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# Rethinking governmentality: Towards genealogies of governance

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## Abstract

Foucault introduced the concept ‘governmentality’ to refer to the conduct of conduct, and especially the technologies that govern individuals. He adopted the concept after his shift from structuralist archaeology to historicist genealogy. But some commentators suggest governmentality remains entangled with structuralist themes. This article offers a resolutely genealogical theory of governmentality that: echoes Foucault on genealogy, critique, and technologies of power; suggests resolutions to problems in Foucault’s work; introduces concepts that are clearly historicist, not structuralist; and opens new areas of empirical research. The resulting genealogical theory of governmentality emphasizes nominalism, contingency, situated agency, and historicist explanations referring to traditions and dilemmas. It decenters governance by highlighting diverse elite narratives, technologies of power, and traditions of popular resistance.

## Keywords

critique, Foucault, genealogy, governance, governmentality, historicism

Governmentality (*gouvernementalité*) refers to the conduct of conduct, especially the technologies that govern individuals. It captures the way governments and other actors draw on knowledge to make policies that regulate and create subjectivities. The French thinker, Michel Foucault (1991; 2004), first coined the term governmentality in his lectures at the Collège de France from about 1977 until his death in 1984. The dates are significant. They locate governmentality alongside Foucault’s later genealogical writings, not his earlier archaeological ones. However, some commentators argue that

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governmentality remains entangled with structuralist themes redolent of the archaeologies (Biebricher, 2008; Dupont and Pearch, 2001; Lemke, 2000). Because Foucault's own work on governmentality consists mainly of lecture materials that he never took forward to publication, the literature on governmentality owes much to the way his followers applied and extended his work, and many of these followers, especially the Anglo-Foucauldians (Barry et al., 1996; Burchell et al., 1991; Dean, 1999), did indeed approach his work on governmentality against the background of Althusser's structuralist theory of social control.

Yet, this essay is not about how we should read Foucault, let alone his followers. I do not discuss Foucault's own use of the term, nor do I discuss how the term has been applied in later empirical studies. This article is about governmentality conceived as a genealogical approach to the study of the state, public policy, and its effects. It asks: how should we conceive of genealogical studies of the state, public policies, and their effects? If readers believe the existing literature on governmentality is already properly historicist and genealogical, they may treat this essay as an attempt to elucidate a consistent theory that justifies that literature. If they understand that literature to be tinged by structuralism, they may treat this article as reforming it. Either way, this essay succeeds if it:

- echoes Foucault on genealogy, power/knowledge, and technologies of power;
- suggests resolutions to problems that critics think undermine Foucault's work;
- introduces concepts that are clearly historicist, not structuralist;
- opens new areas of empirical research.

So, the first section of this essay identifies problems with a lingering structuralism in governmentality. The following section introduces genealogy as a historicist solution to these problems. The third section analyses the concepts needed for a genealogical and historicist approach to governmentality. The final section describes a research agenda inspired by this account of governmentality.

## **Structuralist problems**

Post-structuralists may reject the structuralist idea of a science, and highlight the instability of structures, but they often retain structuralist themes. The main themes are: a differential theory of meaning, hostility to ideas of human agency, and preference for synchronic explanations. While Foucault denied he was a structuralist, his archaeologies contain these themes. His archaeologies explore the consecutive epistemes governing health, psychology, and the human sciences, where an episteme is a set of structural relationships between concepts (Foucault, 1970; and for discussion Gutting, 1989). These epistemes structure intentionality and agency, defining what people can say and how they can do so. And Foucault's focus on epistemes and neglect of agency mean his archaeologies consist of synchronic snapshots, with little attention being given to the diachronic processes by which one episteme gives way to another.

These structuralist themes come from the linguistic formalism of Ferdinand de Saussure (1966). According to Saussure, signs combine signifiers (or sounds) with signifieds (or concepts), where signifiers and signifieds alike have the content they do

only by virtue of their difference from other units in a system of signs.<sup>1</sup> Poststructuralists use Saussurean linguistics to argue that meanings arise negatively from relations of difference in a system of signs. They argue that meanings are purely differential; meanings arise from relations of difference in a language. They conclude that to study meanings is not to ask how language is used by intentional agents, but to study the synchronic relations between units in a language.

The problems with structuralism have been widely discussed, so I will mention them only briefly here. Even Saussure (1966: 13) adopted a structural approach only as a method that would establish linguistics as a science. It is a mistake to treat his method as a philosophy of language. Moreover, linguists now reject formal structural analyses of language in favor of transformational grammars. Political theorists should be wary of out-dated linguistic theories. Finally and most importantly, there are solid philosophical arguments for rejecting the idea that language is purely differential.

An easy way to introduce these philosophical arguments is to distinguish between contextual and differential theories of meaning. Many philosophers accept contextual theories of meaning: they argue that meanings arise only in the context of, for example, webs of belief or language games (Quine and Ullian, 1970; Wittgenstein, 1972). Consider the case of malaria. Perhaps we cannot teach someone the meaning of malaria only by pointing to examples and saying 'malaria'. Yet, this contextual theory of meaning is not the same as the differential view associated with post-structuralism. The meaning of concepts may depend on our background theories about the world, but that does not imply that their meaning derives from their difference from other concepts. To the contrary, once we accept various theories about the cause of certain physical symptoms, we can define malaria positively as a fever caused by the presence in the body of the protozoan parasite of genus *Plasmodium*. We can bind a concept to its referent in the context of background theories. Many poststructuralists treat arguments against pure meanings as sufficient to establish a differential theory of the sign. They are wrong to do so. A contextual theory of meaning provides a clear alternative.

