault's move to thematise governmentality was intended as an intervention in contemporary political culture. There is a continuing reflection on the political threaded through Foucault's later investigations which I am sure was intended to bring some resources to bear on understanding the fate and sense of the political today.

It's extremely important by the way not to limit ourselves here to what Foucault managed or had time to show – some of the other scholars I mentioned earlier bring in other, critical findings which may or may not be fully consistent with Foucault's analyses but which can certainly complement, and be complemented by them. It is absolutely essential to remember that Foucault's work was unfinished. It would be bold for anyone to think they could finish it, but it isn't prohibited to try to continue it.

A.V. In 1980, in your Afterword to *P&K*, you confronted the work of Foucault with what you called "Marxist paradoxes". It was necessary to show the singularity of his analytic approach in response to ways in which some Marxists social scientists had criticised it. It seems today that the relation Foucault–Marx doesn't occupy a relevant role, at least not in the way the Foucault-Neoliberalism does (as has been clearly explored in some recent publications).

What do you think could be the reasons for this shift in the controversies? Is there a shift after all? Beyond this, what kind of effectiveness do you think these polemics may have for analytical work?

C.G. There are some hints of a Marxist/post-Marxist revival in the air, more noticeably I think since the 2007/8 crash, and for obvious reasons – a little as though people believe or hope that the crash might reverse some of the sweeping ideological effects of the collapse of the USSR. Some of the new forms of militancy like Occupy and the theme of "the commons", and some of the thinkers people talk about – Agamben for instance – are fairly new; on the other hand some of the young people sound (and, unfortunately, behave) like faithful reproductions of the Marxist left in the seventies.

I think it's possible to be sceptical about whether Marx or Marxism has something new to say today, while also thinking we are short of effective ideas on the reform of the current capitalist order.

You may be referring in your question to recent debates and publicity about whether Foucault was too sympathetic to neoliberalism? I wrote about that in 1991 and I haven't changed my opinion. But of course the world has changed. Foucault was not a prophet like Nostradamus who predicts and explains everything that has happened to us since 1980. And it's always necessary to remind ourselves that he didn't describe everything that was happening even in the neoliberalism of his time – there are other important, highly influential figures and current like Coase, Buchanan, Stigler, Posner and others; there was Pinochet and the Chicago boys in Chile – some of which are now, rightly, getting more attention. And I think, rather as Foucault said about what he called state-phobia, and perhaps as he said about neoliberalism, one needs a critical analysis

of neoliberalism and its effects that doesn't homogenise it or credit it with supernatural demonic power.

A.V. It is well known and often repeated that the most powerful characteristic in Foucault's works is an *ethos*, that is to say, not a full-constructed theory but some principles of analysis like the famous supposition that the universals do not exist, the methodological scepticism, his very singular positivism (Veyne, Dean), the work with thought as something more than a locus of representation of reality etc. In your interview with Jacques Donzelot you briefly mentioned the various ways in which this had been done (Miller on management, Rabinow and Rose in biotechnology, Elden in space and geography, etc.)

But, what about the non-fixed diagrams that Foucault used? Or more accurately, the way he used them? We mean here by "diagram" (other terms can be used, of course) the type of mobile terrain in which Foucault situated his analysis (and which was part of them, of course). For example, do you still see (as you argued in *P&K*) the potential of the distinction among programs, technologies and strategies? Is there a necessity for governmentality studies to stabilize – in one way or another – an analytical diagram even without the pretension to elaborate an ahistorical theoretical framework?

C.G. That's hard to answer, and the question you are asking is also not 100% clear to me. I'm not sure there is much that one can, or should seek to stabilise. There is a question of intellectual conviction: is 'governmentality studies', as such, a viable, productive, creative intellectual project for the coming period? None of the people who took a lead on this subject ten or twenty years ago seems particularly convinced of this. Paul Rabinow thinks that what he calls the "British" governmentality school is boring. Maybe to be renewed it needs to be refreshed rather than stabilised. I would see two ways this might happen, and which could also be desirable. One is to take up what Foucault himself actually said he was doing, that is a *history of governmentality*. Very few historians have been involved in 'governmentality studies', and few (with some exceptions) of the people who have been involved have had a serious historical interest. That is something that may be changing – there have been a few missed opportunities, dialogues that might have been; history is largely a conservative profession but there are signs that a few more people at the progressive edge are able to 'get' Foucault. Back in 1991 what I tried to suggest is that Foucault's work along with that of his co-workers – now sometimes forgotten – one could begin to sketch a connected historical analysis in terms of governmentality, from early modernity to the present.

The other thing I think that is necessary in order for this to happen is to fix a lacuna that was allowed to develop – maybe even actively created – by Rose, Dean and others in governmentality studies, through a certain choice to avoid dialogue with histories of political thought and histories of the state. I think there was a sort of presentational manoeuvre that was sometimes performed during this period when Foucault's work wasn't fully available. And that was at the point where Foucault turns to look at the sovereign state, rather than, as he had been doing previously, at dispersed sites of micro-powers, and also to put a new stress on the interaction of power and freedom. Some of the careful students of his earlier work and of work by people like Donzelot and Castel turned around and said, ah, Foucault is only dealing with governmentality at the level of the sovereign state, whereas we have discovered that there are governmental powers of freedom beyond the state, and that is where the serious action is today! And this has played quite well of course in the neoliberal environment where lots of people are telling us that state is no longer where it's at. Except that, as people have also now noticed, neoliberalism also involves a strong state, and the neoliberal capture of the state is the great unrecognised fact behind these new,

dispersed networks of extra-state 'governance' which we nowadays hear so much about.

