

# **Post-Foucauldian Governmentality: what does it offer critical social policy analysis?**

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## **Abstract**

*This article considers the theoretical perspective of post-Foucauldian governmentality, especially the insights and challenges it poses for applied researchers within the critical social policy tradition. The article firstly examines the analytical strengths of this approach to understanding power and rule in contemporary society, before moving on to consider its limitations for social policy. It concludes by arguing that these insights can be retained, and some of the weaknesses overcome, by adopting a 'realist governmentality' approach (Stenson 2005, 2008). This advocates combining traditional discursive analysis with more ethnographic methods in order to render visible the concrete activity of governing, and unravel the messiness, complexity and unintended consequences involved in the struggles around subjectivity.*

**Keywords:** ethnography, Foucault, governing, power, resistance

## Introduction

Governmentality, derived from the work of Michel Foucault, has gained increasing popularity within social policy in the last decade. Although applied by different people in different ways, it has nonetheless been embraced as a valuable theoretical perspective for understanding power and rule across diverse fields such as crime (see for example, Garland 1997; Stenson 1998, 2005); education (see for example, Ball 1990; Morgan 2005); housing (see for example, Flint 2002, 2003; Cowan and McDermont 2006; Author 2007, 2008; Author and Cooper 2008); local government and public service reform (see for example, Newman 2001; Raco and Flint 2001; Clarke *et al* 2007); social welfare (see for example, Dean 1995, 1999; Cruikshank 1994, 1999; McDonald and Marston 2005); and social work (see for example, Baistow 1994/5; Lewis 2000).

Foucault's original essay on governmentality emerged from a lecture series that he presented at the College de France in the 1970s, which was concerned with tracing the historical shift in ways of thinking about and exercising power in certain societies (Elden 2007).<sup>1</sup> Here, Foucault highlights the emergence of a particular rationality of rule in early-modern Europe, in which the activity of government became separated from the self-preservation of the sovereign and redirected towards optimising the well-being of the population, hence making this population potentially more 'docile' and 'productive' (Foucault 2003a, 2003b). Crucially, he introduces the term "biopolitics" to draw attention to a mode of power, which operates through the administration of life itself – meaning bodies (both individually and collectively), their health, sanitation, procreation, mental and physical capacities and so forth (Foucault 2003c: 202). In doing so, Foucault illuminates an 'art of governing' that involves sets of practices and calculated strategies

that are both plural and immanent in the state. In addition, he articulates a mode of political government more concerned with the management of the population than the management of a territory per se (Jessop 2007).

Alongside this historically specific meaning a more generic definition and usage of the term governmentality has emerged. The insights and analyses advanced by secondary commentators within this field have been pivotal. A review of the literature highlights that this is a phenomenon that took off in the late 1990s, although a small number of authors were drawing influence from Foucault's work a little earlier (see for example, Gordon 1980; Rose and Miller 1992; Burchell 1993; Dean 1995). Importantly, these commentators have developed and utilised governmentality in a wider sense to draw attention to the 'how' of governing, by considering how we think about the nature and practice of government. This is illuminated through a focus on both the *discursive field* in which the exercise of power is rationalised – that is the space in which the problem of government is identified and solutions proposed; and the actual *interventionist practices* as manifest in specific programmes and techniques in which both individuals and groups are governed according to these aforementioned rationalities<sup>2</sup> (Lemke 2001). By emphasising the interconnection between thought and modes of governing – as manifest in the emergence of particular governmentalities (or mentalities of rule) – attention is directed to what authorities wanted to happen, in pursuit of what objectives and by what means, but without collapsing analysis solely on to the sovereign will of the ruler(s).

This article reviews both the strengths as well as the potential challenges that a governmentality perspective offers researchers within the critical social policy tradition.