Once we reject differential theories of meaning, we have little reason to remain hostile to human agency or to prefer synchronic analyses. Yet, studies of governmentality often hedge questions of agency and explanation. Foucault sometimes ascribes to people capacities for innovation and creativity, as with the concept of 'counter-conduct', but he typically concentrates on how power constructs individuals, saying little about the ways individuals act creatively for reasons of their own to create new forms of power. Other works on governmentality rarely examine agency as either a source of power/knowledge or as evidenced in specific instances of counter-conduct. Studies of governmentality are often equally evasive on the question of how (or even if) they are explaining patterns of rule. A diachronic or historicist approach presumably would include an account of power in terms of the contingent ruptures and displacements that arise from struggles among agents. In contrast, studies of governmentality typically show a clear preference for synchronic accounts. They portray forms of power/knowledge as monolithic, with state practices fitting seamlessly with practices of self-creation. This synchronic focus often leads to somewhat reified and homogenous accounts of modern power, with little sensitivity to diversity, heterogeneity, and resistance within and over time.

## Genealogical solutions

The problems with structuralism were clear to Foucault. He devised new concepts of power and genealogy in part to overcome the limitations of poststructuralist treatments of subjectivity and explanation. His genealogies replaced his quasi-structuralist epistemes with more fluid discourses and power/knowledge. The very fluidity of discourses seems to preclude synchronic explanations of their content as being defined by the relations among the units of which they are composed. Foucault (1972) agreed that the statements of an era may coalesce to form an 'archive', but he also said that archives were just tentative groupings of statements based on contingent regularities and connections. Instead of synchronic explanations, Foucault turned to genealogical histories of the present: *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *A History of Sexuality* (1978–85).

What, though, is genealogy, and how can it resolve the problems associated with structuralism? I want to suggest that genealogy is a mode of inquiry based on a form of historicism that highlights nominalism, contingency, and contestability. I then want to argue that this account of genealogy helps solve the main problems critics associate with Foucault's work.

### Historicism

Genealogy arose in the context of nineteenth-century historicism. It has earlier precursors, notably Hume's speculative account of the psychological origins of morality in customs and habits. But Nietzsche's genealogies mark a break with these precursors (Hoy, 1994). Although this break may seem to be a matter of critique, Hume (2007) had used his approach to critical effect in, for example, his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* where Philo presents religion as arising out of the states of terror that accompany depression and illness. Nietzsche breaks with his predecessors in the radical and thorough nature of his historicism.

Historicist modes of reasoning were commonplace throughout the nineteenth century. An emphasis on the organic replaced the mechanical motifs of much of the eighteenth century. Philosophers and social theorists typically conceived of human life, and perhaps even the natural world, as defined by creative and purposeful intentionality. Comte, Hegel, Marx, Spencer, and others all argued that human life and human societies could be understood properly only as the products of historical processes. Most of the historicism of the nineteenth century was developmental, conceiving of history as guided by certain principles (Farr, 2007). While different nineteenth-century theorists highlighted varied principles, the most commonly accepted ones included liberty, reason, nation, and statehood. These principles give a progressive direction to history.

Nietzsche's intellectual biography exhibits the influence of nineteenth-century historicism. His early philological writings are defiantly historical, and by the time he wrote *Beyond Good and Evil* (2002), his historicism has become increasingly radical. Instead of appealing to principles as guides to historical development, Nietzsche searched for the contingent, accidental sources of the belief in these principles themselves. This radical historicism transformed genealogy. Hume went beneath cultural ideas and practices to pick out continuous features of human life, and he then used this continuity to vindicate the relevant ideas and practices by suggesting they were rooted in common experiences.

Likewise, Paul Rée's (2003) genealogy used the principle of the survival of the fittest to argue that modern morality is the highest stage of evolution yet attained. Nietzsche argued that this simply fails to take seriously the problem of morality. To take that problem seriously, we have to inquire critically into the historical origins of our moral ideas.

Radical historicism does away with appeals to principles that lend necessity and unity to history. The result is a powerful emphasis on: nominalism, contingency, and contestability.

**Nominalism.** Historicists generally conceive of human life as unfolding against a historical background. Human actions, practices, institutions come into being in historical contexts that influence their content. Developmental historicists evoked more or less fixed principles to give unity to many of these historical entities and their progress. States, for example, were defined either by traditions consisting of national characteristics or by a fixed pathway to civilization. In contrast, radical historicists lean toward a nominalist conception of actions and practices and the traditions informing them. As Foucault argued, 'anthropological universals' appear as historical constructs with no fixed content. Radical historicists eschew analyses of concepts such as state, society, economy, nation, and class that point to essences or sets of principles as defining their boundaries or development. As a result, radical historicism sometimes may seem opposed to all aggregate concepts and explanations. Yet radical historicists can deploy aggregate concepts – including developmental historicism, Christian morality, and disciplinary power – provided that these concepts are defined pragmatically in relation to what is being explained. A radical historicist explanation of actions and practices appeals to the historical background or tradition that informs them, where the relevant tradition is defined not by an essence or fixed principles but as the particular slice of the past that best explains the relevant actions and practices.

