

# The Governmentalization of the State: Two Questions of Power

Written by Andreas Aagaard Nohr

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# The Governmentalization of the State: Two Questions of Power

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*'The fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics.'*  
[Bertrand Russell][1]

As suggested by the quote of Bertrand Russell above, power is of exceptional importance in the social sciences. Nevertheless, as a fundamental concept, quite contrary to physics, theories on power within the social sciences are both many and diverse. The governmentalization of the state is, arguably, first and foremost a question of power. Therefore, this essay will start out by examining two juxtaposed questions, or starting points, constituting two scholarly traditions on the subject of power: the traditional question of *'who governs?'* and Foucault's *'how is power exercised?'* Second, building on this conception of power, it will clarify what Foucault means by his notion *'the governmentalization of the state'* and what processes he is describing. Lastly, it will assess the usefulness of governmentality as a conceptual tool for understanding the functioning of the modern state. It will do so by looking at the further development of the concept and scrutinizing some of the criticisms the concept has received. From there, the argument will be made that despite their immediate juxtaposition, the best out of the two traditions ought to be combined for an effective analysis of the modern state. Hence, the question of *'how'* has to supplement the question of *'who?'*

### Two questions of power:

Theorizing about power has a number of traditions. A quick review reveals, first, the *'pluralist'* theories, as formulated by Robert A. Dahl amongst others.[2] The second includes the *'elitist'* theories of power, most notable in Steven Lukes' work on the three-dimensional power concept.[3] Lastly, the third tradition comes from Marxist theories of power such as Benno Teschke' theory of *'social property relations'* or Nicolas Poulantzas' work on the state.[4] However, the unifying feature of all these different theories is that they regard power as an entity that can be utilized, possessed or wielded. In other words, power is material, an entity. Thus, they all pose the Weberian question: *'Who Governs?'* – who has power and what do they do with it?[5] Bent Flyvbjerg claims, in essence, that what is of interest to these theories of power is their *result* and *location* – their *legitimacy* and *foundation*.[6] These traditions of theorizing, first and foremost, ask the following questions: *'Who? – What? – Where?'*[7] An obvious answer within the discipline of International Relations would be the *state*.[8]

In contrast to these traditional approaches to power, Foucault asks: *'how is power exercised?'* By this, Foucault does not mean *'how does [power] manifest itself?'*, but, rather, *'by what means [power] is (...) exercised?'*. He continues by asking: *'what happens when individuals exert (as they say) power over others?'*[9] Foucault starts out his analysis with an inversion of Clausewitz's famous dictum: *'Politics is the continuation of war by other means.'*[10] Thus, for Foucault, power is to be understood in terms of its concrete application in strategies and tactics: that is, *power as a force relation*. Accordingly, to the question *'what is power?'*, Foucault suggests something like this: we have to start with the assumption that *'power as such does not exist'* but that it should be viewed as a dense net of omnipresent

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relations – it comes from below and is everywhere. [11]

In a way, Foucault's answer is very simple: power is that which is *between things*. Power as such cannot logically be an entity that can be utilized, possessed, or wielded, and, therefore, Foucault concludes that 'power is exercised', 'it exists only in action' and that it is that which 'designates relationships between partners.' [12] Furthermore, power relations do not stand in an external relationship to other forms of relations, e.g. economic relations, relations of knowledge, or social relations. Because power is everywhere, there is no general ordering principle. It is produced from one moment to the next and, therefore, power cannot only be restrictive, excluding, or repressive, but also productive. 'Power', Foucault argues, 'produces, it produces reality; it produces domains and objects and rituals of truth.' [13] In sum, within Foucault's conception of power, the question of 'who governs?' becomes problematic. We must, consequently, start our inquiry of power with a question of 'how?' – how is power exercised?

## The Governmentalization of the State:

If power is a relation (i.e. what is between things), what then, is it to govern? In his lectures *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault elaborates over the different meanings of the word 'conduct' (*conduit*). It is, in an ethical sense, the activity of conducting one self and, in a normative sense, the activity of conducting behavior. [14] In the ethical sense, government is the effort to shape, sculpt, and guide choices, needs, and lifestyles of groups and individuals; it is to govern through *freedom* in a suggestive way. Governing is, thus, different from reigning, ruling, or commanding, in that governing implies freedom. Whereas, in the normative sense, government is to establish a code of conduct to which behavior can be judged and regulated. To govern, then, is simply not something the state does, but is, rather, linked to a wide range of human activities. By drawing on literature from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Foucault shows that *to govern* had a wider application than merely 'the Government', which today is synonymous to the state. [15] In contrast, Foucault shows that government is a form of behaviour – it is the act of exercising power, to conduct the *conduct* of others. To be sure, governing, as he sees it, is the 'conduct of conduct,' a behaviour that seeks to 'structure the possible fields of action of others.' [16] Moreover, such behaviour always has some kind of rationality behind it. Out of this deliberation of conducting conduct, Foucault links the technical aspect of governing (*gouverner*) with modes of thought (*mentalité*) and constructs the neologism: 'governmentality' (*la gouvernementalité*). [17]