To achieve this aim the next section of the paper considers the analytical insights of governmentality, particularly its challenge to the self-evidence of power; its broader definition of governing; its consideration of the productive nature of power; and its critical approach. In contrast, the section that follows explores the theoretical limitations of this perspective, focusing specifically on its disregard for empirical reality; its tendency to conflate thought and practice; its inattention to social difference; its neglect of the role of the state; and the adequacy of its politics of resistance. Many of these critiques reflect the way in which governmentality “is often deployed in ways that belie its original formulation”, and indeed, generate analyses which “are decidedly ‘un-Foucauldian’” (Rutherford 2007: 292). As such, they would be more accurately directed at secondary commentators who have interpreted and applied Foucault’s work, rather than his original analysis, which does provide the conceptual apparatus to engage with these issues. The paper concludes by arguing that the way forward for critical social policy is to reconfigure governmentality and adopt a ‘realist’ perspective (Stenson 2005, 2008). A welcome departure from the rather abstract and text centred approaches that have tended to dominate governmentality studies, this mixed-methods approach gives more attention to the empirical concerns of social policy by examining particular mentalities of rule in their local context. In doing so, it renders visible the actual effects of governing practices, and the behaviour and situated knowledge of subjugated populations. This sensitivity to time and place, coupled with a strong focus on the resistant ‘subject’, represents a return to, as opposed to a departure from, Foucault’s own thinking.

## **Analytical Insights and Explanatory Power**

As this section will explore, a governmentality perspective offers numerous critical insights for policy research. First, by highlighting how emergent mentalities of rule are made both practical and technical within specific organised practices for directing human conduct, this perspective illuminates how the governable subject is discursively constituted and produced through particular strategies, programmes and techniques.

Governmentality is fundamentally a political project – a way of both problematising life and seeking to act upon it, which identifies both a territory (i.e. social space) and means of intervention. As Rose and Miller emphasise, the intention is to link what is “desirable” with what can be made “possible” by translating political ambitions into something inevitably more practical (1992: 181-182). Yet these rationalities are not fixed or universal, but heterogeneous and historically contingent. They represent particular responses, to particular problems, at particular times. They also embody a moral dimension, for they seek to purport ‘truths’ about who we are or what we should be, whilst assuming that we can indeed direct human conduct towards particular ends (Rose 1999a). A governmental perspective is not however traditionally concerned with the ‘truth’ or ‘falsity’ of these political rationalities, rather how they are constructed as objective knowledge. By illustrating the “inventedness of our world”, governmentality poses questions that undermine the familiarity of our present (Burchell 1993: 227). Within a social policy context, this emphasises that government policies are themselves ‘social artefacts’ with a specific historical trajectory (Marston and McDonald 2006).

This rejection of “an essentialist subjectivity” in favour of a focus on how subjects are historically constructed through complex webs of relations is not restricted to

a Foucauldian perspective (Cooper 1994: 439). It has also informed postmodern and post-structuralist theory more generally, especially the work of feminist, critical race and subaltern scholars (see for example, Williams 1989; Sawicki 1996; Lewis 2000).

Second, governmentality does not restrict its analysis to the institutions or political power of the state. Rather it defines the ‘art of governing’ more broadly as the “conduct of conduct” (Foucault 2003d: 138). This word play on conduct encompasses any calculated attempt to direct human behaviour towards particular ends (Dean 1999). Whilst there is a place for the state in this analysis it is not over valued, being only one authority, and indeed, form of government amongst many. This reflects an older and more comprehensive meaning of governing which ranges along a “continuum” from addressing problems of self-control through private acts of self-governance, to regulating the conduct of other individuals or groups (Lemke 2000: 7). It emphasises that individuals are subject not only to domination by external actors, but are also active in their own government. For example, the work of Baistow (1994/95) and Cruikshank (1994, 1999) highlights how self-esteem and empowerment are increasingly ethical obligations of citizenship and matters of personal and social responsibility.

Building self-esteem is a technology of citizenship and self-government for evaluating and acting upon our selves so that the police, the guards and the doctors do not have to. Consent in this case does mean that there is no exercise of power; by isolating a self to act upon, to appreciate and to esteem, we avail ourselves of a terrain of action; we exercise power upon ourselves (Cruikshank 1999: 91).

This emphasis on individuals shaping their own subjectivities is significant, for it extends the terrain of government even further into the very depths of the soul (Rose 1999b).

Moreover, it highlights the kind of power that we, as ‘welfare subjects’, exercise over ourselves through techniques of self-improvement.

Studies of governmentality therefore have a broad remit, concerning self-government, relations with social institutions and communities, and the exercise of political sovereignty. It is a mode of analysis that lends itself to any context involving the deliberate regulation of human conduct towards particular ends. By highlighting how government is ubiquitous in all social relationships, even in the most mundane activities at the finest minutia, it traces multiple sites of governing beyond the traditional boundaries of the state apparatus.