**Contingency.** Clearly radical historicists cannot explain changes in actions, practices, and traditions by appealing to fixed principles or essences. They reject the teleological narratives of developmental historicism, including those associated with Marxism. Radical historicists thus portray history as discontinuous and contingent. History is a series of contingent even accidental appropriations, modifications, and transformations from the old to the new. As Nietzsche (2007: 51) wrote, there is 'no more important proposition' for historians than:

that the origin of the emergence of a thing and its ultimate usefulness, its practical application and incorporation into a system of ends, are *toto coelo* separate; that anything in existence, having somehow come about, is continually interpreted anew, transformed and redirected to a new purpose by a power superior to it; that everything that occurs in the organic world consists of *overpowering, dominating*, and in their turn, overpowering and dominating consist of re-interpretation, adjustment, in the process of which their former 'meaning' and 'purpose' must necessarily be obscured or completely obliterated.

This emphasis on contingency may appear to suggest that change is inexplicable. Yet, radical historicists often describe and explain change; they just do so without appealing to overarching principles. Change occurs contingently as people reinterpret, modify, or transform an inherited tradition in response to novel circumstances or other dilemmas.

*Contestability.* An emphasis on contingency implies that history is radically open in that what happens is always contestable. It suggests that there are always innumerable ways in which an action, practice, or traditions may be reinterpreted, transformed, or overpowered. Thus, radical historicists are suspicious of attempts to portray a thing as unified and its transformation as peaceful. They highlight the diverse meanings that accompany any practice and the contests that accompany all attempts to transform practices. In doing so, radical historicists often adopt a decentered approach, where to decenter is to show how apparently uniform traditions or practices are in fact social constructs that arise from individuals acting on diverse and changing meanings. Similarly, radical historicists often deploy a concept of power in order to highlight the diversity and contests that lie behind illusions of unity and necessity. When they do so, however, they rarely intend to point to a power center. They do not use power to suggest that one group with a set of interests defined by its own social position dominates or exploits some other group. Rather, they use power simply to signal the presence of multiplicity and struggle.

## Truth

Genealogy instantiates a historicism that differs dramatically from the structuralist formalism derived from Saussure. This historicism points to ways Foucault and other genealogists can avoid pernicious relativism and totalizing critique.<sup>2</sup>

To conceive of genealogy as an expression of historicism is to clarify its epistemic commitments. Sometimes genealogy's overlap with historicism is mistaken for skepticism, relativism, or even a suspension of epistemic commitments. Yet a moment's thought should dispel the idea that genealogy can simply avoid truth claims. Genealogies obviously make claims about the truth, plausibility, and possibility of the philosophical positions they instantiate and the more factual parts of their narratives. There is thus a need to clarify both the truths and concepts of truth to which genealogy is opposed, and the truths and concepts of truth on which it relies.

Historicism is clearly opposed to truth claims that do not recognize their own historicity, including all those that masquerade as utter certainties based on pure reason or pure experience. From a historicist perspective, beliefs and truth-claims are always saturated by the particular tradition against the background of which they are made. Even simple experiences, let alone complex moral theories, depend in part on the prior webs of beliefs people bring to them. The plausibility or truth of any statement depends, in other words, on one accepting a number of other beliefs. No belief is certain on its own; no belief is verified or refuted by given experiences or given reasons.

It is important to emphasize that an opposition to utter certainties does not entail a denial of all truth claims. To the contrary, historicists can still make truth claims provided that they conceive of truth not as some kind of timeless certainty but as something more like 'objectively valid for us' or 'the best account of the world currently on offer'. Such historicist and anthropological concepts of objectivity require a convincing account of the way in which we are to compare and evaluate rival accounts of the world, but they do not require us to appeal to pure experience or pure reason, let alone to suspend all our epistemic commitments.



Comparisons of rival theories are not easy to analyze. There is always a danger that comparisons tacitly assume the superiority of a particular perspective. Nonetheless, one aspect of such comparisons may well concern the ability of a theory to narrate itself and its competitors. The suggestion here is that a good social theory should be able to provide an account of how and why it arose as well as an account of how and why its rival arose. If this suggestion is correct, then genealogies contribute fairly directly to the task of theory choice.

Historicism thus explains how genealogies can challenge truth claims without collapsing into the kind of totalizing critique that challenges all truth claims in a way that entails a performative contradiction. On the one hand, genealogists continually question. They expose the particularity of perspectives that appear to be universal or timeless truths. On the other hand, to question beliefs is not necessarily to reject them. To expose the particularity of a perspective is not necessarily to deny its validity, unless of course it is incompatible with recognition of its own particularity. In short, historicists may incorporate a self-reflexivity in their beliefs by situating them in a particular tradition, but this self-reflexivity does not undercut their beliefs so much as contribute to their attempt to establish that historicism is the best account of the world currently on offer.