One should be aware that Foucault's philosophy is about problems. [18] It concerns the history of problems or, rather, the way in which humans have turned problems into *problematizations*. Foucault takes the problem as being an answer to something and, therefore, inquires about the question behind the problem. The problem is an answer to: 'what is the answer to the question? The problem.' [19] In that regard, 'sexuality' is not a part of human nature; it is a part of culture and history. Foucault therefore asks, to which question is sexuality an answer? The answer, which has an implicit solution, is 'how should I conduct myself?' In this process, we see three distinct conceptual items: (1) a *problem space*, which (2) has a number of possible *solutions*, by which we are predisposed to solving problems in a particular way and by particular technologies and rationalities (also called a *dispositif*: a mode of power; that is, a specific *program* that arranges power relations in a particular way), and (3) how these solutions together are *experienced*. [20] These three form a triangle that is present in most of Foucault's work. [21]

In the same way, we can ask: to which question is governmentality the answer? The answer would be: how to govern others? We can call this question 'the problem space of rule' that is occupied by different problems, like sexuality, the legal status of individuals, and the right tied to territory, having a variety of solutions, e.g. Ancient Greek city-state government, pastoral power, or sovereignty as possible solutions, and the *experiences* that follow. For the purpose of this argumentation, however, it is important to clarify that Foucault introduces a theoretical distinction between the individualizing and totalizing images of society in order to better comprehend different dimensions in the exercise of power. [22]

In his lecture *Omnes et Singulatim*, Foucault identifies these two images with shepherd/flock and city/citizen games found, in what he terms, pastoral power and Ancient Greek city rule. [23] They correspond to the individualizing and totalizing images, in that it is the responsibility of the shepherd to care for the life of the individual sheep, with complete accountability, in regard to the self-control and submission of the dispersed flock. The shepherd resembles the individualizing image because he takes care of 'each and every' sheep. Whereas, it is the chief task

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for the politician is to ensure the unity of the citizens of the city, not to care for the lives of individuals. The politician, thus, resembles a captain steering the totality of a ship, again, not its individual passengers. Governmentality can, consequently, be related to two themes: it is where the questions of government of self and the question of governing others come together. These themes, thereby, become a 'guideline' for a 'genealogy of the modern state' that embraces a period from Ancient Greece till contemporary forms of neo-liberalism.[24]

As the conceptualization of power has shown so far, the state is not the origin of power. Rather, it is a step in a process of power relations where two different images of government meet. The Governmentalization of the state involves the processes through which power has been intertwined with the state, tying various power relations to a central body that makes it look as if power is coming from a centre. It is something that we experience when we are being governed. The state should, therefore, be understood as the convergence point for coordinating the different *dispositifs*. The governmentalization of the state is, thus, not a process of substituting old *dispositifs* with new ones. In fact, it is not a *dispositif* because governmentalization constitutes a shift of emphasis on different problematizations that subsequently are bound up in the state. Foucault thinks of these processes as a 'trajectory,' one that society has been on since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[25]

In his lectures, Foucault elaborates on this trajectory: 'we have a triangle: sovereignty, discipline, and governmental management.'[26] By applying the notion of a triangle, he emphasizes that governmentality utilizes the techniques, rationalities and institutions of both sovereignty and discipline, but it also 'seeks to re-inscribe and recode them.'[27] Societies have been gradually governmentalized. According to Foucault, the governmentalization of the state is an ongoing process that is not only a reconfiguration of sovereignty and discipline, but also a whole list of new *dispositifs* that are tied up to the state. Thus, notions like 'bio-political', 'security', 'insurance', 'control', 'project' are all *dispositifs* that have followed after one another and became a part of the governmentalization process.[28] About *dispositifs*, Foucault says that 'the forms and specific situations of the government of men by one another in a given society are multiple; they are superimposed, they cross, impose their own limits sometimes cancel each other out, sometimes reinforce each other.'[29] Furthermore, as Foucault points out, 'because power relations have come more and more under state control' the different *dispositifs* has been 'elaborated, rationalized, and centralized in the form of, or under the auspices of, state institutions.'[30]

## How useful is governmentality as a conceptual tool?

The purpose of conceptual tools lies in the particular problem one is trying to solve. Thus, to use a simple metaphor, while a hammer is good for hammering nails, it is bad for sawing wood. The same goes for conceptual tools, depending on the problem one wishes to solve, different questions have to be asked.