The emphasis on government (i.e. the ‘conduct of conduct’) and how we govern also marks out a significant point of distinction between governmentality and the mainstream governance literature. As Newman emphasises, governance is a “shorthand label” used to describe a particular set of changes in the way in which society is governed (2001: 11). It reflects a departure from traditional forms of hierarchical state control, towards an enabling state which promotes the greater involvement of both the private and voluntary sectors, as well as an active citizenry, in networks, partnerships and co-governance. By contrast, a governmental analysis highlights that less direct government in society does not necessarily entail less governing. Indeed, recent commentaries on neoliberal (or advanced liberal) governmentality have highlighted how endeavours to devolve autonomy and responsibility from the state to an active citizenry represent a form of ‘regulated freedom’ in which the subject’s capacity for action is used as a political strategy to secure the ends of government (Rose 1999a). It is the focus on the way in

which thought is made both practical and technical that makes this analysis decidedly Foucauldian, distinguishing it from the wider governance literature.

Despite the emphasis on government beyond the state, this perspective also illuminates how the ‘the art of governing’ has increasingly become encapsulated within the state apparatus – what Foucault labels the “governmentalization of the state” (2003a: 244). Whilst the state no longer claims to have all the answers to solving all of society’s problems, and may be increasingly reliant on non-state actors, including individuals, to secure its objectives it still remains a pivotal actor in shaping both the conceptualisation of the ‘problem’ and the proposed solution (Author, 2008). As Sharma highlights, writing in the context of state-led empowerment programmes in India, the state has not been made redundant here; rather its role has been reconfigured:

Instead of being tied to its capacity to directly care for its citizens through redistributive programs, the state’s commitment to national development is expressed through its ability to empower marginalized subjects to care for themselves (Sharma 2006: 69).

The third key insight of governmentality is that it is underpinned by a perspective on power that is fundamentally productive, facilitative and creative, which operates by shaping and mobilising particular subjectivities:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (Foucault 2003e: 307).



As Foucault (2003d) himself stressed, his work was not primarily concerned with analysing the phenomena of power, rather his concern lay in the different means by which human beings are made subjects. As Miller observes:

Power in this respect is a more intimate phenomenon. It knows the individual better, it does not act on individuals at a distance and from the outside. It acts on the interior of the person, through their self (Miller 1987: 2).

This focus on the productive form of power challenges traditional views derived from Hobbes, where power is understood as causal and mechanistic; a negative, repressive act involving human agency and the ability of 'A' to get 'B' to do something it would rather not do (Clegg 1989; Author and Cooper 2008). In contrast, Foucault conceives power to be more about the "management of possibilities" and the ability to "structure the (possible) actions of others" than recourse to violence or coercion (Foucault 2003d: 138). Power is exercised only over free subjects, with a capacity for action, and who have a fundamental recalcitrance of will. Therefore subjects have the ability to react to, and resist, governmental ambitions to regulate their conduct. In this context, power is not the antithesis of freedom and human agency, it presupposes it.

Whilst this opens up a critical space for exploring resistance, it is not conceived in terms of liberation from an oppressor; rather as an invention of alternatives to current governing practices. As Rose *et al* assert, studies of governmentality therefore refute:

[T]he idea of resistance derived from the analytical framework of agency versus structure that has haunted so much contemporary social theory. After all, if freedom is not to be defined as the absence of constraint, but as a rather diverse array of invented technologies [...] such a binary is meaningless (Rose *et al* 2006: 100).

In other words, power is regarded less as an entity that can be overthrown, destroyed or abandoned, and more a political strategy, with those who 'resist' exercising some power as well as those who seek to govern them (Cooper 1994). By defining power and resistance in this way Foucault signals his scepticism, and indeed rejection, of emancipatory projects.