### *Critique*

To conceive of genealogy as an expression of historicism is also to clarify its relationship to critique. Genealogy's emphases on nominalism, contingency, and contestability help distinguish it from other types of critical theory. However, if we simply equate genealogy with historicism, we have to allow that genealogy is not inherently critical. Historicists can tell all kinds of narratives, some of which may be forms of critical unmasking but others may be what philosophers such as David Hoy (2008) and Bernard Williams (2002) call vindicatory genealogies. Vindicatory genealogies may enable us better to understand and to justify aspects of ourselves that we have overlooked. An example of a vindicatory genealogy would be a historicist narrative of the origins of the genealogical stance in a radical challenge to the principles and unities that characterized developmental historicism. While we can distinguish critical and vindicatory genealogies, it may be easier to use historicism as an umbrella concept for both, reserving the term 'genealogy' for historicism in its critical guise. Whatever terminological norms we adopt, we can ask: how does genealogy operate as a historicist form of critique?

Genealogy operates primarily as a denaturalizing type of critique. Historicism includes a nominalist and constructivist social ontology emphasizing the contingency and contestability of beliefs, actions, and practices. Thus, it denaturalizes beliefs, actions, and practices that others conceive as natural. When other people believe that social norms or ways of life are natural or inevitable, historicists denaturalize these norms and ways of life by suggesting that they actually arose out of contingent historical processes. In other words, genealogy operates as a form of critique because it applies the denaturalizing tendency of historicism to unsettle those who ascribe a spurious naturalness to their particular beliefs and actions. Genealogy reveals the contingency and contestability of ideas and practices that hide these aspects of their origins. Of course, genealogists may buttress their historicist critique with other arguments – such as the

phenomenological and psychological unmasking found in Nietzsche's account of *ressentiment* – but the distinctly genealogical form of critique still derives from the denaturalizing effect of historicism.

It is perhaps worth briefly mentioning how my earlier discussion of the epistemic commitments associated with historicism illuminates the way genealogy operates as critique. On the one hand, historicists reject utter certainties: they denaturalize purportedly transcendent or universal perspectives that elide their own dependence on a particular tradition. Yet, on the other, historicists are not necessarily anti-realists: they try to trace the actual history and effects of various beliefs and practices, including purportedly transcendental or universal ones.

The epistemic commitments of historicism also illuminate the characteristic style of many genealogies. On the one hand, suspicion of utter certainties may encourage genealogists to abandon standard claims to objectivity, to invent provocative aggregate concepts, and even to offer their narratives as somewhat speculative. Yet, on the other, genealogists are trying to develop compelling narratives supported by evidence derived from empirical research, and in that respect, their research is, as Foucault (1984: 76) noted, 'gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary'.

A denaturalizing historicism informs other prominent features of genealogy. For a start, genealogies are usually histories of present subjectivities, since their critical impact depends on our being immersed in the beliefs and practices that they denaturalize. In addition, genealogies typically explore the conditions of possibility of contemporary beliefs and practices, since they uncover the historical contingencies that made it possible for people today to think and act as they do. Finally, genealogy opens novel spaces for personal and social transformation precisely because it loosens the hold on us of entrenched ideas and institutions; it frees us to imagine other possibilities.

## **Governmentality as genealogy**

Genealogy provides a historicist alternative to the structuralist themes lingering in Foucault's archaeologies and it thereby resolves some of the problems often identified with his work. Yet, as some commentators have suggested, work on governmentality can appear to neglect the historicism of genealogy. In contrast, the rest of this article provides a defiantly historicist, genealogical account of governmentality. What difference would it make if we thought of governmentality as a genealogical mode of inquiry? To begin, I want to suggest that a historicist approach to governmentality may stop its theoretical drift toward reification and determinism. Thereafter I will discuss the kind of aggregate and explanatory concepts that would signal this theoretical intervention.

### ***A new theory***

Earlier we identified the main structuralist themes that linger in governmentality: a differential theory of meaning, hostility to ideas of human agency, and preference for synchronic explanations. These themes may entail reification and determinism. For a start, linguistic formalism can appear to treat language as a reified object. The content of people's contingent speech-acts can appear to get reduced to the unstable relations

among signs. Work on governmentality can lose sight of the fact that people create meanings and practices. Sometimes it seems to treat meanings as things that exist as part of systems of signs quite apart from the actors who make them. In addition, hostility to agency can appear to lead to a kind of determinism. Systems of signs can appear not only to exist apart from the actors who make them but also to define what these actors can say and how they can say it. Of course, poststructuralists often criticize the earlier structuralists for exhibiting such determinism while implying that they themselves think about change, chance, and transformation in terms of the instabilities that are inherent within structures – instabilities that threaten the structure and put it into contradiction with itself. However, this poststructuralist argument simply elides the question: are these instabilities necessary qualities of a disembodied quasi-structure that thus defines its own development or are they products of people's contingent activity?

It is no accident that structuralist themes can lead to a kind of reification and determinism more usually associated with positivism. Structuralism arose alongside positivism in the early twentieth century in clear opposition to historicism. The First World War undermined faith in the principles of reason and progress that had governed so much developmental historicism. Innovations in logic and science then informed more formal approaches to social life. Structuralism and positivism alike rejected historical forms of explanation. They tried instead to explain beliefs, actions, and social life more generally by reference to synchronic classifications, models, systems, correlations, and structures. No doubt some political theorists appeal to institutions, correlations, or quasi-structures only as a shorthand for clusters of contingent beliefs and actions. Nonetheless, the worry remains that their shorthand then bewitches them. They can avoid reification and determinism only by adopting a radical historicist approach to the study of politics.