Inspired by Foucault's concept of governmentality, several scholars have critiqued the so-called 'who governs?' tradition. Rose and Miller's 'mentalities of government', Dean's 'analytics of government', and the more general notion of governmentality are all conceptual frameworks developed to show that the question of 'how power is exercised' constitutes serious problems for asking 'who governs?'[31] Needless to say, the concept of governmentality has found a place in the study of both domestic and international relations of power.[32] Nevertheless, some of these interpretations of how governmentality functions in society (domestic as international) emerged without having any real impact; that is, a study of governmentality that fails to incorporate resistance or counter-conduct, let alone that the governmentalization of the state, is constantly challenged by other ways of governing. Consequently, the friction between sovereign, disciplinary, and governmentalized power is still, very much, ongoing.[33]

Foucault's conceptualization of the modern state, as a governmentalized whole, also has its critics. The different power-as-entity theories reacting to Foucault's claim that the modern state was nothing more than a 'composite reality', or a 'mythicized abstraction', pointed to different explanatory holes in his account of how the state was governmentalized.[34] Timothy Mitchell challenges Foucault's account of how the economy emerged as a separate domain on which power relations could be redirected.[35] Philip S. Gorski charges Foucault with being too 'unidimensional', in that he 'ignores the normative bases of discipline and overlooks how "ideal interests" play in social disciplining's propagation.'[36]

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However, one of the strongest charges is to be found by Danica Dupont and Frank Pearce, who criticise Foucault of having a Hegelian historicist reading of history, where western political history is like 'the growth of a plant from a seed, where an idea develops, confronts material obstacles, grows by overcoming and transcending them, to fully and finally realize itself in a particular social order.'<sup>[37]</sup> In countering such a critique, it is necessary to re-emphasise the way in which multiple *dispositifs* are recoded to solve new problems. That, if we insist on adhering to Dupont and Pearce's language, the 'creators' of such governmentality did not foresee. Government does not encounter the same problems at all times, and it most certainly does not have liberal democracy as its 'culminating point.'<sup>[38]</sup>

Some of these critiques are a bit misconstrued. Foucault was not denying that power could be analysed as an entity.<sup>[39]</sup> He was merely pointing out that by doing so, certain features of power would stay hidden. As an analytical tool, theories of power have certain problems that they cannot deal with because of the conceptualization of power used. Even so, as Timothy Mitchell rightfully asks:

'[H]ow does one define the state apparatus and locate its limits? At what point does power enter channels fine enough and its exercise become ambiguous enough that one recognizes the edge of this apparatus? Where in the exterior that enable one to identify it as an apparatus?'<sup>[40]</sup> Thus, a question of 'locus of power' has to be asked at some point, but when?

As an ideal-type categorization, this essay suggests that these two traditions be situated as two extremes along an axis between the question of 'who?' to 'how?' On the one side, we end up in an almost nominalist account of agency, where the ones who govern can do anything without referring or grounding their actions in any type of rationality or program for action. On the other, we end up with an essentialist, or super-structural, rationality that governs through individuals and determines their behaviour in the smallest detail. While the former has difficulty explaining any form of stability, the latter finds it almost impossible to explain change.<sup>[41]</sup> Although none of these positions are possible to uphold, and the argument here is not that anyone is attempting just that, this essay seeks to show that to define power in this way is worthwhile when we have to assess the usefulness of conceptualizing the state as a governmentalized one.

With this ideal-type sketch in mind, the academic dispute between those who ask 'who governs?' and 'how is power exercised?' should be regarded as unproductive. The solution ought to be pragmatic. We must follow Richard Rorty's dictum that 'The way to re-enchant the world ... is to stick to the concrete.'<sup>[42]</sup> Building on this approach, Flyvbjerg insists that both questions have their rightful place in the analysis of power. He practically combines the two questions and asks: 'what are the most immediate and most local power relations operating, and how do they operate?'<sup>[43]</sup> Flyvbjerg's reading of Foucault's question of *how* becomes: 'what "governmental rationalities" are at work when those who govern, govern?'<sup>[44]</sup> We, therefore, have to keep in mind that governmentality is but one amongst many ways of governing. It is between the different governmental rationalities that the concrete exercise of power takes place. For social scientist to be able to distinguish between them, we have to supplement the questions of 'Who? - What? - Where?' with "How" and *visa versa*.<sup>[45]</sup>