Finally, governmentality offers a critical approach by transcending moral judgements about the proper form of 'good' and 'democratic' government. As Newman (2001) highlights, this is in stark contrast to the mainstream governance literature which tends to focus on describing how organisations or actors are, or should be, governed; and implicitly (if not explicitly) portrays particular forms of governance that operate beyond the state as more or less desirable than traditional forms of top-down hierarchical control (see for example, Rhodes 1997). Governmentality avoids such normative assumptions by breaking down hard and fast distinctions between liberating and repressive technologies of power. As Dean comments:

An analytics of government is thus in the service not of a pure freedom beyond government, or even of a general stance against domination (despite some of Foucault's comments), but of those 'moral forces' that enhance our capacities for self-government by being able to understand how it is that we govern ourselves and others. It thus enhances human capacity for the reflective practice of liberty, and acts of self-determination this makes possible, without prescribing how that liberty should be exercised (Dean 1999: 37-38).

By starting from a position that interrogates both the framing of issues and the technologies used to regulate governable subjects, researchers are encouraged to go beyond traditional binary divisions at the heart of political sociology, such as the citizen/subject, private/public, liberation/domination and so forth (Rose 1999a). For

example, Barbara Cruikshank's (1994, 1999) work on *The Will to Empower* illustrates that far from being a form of radical politics aimed at enhancing citizen control, empowerment is itself a strategy of government and relationship of power concerned with creating self-governing subjects. By defining welfare subjects in terms of what they lack (i.e. their inability to mobilise in their own self-interest), such 'technologies of citizenship' embody a productive form of power that aims to put others into action. Paradoxically, empowerment may embody regulatory as well as liberatory possibilities, for it involves reconciling the personal political projects of the 'governed' with the desires and plans of the 'governors' (Author 2007; Author and Cooper 2008).

### **Challenges and Limitations**

Despite its value, governmentality is nonetheless a theoretical position that has come under challenge. Many of these critiques would however be more accurately targeted at secondary commentators who have appropriated Foucault's ideas, and need not be a necessary feature of governmentality.

First, this perspective has been heavily criticised for its disregard of empirical reality. As Stenson argues, the dominant approach within post-Foucauldian governmentality studies is "discursive governmentality" (2005: 266).<sup>3</sup> It draws on discursive, as opposed to material practice, for its evidence base, thereby concentrating on the rationales of governing as manifest in key (government) documents, rather than the more specific and concrete 'art of governing'. The result is a disconnection between the study of specific mentalities of rule and the social relations in which they are embedded (see also, O'Malley *et al* 1997; Stenson 1998; Clarke 2005). This is in direct

contrast to Foucault's own writings, which although textually-based and historical, are nonetheless firmly empirical and consider discourses as material instruments strategically deployed. For example, Foucault argues for:

[A] way that is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and one that implies more relations between theory and practice. It consists in taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists in using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light the power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and methods used. Rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies (Foucault 2003d: 128-129).

A review of the post-Foucauldian governmentality literature suggests that this 'discursive' label may however be well merited. Selected commentators within this field seem keen to eschew "empirical description" and realist institutional analysis (Dean 1995: 570). They purport that governmentality is fundamentally "diagnostic rather than descriptive", and therefore not concerned with the actual operation of systems of rule but "particular stratum of knowing and acting" (Rose 1999a: 19; see also Rose *et al* 2006). Whilst this emphasis on political rationality, bodies of knowledge and discourse is perhaps to be expected given the prime concern with mentalities of rule, it nonetheless poses problems for researchers who wish to apply governmentality in a more ethnographic/policy orientated setting, and in doing so determine the extent to which these political ambitions have been realised in practice. Moreover, this preference to disregard messy empirical actualities results in a fundamental inability to account for why the governable subject, constituted through discourse, fails to turn up in practice. Whilst 'reality' is perhaps of less concern to those solely concerned with tracing changes in thought through text-based-discourse, it is a problem for those researchers interested in

the effects of power at the micro-level and the lived experience of subjection; this is all the more significant given Foucault's own methodological approach was concerned with the inherent ability of the subject to think and act otherwise.

Second, and related to the previous point, the tendency to promote an overly abstract view of governing in which politics is reduced to rationality, also contributes to a representation of power that is omnipresent and totalising: thereby precluding the possibility of meaningful individual freedom and human agency. Whilst the discursive formation of the subject is a key strength of governmentality, it is a mistake just to "read off" consequences from governmental ambitions (Clarke *et al* 2007: 22), for it cannot be assumed that reproduction happens and power always realises its effects (see also O'Malley *et al* 1997; Marston and McDonald 2006).