A historicist, genealogical approach decenters concepts such as institution, norm, power, and language. To decenter is here to focus on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings. It is to unpack a reified account of politics by pointing to the disparate beliefs of the relevant actors, thereby revealing the contingency and contestability of the actions that constitute political life. Again, decentered theory challenges the idea that any inexorable or impersonal structure, force, or norm generates fixed patterns and regularities in politics. It implies that the political life is constructed differently by many actors inspired by historically specific ideas and values.

### *Aggregate concepts*

A genealogical approach to governmentality decenters institutions, networks, and discourses by appealing to historical accounts of beliefs and actions. Decentering may go all the way down to the micro-level of specific individuals. However, there will be times when genealogists want to tell more general stories about political life, and to do so, they need concepts that avoid reification and determinism by referring to common meanings and by allowing for agency. Later I will examine concepts that constitute historicist forms of explanation. To begin, however, I want to look at concepts that refer primarily to the ontological nature of political life: situated agency, practice, and power.

Throughout I will distinguish these historicist concepts from those associated with more positivist forms of political science.

*Situated agency.* A particular concept of the human agent constitutes the micro-level of radical historicism. Genealogists, like other post-foundationalists, are skeptical of the very idea of an autonomous individual who can form beliefs and act on the basis of pure experiences or a pure reason. All experiences and reasoning occur in webs of beliefs. However, to reject autonomy is not to reject agency. Even if people are necessarily influenced by their particular historical context, they may still be agents who can adopt beliefs and perform actions for reasons of their own and in ways that transform the historical context that influences them. So, agency is possible, but it is always situated in a particular context.

Some readers may mistake the concept of situated agency for the institutionalist claim that people behave rationally within particular institutional settings. Genealogists differ from institutionalists in two respects. First, whereas institutionalists conceive of the context in terms of reified institutions, genealogists may think of it as the wider web of beliefs the actor has reached against a particular historical background. Second, whereas institutionalists appear to define rationality in terms derived from rational choice theory, genealogists emphasize contingent forms of local reasoning.

Reasoning is always local in that it occurs in the context of agents' existing webs of belief. The adjective 'local' refers here to the fact that reasoning always takes place against the background of a particular subjective or intersubjective web of beliefs. While the content of the relevant web of beliefs varies from case to case, there is no possibility of reasoning outside of any such background. To insist on the local nature of reasoning is thus to preclude the autonomous and universal concepts of reasoning and subjectivity that are associated with rational choice theory. Whereas rational choice theory gestures at a view from nowhere – as if people could adopt beliefs and make decisions in ways that do not depend on the prior views they hold – local reasoning occurs in the specific context of just such prior views. Similarly, whereas rational choice theory gestures at an assumption of perfect information, local reasoning recognizes agents can use only the information they possess, and they do so even when the relevant information is false.

When we use the adjective 'local' to capture the fact that reasoning takes place against a background of prior beliefs, we need not give it spatial content. Local is relative here to a web of beliefs, not a territorial area. Local reasoning differs, therefore, from the cognate idea of local knowledge (Geertz, 1983). Local knowledge refers to people's grasp of their own experiences and circumstances, where this knowledge is sometimes defined as specific, concrete, and practical, rather than general, abstract, and theoretical. Local knowledge thus contrasts less with an autonomous view from nowhere than with expert knowledge based on technical or professional training.

*Practice.* Once genealogists leave the micro-level for the mid-level and macro-level, they conceive of social objects as practices rather than institutions, structures, or systems. A practice is a set of actions, perhaps a set of actions that exhibit a pattern, even a pattern that remains relatively stable across time. Actions and practices are the main grounds on which we ascribe beliefs to people: we ascribe beliefs to them in order to make sense of

their actions. Nonetheless, practices cannot explain actions since people act for reasons of their own. People sometimes act on their beliefs about a practice, but, when they do, we still explain their action by reference to their beliefs about that practice, and these beliefs need not be accurate.

Practices can be the consequences of actions. The effects of actions often depend on the responses of others. Thus, if we equate a practice with the set of actions by which others respond to an action, then by definition that practice constitutes the consequences of the act. Nonetheless, we should remember here that the practice is composed solely of the contingent actions of individuals. It is these actions in their diversity and contingency that constitute the consequences of the action. And we explain these actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors, not the practice itself.

When political scientists appeal to ‘institutions’, they often evoke something akin to a practice, but they ascribe to it a constraining power greater than my analysis allows. If they do want to ascribe such constraining power to practices, they need to specify what they mean by constraint and how exactly practices constrain actions. Clearly practices – or at least the actions of others – constrain the effects and so the effectiveness of actions. It is unclear, however, how practices can constrain the actions that people might attempt to perform.

*Power.* Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Foucault’s shift to genealogy was his rethinking of power. Genealogists reject as reifications those concepts of power that refer to social relations based on the allegedly given interests of classes or other social groups. They reject these concepts of power on the grounds that people necessarily construct their understanding of their interests through particular and contingent discourses.