There has also at times, I think, seemed to be certain kind of tribal split between people who chose to highlight the notions of governmentality and biopolitics respectively. Some of the work themed on biopolitics (Agamben, Esposito, Negri-Hardt) indeed has little to do with whatever is distinctive about Foucault's work and also does not seem to be very productive except as doxology or theology; but the theme of biopolitics itself as Foucault himself understood is vastly important and should not be marginalised for any doctrinal reasons.

I think a lot of the best work that is being done and will be done that brings these themes together will be by smart people who have read their Foucault and then do their own work without necessarily arraying themselves under his banner. Or maybe they will quote him without saying so, as Foucault did with Marx! I would think for example of Stephen Kotkin's brilliant books on the USSR, its empire, and its collapse (Kotkin is an interesting case in another way because he was personally taught by Foucault for a brief period.)

A.V. At the end of your introduction to *TFE*, you pointed out as one of the two lines of Foucauldian optimism in relation to the governmentality theme the very notion of "governmental rationality", in the sense that it indicates that "the very possibility of an activity or way of governing can be conditional on the availability of a certain notion of its rationality..." (*TFE*, 48).

It seems to us that you are talking here about the stake in Foucault's choice in focussing an analysis precisely on a history of systems of thought, and we ask ourselves if this is not one of the points where he comes in for critique by sociologists, historians or political scientist, who may comprehend the development of historical phenomena through the interests of groups in confrontation, when not through a mathematical theory of rational choice, etc.

What kind of historical work do you find compatible today with the accent gave by Foucault to systems of thought and its work of problematisation, particularly in relation to political government?

C.G. I think Foucault's choice to focus on the history of systems of thought is significant and serious, especially as it continues to cut across contemporary disciplinary limits. Foucault explained, up to his last texts and interviews, how this approach connects to historical studies of practices and problematisations in which thought is stabilised and destabilised. At the same time his work is wholly consistent with, and often complementary to historical sociology as conceived by Weber and as pursued later by Foucault's friend Paul Veyne, among others. There are always issues – this relates also to your question about the diagram – about balancing the detailed studies of historical individualities with the tentative construction of large scale syntheses and hypotheses – such as stories about things like liberalism and neoliberalism, or even stories about the singularity of the West. Some people feel safer at the detailed level, working on descriptive fieldwork rather than on what are criticised as totalising and epochal levels of synthesis, but one should not assume that this is the only and sufficient way to work, even if it is the kind of work which can maybe nowadays more easily qualify for social science research funding.

A.V. You have worked to integrate some aspects of Foucault's framework to others of Weber's. Which are the characteristics of Weberian thought you consider interesting and in what sense it may function as a complement to Foucault?

C.G. I think there is still a lot to explore in two enormous areas where their work is jointly relevant: the religious antecedents of modernity, and the historical singularity of the West. The terms in which we look at both topics have changed

since Weber's time, but also now since Foucault's. Some of the work done a few decades ago by other people like Donald Kelley and Michael Walzer, as well as the recent and ongoing major work of historians of Christianity – Peter Brown, Diarmaid McCullough, Patrick Collinson, Alison Cameron, Steven Markus, Carole Straw, Abigail Firey, give us a whole range of new opportunities to take new bearings on these questions.

A.V. What can we say today to build on Foucault's ideas on the religious antecedents of modernity?

C.G. I have written a piece for the next issue of *Foucault Studies* on the 1980 lectures where I try to discuss this. There are a couple of remarks during his later interviews and discussions in America which I think are crucial: firstly, governmentality is the point of junction of techniques of power and techniques of the self, and secondly individuals need to have acquired a certain internal structure in order for them to be governable in a certain way. These ideas are enough to drive an immense agenda of ongoing research. One just needs to remember that Foucault isn't a theologian, not even a negative one. As people say in English, it's a free country (or in German, *die Meinungen sind frei*): people who want to convert Foucault into a political theologian (or integrate his analysis with a political theology) cannot be prohibited from conducting their experiments, but I don't see this myself as a promising way forward.

A.V. In *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault argued that utilitarianism shouldn't be seen only as a kind of philosophy or even an ideology. The importance of utilitarianism during the nineteenth century in relation to law or the economy was evident, not only by the key role of its proponents (Bentham or Sidgwick) but according to the connections that Foucault intended to establish between this and a historical rationality of government.

Nevertheless, by the middle of the 20th century utilitarianism seems to be the target of various critics, especially in the areas of Political Philosophy or Philosophy of Right (there are serious attacks made by Rawls, Dworkin, Posner, and defences such as those of Hart). In this regard, do you consider that we witnessed around the middle of the 20th century a kind of "crisis" of utilitarianism as a technology of government?

C.G. Foucault also links Bentham in *The Birth of Biopolitics* to the utilitarian calculus of the *agenda* and *non-agenda* of government, based on interest and utility. Partha Chatterjee, who has used some of Foucault's ideas in post-colonial studies, has recently reminded us of the role of Bentham's theory of comparative government in justifying British imperial rule in India. In the nineteenth and twentieth century Foucault shows the utilitarian formula of liberalism in (mainly victorious) competition with value-based theories of rights. One of the very interesting details in the 1980 lectures which we may have been slow to appreciate is that Foucault there warns against over reliance on utilitarian accounts of governmental rationality. He thinks there are factors involved which are neither utilitarian in power/knowledge terms, nor merely ideological – this extra supplementary factor, which is required to establish a legitimate sovereign power, is what he here called *alethurgy*, the manifestation of truth. I suspect that some of these critiques of 'utilitarianism' may be older than utilitarianism itself, and recent crises of governmentality have not always been just about utilitarianism. But if you consider practices like cost-benefit analyses of public policy or the new science of happiness, which William Davies discusses in his two recent books, you might conclude that utilitarianism is still very much part of contemporary governmentality.