Within social policy, similar criticisms have also been directed at Foucauldian and post-structuralist theory more generally. As Hunter summarises:

[P]oststructural discursive accounts of identity tend to focus on the cognitive construction of identity 'within discourse'. This then perpetuates an image of the 'social as a machine', reforming and constituting everything it comes into contact with (Hunter 2003: 331).

Yet Foucault himself was against top-down, singular models of power and indeed was keen to highlight the multiple, overlapping and at times contradictory forms of rationality that existed (Foucault 2002; see also Philo 2000). By largely focusing on rule from the perspective of the 'governors' alone, some proponents of governmentality have therefore failed to accord resistance the constitutive role that Foucault made available in his work (O'Malley *et al* 1997). By ignoring the messiness of realpolitik, this top-down discursive approach neglects that subjection is neither a smooth nor complete project;

rather one inherently characterised by conflict, contestation and instability. Moreover, it downplays the way in which governmental programmes and strategies are themselves internally contradictory, continually changing and capable of mutation:

[Governing] is often characterised by contradictions, complexities and inconsistencies, a gulf between policy rhetoric, implementation and practices and the fact that outcomes are often partial, uneven and unpredictable (Flint 2002: 621).

The third critique of governmentality is its inattention to social difference. Here, feminist and critical race scholars have highlighted a tendency to ignore the complexities of social location by assuming that power falls equally over all (Cooper 1994). Related to this point, critics have also emphasised a lack of explicit attention to how the exercise of power is linked to social inequalities of race, class and gender – especially the way in which modes of power are differentially accessible to different social groups. As Cooper argues, this is not merely an issue of the “capacity to deploy technologies of power”, but also relates to the “character” of these technologies in terms of the types of gendered or racist discourses that are used (1994: 450). Nonetheless, the strong influence of Foucauldian theory upon feminist and critical race scholars suggests that it is possible to reconcile these tensions. The work of Lewis for example, illustrates how the entry of black and Asian women into professional social work occurred “as part of a moment of racial formation and social regulation”, in which new black subjects were reconstituted as ‘ethnic minorities’ (as opposed to immigrants), and black and Asian family forms constructed as “pathological and yet governable” via the intervention of state agencies equipped with specific ‘ethnic’ knowledge (2000: xiii).

The fourth critique of governmentality is Foucault's well-known rejection of state theory (Kerr 1999; Jessop 2007). Whilst his emphasis on the dispersed, capillary nature of power illuminates the plurality of sites of government, such a focus downplays the influence of governing institutions as social forces, and the central role of the state in shaping social policies that regulate our daily lives. For example, recent initiatives in urban policy in the UK such as the *City Challenge* and *Single Regeneration Budget* highlight how endeavours to mobilise active citizenship at the community level have not been accompanied by actual transfers of executive power from the centre to the local (Marinetto 2003). Rather, political authorities remain in control of both policy agendas and significant financial resources, with community participation occurring in strictly defined parameters. This is more akin to a process of incorporation than empowerment, and results in strategic-level decisions being retained within the state apparatus.

As discussed in the previous section, a close reading of Foucault's (2003a) *Governmentality* highlights that these centralising and decentralising forces are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Whilst he clearly rejects the state as a unified and monolithic all-powerful ruler, Foucault nonetheless continues to emphasise its importance as a "site at which power condenses" (Cowan and McDermont 2006: 182).

The final critique of governmentality relates to the perceived (in)adequacy of Foucault's politics of resistance, which is derived from his perspective on power more generally. By depicting a mode of power that is inscribed so deep that one cannot step outside it, Foucault is accused of failing to provide a convincing account of how resistance is actually possible. Moreover, Foucault's rejection of transformative agency has raised further concerns about the nihilism, pessimism and lack of normative guidance

present in his work (Cooper 1994; O'Malley *et al* 1997). Such arguments not only ignore the value of critical thought that *does not* pinpoint particular remedies, but also fail to appreciate “the rather limited and specific nature of his project” (Sawicki 1996: 176).