As Foucault emphasized, however, there are other ways of thinking about power. For a start, power can refer to the way in which contingent historical backgrounds impact on individuals, influencing their subjectivity and their actions. Power refers here to the constitutive role played by tradition in giving people their beliefs and actions, and so in making the social world. Genealogy is all about power so conceived, since it explains actions and practices by reference to contestable beliefs that emerge out of contingent historical contexts.

In addition, power can refer to the restrictive consequences of the actions of others in defining what we can and cannot do. Restrictive power works across intricate webs. Actors such as elected politicians, senior civil servants, doctors, police officers, and everyday citizens all find their possibilities for action restricted by what others do. In these terms, genealogies may show how various actors restrict what other actors can do in ways that thwart the intentions of policy actors. Local actors – bureaucrats, doctors, and police officers – can draw on their own cultures and traditions to resist policies inspired by the narratives of others in the policy cascade.

### *Historicist explanations*

Let us turn now to the explanatory concepts required by genealogies. Historicist explanations work not by referring to reified mechanisms, correlations, or structures, but by describing contingent patterns of meaningful actions in their specific contexts. These

explanations are not only temporal in that they move through time; they are historical in that they locate the phenomena at a specific moment in time. These historical narratives are based on concepts such as tradition and dilemma (Bevir, 1999).

*Narrative.* A familiar distinction has positivist social science generate causal explanations while histories and genealogies lead to an understanding of beliefs and actions. This distinction wrongly implies that genealogists are trying only to understand or reconstruct objects, not to explain them. Genealogists usually believe their narratives explain beliefs and actions by pointing to their historical causes. More generally, scholars from all sorts of disciplines use the word 'cause' to describe very different explanatory relationships. They use the word 'cause' to indicate the presence of a relationship of the sort that explains the kind of object that interests them. In this view, narrative is the form of explanation that is appropriate to a historicist theory of politics. Narratives work by relating actions to the beliefs and desires that produce them and by situating these beliefs and desires in particular historical contexts.

Narratives depend on the conditional connections between beliefs, desires, and actions. These conditional connections are neither necessary nor arbitrary. Because they are not necessary, political science differs from the natural sciences. Because they are not arbitrary, we can use them to explain actions and practices. Conditional connections exist when the nature of one object draws on the nature of another. They condition each other, so they do not have an arbitrary relationship. Equally, the one does not follow from the other, so they do not have a necessary relationship. They embody contingency.

Although narrative explanations appear in works of fiction, we need not equate genealogy to fiction. Genealogists strive, to the best of their ability, to capture the way events happened in the past or are today. Even if they accept that no fact is simply given to them, they still cannot ignore the facts,

*Tradition.* A tradition is the ideational background against which individuals come to adopt an initial web of beliefs. It influences (without determining or – in a strict philosophical sense – limiting) the beliefs they later go on to adopt. The philosophical justification for this definition of tradition derives from our earlier analysis of situated agency. Traditions help to explain why people hold the beliefs they do; and because beliefs are constitutive of actions, they also help to explain actions. Traditions cannot fully explain actions partly because people act on desires as well as beliefs, and partly because people are agents capable of innovating against the background of a tradition. While a tradition explains why an agent adopted an initial web of beliefs, it consists solely of the beliefs of other actors.

Because positivist political scientists rarely concentrate on meanings, they rarely evoke traditions. They prefer to appeal to allegedly objective social facts that apparently determine the beliefs of actors, or even make it unnecessary to appeal to beliefs at all. Similarly, when they do appeal to meanings, positivists typically reify meanings, treating them either as norms that govern behavior or as one among the several variables that explain outcomes. The distinction between genealogy and positivism is thus especially clear in the former's use of historicist concepts such as tradition to evoke the contingency of social life.

*Dilemma.* A dilemma is any experience or idea that conflicts with someone's beliefs and so forces them to alter the beliefs they inherit as a tradition. It combines with the tradition to explain (although not determine) the beliefs people go on to adopt and so the actions they go on to perform. Dilemmas and traditions cannot fully explain actions because actions are informed by desires as well as beliefs, and because people are situated agents who respond creatively to any given dilemma. Although dilemmas sometimes arise from experiences of the world, we cannot equate them with the world as it is since experiences are always theory-laden. Like meanings in general, dilemmas are always subjective or inter-subjective.

Positivists sometimes adopt concepts such as dilemma or pressure to refer to the sources of change, but they appear then to equate such pressures with objective facts about the world rather than the subjective beliefs of policy actors. If they are to define pressures in this way, they need an analysis of how these pressures lead people to change their beliefs and actions. They need to argue either that people are bound to experience a pressure as it is, or that a pressure leads to new actions (and so presumably beliefs) even though the actor has no subjective awareness of it.

## **Rethinking the state**

A genealogical approach to governmentality requires aggregate and explanatory concepts that clearly eschew structuralism for historicism. One obvious advantage of these concepts is that they clear up ambiguities and resolve problems associated with the structuralist themes found in some work on governmentality. Another advantage may be that they broaden the research agenda associated with governmentality from a focus on the forms of power/knowledge embedded in public policies to genealogical histories of other aspects of the state and contemporary governance.