### **The Way Forward: a ‘realist governmentality’ approach**

Crucially, the theoretical limitations discussed need not be a necessary feature of an analysis informed by governmentality. In particular, the top-down solely discursive approach stands in somewhat contradiction to the perspective of power advocated by Foucault himself. As O'Malley *et al* conclude, Foucault:

[R]epeatedly asserted that politics also is to be seen as a matter of struggle in which the outcome cannot be forecast because it is dependent upon the realization and deployment of resources, tactics and strategies in the relations of contest themselves. This highly fluid interpretation of power centres social relations, and to that extent it is perhaps surprising that such a view is virtually excluded from governmentality work. Rather, as we stress, politics appears as a ‘mentality of rule’ [...] largely evidenced in the texts of government (O'Malley *et al* 1997: 510).

Within governmentality a key role for political contestation, an analysis of the effects of particular governmental ambitions, and the development of a critical stance are all quite feasible without undermining its positive attributes (O'Malley *et al* 1997).

Indeed within social policy, work of this kind has already been undertaken in both the UK and Australia. For example, research into UK public service reform by Clarke *et al* (2007) highlights that there is little attachment to the identity of the ‘citizen-consumer’.

By contrast, service specific terms such as patient and service-user held much more relevance, as did terms that emphasised a sense of belonging as a member of the public or wider community. This indicates the possible co-existence of plural and overlapping



identities, and that subjects are able to engage in reasoning about their own needs, relations to particular institutional arrangements, and specific political discourses:

[O]ur respondents are ‘subjects of doubt’ [...] They reflect upon the dominant discourse, its interpellations and the subject position it offers. They reason about different sorts of identifications and the relationships they imply. They make choices about what terms evoke their desired personal and political subject positions. They suggest that the practice of scepticism is a popular rather than an academic commonplace [...] These are subjects who require an analysis that is attentive to the breaks and disjunctures in the circulation of discourses, rather than assuming their effectivity (Clarke *et al* 2007: 142).

McDonald and Marston (2005) have also highlighted how the creation of the ‘active’ welfare recipient within Australian welfare reform has been subject to challenge and contestation from below. Despite the use of case management as a governmental technique to micro-manage the behaviour of the long-term unemployed by motivating them to take responsibility for their job search, some individuals refused to engage with the active identity they were being asked to adopt. This highlights the potential for bottom-up resistance to top-down mentalities of rule, and a potential disjuncture between political rationales and their effects in reality:

[W]e have focused on how the targets of employment services govern themselves and are constituted in everyday relations of power and authority. In some cases this has meant drawing attention to how these citizen-subjects refuse to act as a ‘recipient’, a ‘dependent’ or a ‘jobseeker’; a refusal to be what the relations of the state have made them in contemporary welfare politics (McDonald and Marston 2005: 397).

Similarly, within the housing arena research by Author (2007) into community ownership of social housing illustrates that despite the emergence of strategies of empowerment aimed at elevating tenants’ local knowledge and maximising their actual

participation, this political ideal has not been realised in practice. Not only do local decision making processes continue to be dominated by central/local tensions, but the majority of tenants expressed no desire to become actively engaged in formal participation structures, and indeed, articulated priorities for their local area other than empowerment. This opens up the possibility of contestation and contradiction between, and within, governmental rationalities as interpreted by different actors. Interestingly, housing professionals were sympathetic to tenants' reasons for opting-out of the participatory process and equally critical of top-down government policy ambitions (Author, In Press). This underlines the need to consider the subjectivities of welfare professionals as well as service users, for practitioners do not always faithfully adhere to top-down policy discourses, nor are they always out to exert a negative effect on subjects' agency (Hunter 2003).

Uniting these examples from the social policy literature is a commitment to illuminate the empirical reality through which political and policy rationales actually play out. In doing so, these studies address one of the major criticisms of governmentality: a lack of attention to the specific situations in which the activity of governing is problematised. Here, a 'realist governmentality' (Stenson 2005, 2008) approach offers a useful way forward for theoretically informed, empirical researchers within the critical social policy tradition. A novel and somewhat under-developed approach which is still in its infancy, it emerged from within criminology to highlight the struggle for sovereign control of (deviant) populations. Usefully, like the examples previously discussed, it advocates complementing discursive analysis of emergent governmentalities with localised empirical accounts of actual governing practices, which seek to regulate the