## *From government to governance*

A genealogical approach to the state refuses to treat it as defined by principles such as the nation, liberty, or even sovereignty. Genealogists deny that the state or particular states are natural entities with core features waiting to be discovered. In their view, the state consists of a plethora of contingent, possibly conflicting, and often transnational, practices. Thus, they trace historical lines back from the practices that interest them to the often surprising and hidden ancestors of that feature of governance. This approach to the state echoes the pluralists of early in the twentieth century (Bartelson, 2001). The pluralists argued that states do not have a metaphysical nature fixed by formal constitutions and institutions or by the common good of its people. They wanted to disaggregate the state into all kinds of competing pressure groups, and they wanted to explore the actual behavior of political actors.

Today the idea of disaggregating the state appears primarily in the literature on governance (Kjaer, 2004). Much of the literature on governance arose during the 1970s and 1980s as political scientists interested in pressure groups and policy networks responded to two challenges. First, the rise of neoliberalism entailed concerted efforts to transform the public sector through the spread of markets, contracting-out, and market

mechanisms. Political science began to appear less relevant than economics to the study of the state. One response was to argue that these neoliberal policies had the unintended consequence of further spreading networks (Rhodes, 1997). This response reworked the idea of policy networks to make them integral to governance conceived as a new pattern of rule. A second challenge to the literature on policy networks was the rise of rational choice theory. Rational choice theorists called on other political scientists to clarify their micro-theory and in particular to establish what the concept of a policy network actually explained and how. Political scientists often responded to this challenge by redefining themselves as concerned with mid-level theory or institutions. Ironically this response forgot that the study of pressure groups and policy networks had emerged as part of a broad shift in topic away from mid-level concepts such as institutions and the state, and toward actual political behavior and the opinions and beliefs that informed it.

The literature on governance consists in no small measure of mid-level studies of the institutional legacy of neoliberal reforms of the state. Governance is associated with the changing nature of power and the state following the public sector reforms of the 1980s. The reforms are said to have precipitated a shift from a hierarchic bureaucracy toward a greater use of markets, quasi-markets, and networks, especially in the delivery of public services. The resulting complexity and fragmentation are such that the state increasingly depends on other organizations to secure its intentions and deliver its policies. Governance evokes a world in which state power is dispersed among a vast array of spatially and functionally distinct networks composed of all kinds of public, voluntary, and private organizations.

Arguably, the literature on governance has forgotten important insights found in earlier studies of policy networks. When political scientists focus on change in the public sector since the 1970s, they can imply that networks are new, even defining network governance in contrast to a powerful hierarchic state. Critics of the governance literature complain that the state remains an important, powerful, and often dominant actor within the policy process. I do not want to try to decide empirical issues about the changing power of the center here. But I do want to suggest if we treat the concept of governance as an extension of earlier work on policy networks, we make it less about a hollowing out of the state or a weakening of the core executive and more about general features of all patterns of rule. Second, the governance literature has arguably forgotten that the general features highlighted by these abstract concepts have more to do with informal links and interactions than with laws and institutions. They forget that the study of policy networks arose as part of a broad shift of focus away from institutions and structures, and towards actual behavior, mentalities, and attitudes.

### *Decentering governance*

A genealogical approach to governmentality may echo themes found in the general literature on governance. However, a genealogical approach also decenters governance, paying particular attention to the diverse meanings within it and the contingent historical roots of these meanings.

The literature on governance often disaggregates the state in functionalist terms. It argues that different institutions and networks arise to fulfill distinct functions required



of the political system. Narratives of contemporary governance thus focus on issues such as the objective characteristics of policy networks and the oligopoly of the political market place. They stress power-dependence, the relationship of the size of networks to policy outcomes, and the strategies the center might use to steer networks. In sharp contrast, a genealogical approach decenters governance, focusing on disaggregated patterns of meaning in action. This approach encourages us to examine the ways in which patterns of rule, including institutions and policies, are created, sustained, and modified as people act on a range of conflicting beliefs. And it also encourages us to explain people's actions not by reference to structures, norms, or modernization, but by appealing to the historical traditions they inherit and dilemmas to which they respond.

A decentered view implies that different people draw on different traditions to reach different beliefs about any pattern of governance. Often their beliefs include some about the failings of existing arrangements. When their understanding of these failings conflicts with their existing beliefs, the failures pose dilemmas for them. The dilemma then pushes them to reconsider their beliefs and so the traditions that inform those beliefs. Crucially, because people confront these dilemmas against the background of diverse traditions, there arises a political contest over what constitutes the nature of the failings and what should be done about them. Exponents of rival positions seek to promote their particular sets of theories and policies. This contest often leads to reforms of governance – reforms that thus arise as a contingent product of a contest of meanings in action. The reformed pattern of governance then displays new failings, posing new dilemmas, and generating competing proposals for reform. There is another contest over meanings, a contest in which the dilemmas are often significantly different, and the traditions have been modified as a result of accommodating the previous dilemmas. Of course, while we can distinguish analytically between patterns of governance and a contest over reforms, we rarely can do so temporally. Rather, the activity of governing continues during most contests, and most contests occur partly within practices of governing. Governance thus consists of a complex and continuous process of interpretation, conflict, and activity that produces ever-changing patterns of rule.