conduct of specifically targeted populations. In doing so, it brings into focus the micro-practices of local initiatives and the behaviour of local actors. Despite the ‘realist’ label Stenson does not make any explicit connections with the philosophical position of critical realism (Bhaskar 1998). However, his ambition to contrast the discursive with a more grounded focus on the empirical world and the active agents within it, suggests a similar desire to escape the excesses of post-structuralism. Importantly, the key principles of ‘realist governmentality’ can be translated into other policy settings where there is a shared interest in the concrete ‘art of governing’. This opens up the use of ethnography to show how policies are implemented, expose their material effects, and reveal their unforeseen and unintended consequences, as well as their outward limits (Marston and McDonald 2006; Li 2007). A firmly empirical approach, it emphasises the primacy of politics and social relations, as well as the importance of local variation and context.<sup>4</sup> In doing so it aims to reveal the messiness and complexity involved in the struggles around subjectivity, and offer a more nuanced and finely grained analysis of governing in situ.

The insights of this reconfigured governmentality are both illuminating and more practically applicable to the concerns of applied research. First, by analysing the interplay between discourse and its effects in the ‘real’, it overcomes a narrow focus on text-as-evidence (i.e. documents) and therefore addresses the potential disconnection between mentalities of rule and governing practices (Stenson 1998). This draws attention to the “inevitable gap between what is attempted and what is accomplished” – an important but neglected area within this school of thought – and in doing so provides a more detailed picture of how rule operates (Li 2007: 1). Interestingly, the desire to complement an analysis of discursive practices with more ethnographic methods is also

reverberated within the wider social policy tradition, such as Critical Discourse Analysis, where applied social scientists have argued for the need to give discourse analysis a firmly empirical focus, and to avoid deducing local practices from an analysis of meta-narratives (Marston 2002). This suggests synergies and points of connection between ‘realist governmentality’ and other analytical approaches within social policy.

Second, by starting from the assumption that subjects may refuse to know their place and their fundamental recalcitrance of will, ‘realist governmentality’ avoids the tendency of references to resistance simply being “tagged-on” as a last paragraph at the end of a discussion (Clarke 2004: 10). By focusing on strategies from below which aim to resist governmental ambitions, this emphasises that subjects are reflexive and can accommodate, adapt, contest or resist top-down endeavours to govern them if they so wish. Recognising multiple voices and the contested nature of identity may also negate the tendency to focus on mentalities of rule from the perspective of the rulers, programmers and planners alone, thereby introducing a more grounded perspective. To achieve this, it is however necessary to go beyond text-based discourse analysis, for as Stenson indicates it may not be possible to characterise local actors’ “structures of knowledge in (such) systematic textual terms” (1998: 348; see also Li 2007).

The third advantage of this approach, is that ‘realist governmentality’ is more sensitive to temporal and spatial issues, and the contingent and particular national, sub-national and micro-level factors that may shape universalistic governmental rationalities (Stenson 2005; see also Philo 2000, Clarke 2008). Indeed, examining the various local contexts in which governmental rationalities, strategies and techniques are actively contested opens up a critical space in which to explore how central ‘plans’ are mediated

from below and the way in which projects of rule are applied differently in different places:

Power is enacted somewhere – not just as a metaphor but a spatial reality [...] this interrogation of how place matters can take into account the ways in which rule is shaped by contestation and slippage – operating in a distinct fashion within different political economies (Rutherford 2007: 303).

Here the work of subaltern scholars is particularly illuminating. Chatterjee for example, highlights the limits of applying western notions of universal citizenship and civil society in a postcolonial context. Because most inhabitants in India are only tenuously rights-bearing citizens, he argues the dynamic relationship between the state and “political society” is more fundamental in understanding governmental endeavours (2004: 38). By doing so, he renders visible the way in which developmental projects have specifically targeted marginal population groups – often selected on caste or religious lines – as objects of policy. This is in contrast to the welfare settlement between the state and its (equal) citizenry, which has been the cornerstone of welfare administrations in the west.

In a similar fashion, Gupta and Sharma (2006) challenge the programmatic coherence of neo-liberal governmentality. For example, whilst European welfare states have undergone modernising reforms which extol the virtues of self-help, communitarian endeavour and personal responsibility, in a postcolonial context the state remains obligated to look after marginal groups, albeit it with the support of non-governmental organisations. Although postcolonial subjects have never enjoyed a welfare ‘safety net’ in the same way as their western counterparts, ironically they continue to receive state assistance at a time when it is being eroded by governments in the west (see also Chatterjee 2004; Sharma 2006).