### *Empirical topics*

A genealogical approach to governance highlights contests among diverse and contingent meanings. As a result, it privileges specific new empirical topics, including elite narratives, technologies of power, and popular resistance.

*Elite narratives.* A genealogical approach suggests that political scientists should pay more attention to the traditions against the background of which elites construct their world-views, including their views of their own interests. Moreover, the central elite need not be a uniform group, all the members of which conceive of their interests in the same way, share a common culture, or speak a shared discourse. Political scientists should examine how different sections of the elite draw on different traditions to construct different narratives about the world, their place in it, and their interests and values. In America, for example, contemporary governance has been portrayed as a continuing struggle and hodge-podge of administrative arrangements drawing on traditions of meritocracy,

efficiency, entrepreneurialism, and egalitarianism (Stillman, 2003). Similarly, in Britain, different members of the central elite are inspired by Tory, Whig, liberal, and socialist narratives, and while the dominant narratives in the central civil service used to be Whig ones, a managerial narrative has clearly made headway in recent years.

*Technologies of power.* Even as the central elite may well conceive of the world using diverse narratives, so they often turn to forms of expertise to define specific discourses. Nowadays different traditions of social science influence public policy. A genealogical approach reinforces the existing work on governmentality: it draws attention to the technologies of power that inform policies across different territories and different sectors. Governmentality refers here to the scientific beliefs and associated technologies that govern conduct. It concerns the ways governments and other social actors draw on knowledge to construct policies and practices, especially those that create and regulate subjectivities. Much of the world has witnessed the rise of technologies based on neoliberal knowledge of the markets. Recently policy-makers have begun to devise newer technologies based on institutionalist knowledge of society, networks, social capital, and political legitimacy.

*Popular resistance.* When political scientists neglect agency, they can give the impression that politics and policies arise exclusively from the strategies and interactions of central and local elites. Yet other actors can resist, transform, and thwart elite agendas. A genealogical approach to governmentality may draw attention to the diverse traditions and narratives that inspire street-level bureaucrats and citizens. Policy cultures are sites of struggles not just between strategic elites, but between all kinds of actors with different views and ideals reached against the background of different traditions. Subaltern actors can resist the intentions and policies of elites by consuming them in ways that draw on local traditions and their local reasoning. For example, police officers are often influenced by cultures and traditions that encourage them to prioritize combating crime in way that may lead them to neglect community policing even when it is supported by elite policy-makers. Likewise, citizens may continue to act on territorial loyalties and identities that bear little resemblance to the administrative units crafted by policy-makers.

## Conclusion

The literature on governmentality oscillates between two arguably incompatible modes of inquiry: the structuralist or archaeological and the historicist or genealogical. This article has been an exercise in conceptual and theoretical clarification, defining a clearly historicist or genealogical approach to governmentality. This clarification requires both a fidelity to and a critical distance from existing work on governmentality. My aim was both to offer a systematic account of governmentality as a form of genealogy and to open up new theoretical and empirical areas of research.

First, I reinforced important concepts from Foucault's later work, including genealogy, power/knowledge, and technologies of power. These concepts inspire many of the distinguishing features of the existing work on governmentality. In particular, they inspire the study of the mentalities of rule in which power is rationalized, the policies

and technologies through which these mentalities get translated into organized practices, and so the production of the subjectivities associated with these technologies.

Second, I suggested responses to some of the main concerns that critics have about Foucault's work. Worries about a pernicious relativism and totalizing critique arise from the lingering structuralism that characterizes some of his work. Once we recognize that governmentality is a genealogical mode of inquiry, these worries will trouble us far less. Genealogies embody a historicism that can defend its own validity even while it denaturalizes those beliefs and practices that fail to recognize their historical contingency.

Third, I briefly introduced and analyzed a number of concepts that would make clear that governmentality is a historicist mode of inquiry, not a structuralist one. Some of the concepts, such as practice and power, are already present in work on governmentality. Other concepts redefine existing concepts in governmentality to introduce or emphasize historical modes of thought, for example, 'tradition' provides a diachronic alternative to the more synchronic term 'discourse'. Yet other concepts directly challenged some of the structuralist themes that commentators associate with Foucault: for example, 'situated agency' implies a humanist analysis of the subject in sharp contrast to Foucault's (1970: 386–70) earlier proclamations of the disappearance of man.

Finally, I expanded the empirical agenda open to those studying governmentality. To conceive of governmentality as the genealogy of political practices is to extend its range from technologies of power to other aspects of contemporary governance. In this view, governmentality represents a broad alternative to more positivist approaches to governance. It explores the historical roots of the contingent and conflicting meanings that inform political action. These meanings include not only technologies based on scientific knowledge but also the more general narratives that inspire elite and subaltern actors in the struggle to formulate, implement, and enact policy.

## Notes

1. One of Saussure's students took notes of Saussure's (1993) third and last set of lectures. These notes suggest Saussure's views differed slightly from those published in the *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. Nonetheless, I will not refer to them here since they were only published recently, and were not available to the original editors of the *Course*, nor something that could have influenced the structuralists and post-structuralists.
2. Numerous commentators have suggested Foucault's work runs aground on these aporias (Fraser, 1989; Habermas, 1987; Philp, 1983; Taylor, 1985).

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