Finally, this revised approach accords an important role to state institutions. Indeed, Stenson cautions against treating sovereignty in the name of law/nation state as a “fiction” or an “archaic residue of the past”, for centralising tendencies continue to co-exist alongside decentred modes of neo-liberal governance (1998: 337). The effect of which is an inherent tension between “centrifugal” and “centripetal” forces (1998: 342). For example, the work of Newman (2001) highlights how in the UK the New Labour administration’s endeavour to modernise governance has resulted in the decentralisation of state power interacting with, as opposed to replacing, traditional strategies of top-down control. This seemingly paradoxical co-existence of governmental strategies that seek to devolve control to the local, whilst simultaneously recentralising political control within the state apparatus is particularly strong within the housing arena. In Scotland for example, the housing regulator Communities Scotland has deployed technologies of performance management (Author 2007), which encourage social landlords to take responsibility for their own conduct by reconciling their local management systems and performance to externally set standards. This is a mode of power which is both voluntary and coercive, for whilst it is premised on the autonomy and independence of housing agencies, it nonetheless seeks to ensure compliance to governmental objectives through top-down modes of surveillance and (potentially) punitive statutory interventions vis a vis the housing regulation and inspection regime. Such an example underlines the importance of re-inserting the state into an analysis informed by governmentality, for it remains a significant and powerful actor in neoliberal welfare regimes. Yet it also highlights changing forms of governing, and the way in which contemporary governing

practices have both reworked and blurred traditional binary divisions between the state and the market, the state and civil society, the public and private and so forth.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the growing popularity of Foucauldian-inspired governmentality theory within social policy studies, it continues to pose some challenges for applied researchers.

Accusations that it disregards empirical reality, downplays the role of the state, neglects social difference, inadequately theorises resistance, and sanitises politics out of the policy process represent significant barriers to its wider application within social policy: a field that has traditionally prioritised such concerns.

Whilst the criticisms levelled at post-Foucauldian governmentality studies are well-founded, it is also clear that this approach *does have critical potential* and that used appropriately offers opportunities for researchers to explore new issues of power and resistance in the social policy field. In this article it has been stressed that ‘realist governmentality’ represents a useful way forward to transcend the limits of traditional ‘discursive governmentality’ whilst also retaining its key analytical insights. Used in this way, governmentality can avoid the pitfall of assuming that governmental ambitions are always successful in realising their desired outcomes. Moreover, it offers a more grounded, ethnographic analysis of the exercise of power in situ that is sensitive to both time and place.

Importantly, policy research and governmentality studies are not “mutually exclusive” objectives (Marston and McDonald 2006: 2). By adopting a ‘realist’ approach attention can be accorded to the messy actualities of the empirical world; the multi-vocal

nature of governing practices and their consequences; the experiences and perspectives of ‘targeted’ populations; and the tensions and conflict between shifting modes of power – all of which are in-keeping with Foucault’s original analysis. In doing so, governmentality opens up some new and exciting research agendas which promise to illuminate the contested nature of shifting governmentalities, and the multi-faceted nature of power in contemporary society. These are potentially key insights for researchers working within the critical social policy tradition.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The 1970s lecture series was entitled *Security, Territory, Population* and featured the lectures: *Society Must be Defended*; *Security, Territory and Population*; *the Birth of Bio-Politics*; and *Governmentality*. Whilst this historical specificity is often overlooked, it provides the background to Foucault’s claims, and is worth being read in its entirety.

<sup>2</sup> Political rationality refers to any form of thinking that seeks to be clear, systematic and explicit about who we are or what we should be (Dean 1999).

<sup>3</sup> However, as Clarke (2008) highlights the dominance of this ‘discursive’ approach, both geographically and in disciplinary terms, is uneven – with subaltern studies and the disciplines of anthropology and geography being notable exceptions.

<sup>4</sup> Whilst Stenson advocates going beyond a focus on text-based discourse alone, ironically his own empirical research fails to realise this objective (see for example, Stenson and Watt 2007).



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