The usefulness of combining the questions can be demonstrated with an example, as with how the 'governmentality of biodiversity' yields to the governmental rationalities of sovereign nation-states in the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy.<sup>[46]</sup> The value of Foucault's term 'the governmentalization of state' is shown by seeing power not as an entity yielded by the state, but as a dense net of omnipresent force relations. We must follow power relations around through all their twists and turns - power is exercised not only by states, but also by the European Commission, constellations of interests groups such as 'friends of fish' or 'friends of fishermen', or transnational agencies and think tanks.<sup>[47]</sup> However, when adhering to the conceptualization of power that defines it not as a possession but as relation, it becomes abundantly clear that 'the governmentality of biodiversity', as it is traced in various relations, has to compete with other governmental rationalities. As such, 'Placing the governmentality of biodiversity as rationality in the context of power it proves ineffective and with no real impact. It would be true to uphold that rationality must see itself outplayed by power in the context of the CFP.'<sup>[48]</sup>

The term 'the governmentalization of the state' shows its usefulness in the above example. By identifying a 'governmentality of biodiversity,' a particular way of solving the problem of biodiversity, it is competitive with other

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solutions that address other problems (i.e. sovereignty). We can see that different *dispositifs* come together and bring about an experience of the international. We can call this the *experience*, to use Foucault's term, and a play on how International Relations sees its object of study, of the Westphalian state-system. This is where the conceptualization is useful, because it can effectively challenge the state-centric approaches within International Relations, in particular.

## Conclusion:

The beginning of this essay juxtaposed two questions of power, assuming that they were somewhat mutually exclusive. While most theories of power conceptualize power as an entity, something material that can be possessed or claimed, and, thus, ask 'who governs?', Foucault, instead, asks 'how power is exercised?' By this, he wants to suggest that power only exists in force relations, that is between things as a dense net of omnipresent relations. Power, therefore, is exercised and it exists only in action. Furthermore, power transcends other relations and is productive.

With this conceptualization of power, governing takes on a different meaning of reigning, ruling, or commanding. It has a broader meaning than implied by the modern usage of Government. Foucault links government with modes of thought and creates the word 'governmentality', indicating that they should be studied together. Governmentality poses the problem: how to govern other? While at the same time, it answers it with possible solutions (*dispositifs*). The governmentalization of the state is the process through which power relations have been intertwined within the state: we experience power as if is coming from a centre. In other words, the state has become the convergence point for coordinating the different *dispositifs*.

The last section of the essay argued that ,between the various attacks and defends of the term 'the governmentalization of the state', it would be liable to adopt a pragmatic solution. By combining the traditions of 'how' and 'why', it is argued that power should be studied at the most local power relations, with an emphasis being on governmental rationalities. This has been shown with reference to the 'governmentality of biodiversity' and the challenges it meets by the concrete exercise of power within the EU. By drawing on this example, this essay has suggested that the international is but an *experience* and the effect of the governmentalization of the state.

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[5] Flyvbjerg, Bent, *Making Social Science Matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*, Translated by Steven Sampson, Cambridge University Press (2001) p. 123.

[6] Ibid. p. 123.

[7] Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, p.123.

[8] That the state has a privileged position in the field of IR is evident in most IR scholarship: See for example, Morgenthau, Hans (1948) *Politics Among Nations*, New York: McGraw-Hill; Waltz, Kenneth (2001) *Man, the State and War*, Columbia University Press; Waltz, Kenneth (2010) *Theory of International Politics*, Reissued Waveland Press, Inc.

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[10] Michel Foucault, *Society must be Defended – Lectures at the Collège De France 1975-76*, Translated by David Macey, Penguin Books (2004). p. 13-19.

[11] Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p. 217.

[12] Ibid. p. 217-219 Although, Foucault recognises that the use of the word 'partners' can be misconstruing.

[13] Foucault, Michel (1977) *Discipline and Punishment: The birth of the prison*, Translated from French by Alan Sheridan, London: Penguin Books, p. 194.

[14] Foucault, Michel (2007) *Security, Territory, Population – Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977-78*, Translated by Graham Burchell, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 192-193; For a more accessible explanation see Dean, Mitchell (2010) *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: SAGE p. 17.

[15] Foucault, Michel (2007) *Security, Territory, Population*

[16] Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p. 211.

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[17] Foucault, Michel (2007) *Security, Territory, Population*, p. 108.

[18] In fact, with inspiration from Anders Fogh Jensen and Foucault himself, I would suggest that Foucault is writing the history of *experience* (subjectification) in the history of *solutions* (governmentality) and in the history of *problems* (veridiction): See, Jensen, Anders Fogh (2006) *Mellem Ting: Foucaults filosofi*, Copenhagen: Det lille Forlag; and Foucault, Michel (2010) *The Government of Self and Others – Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977-78*, Translated by Graham Burchell, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-6.

[19] Jensen, Anders Fogh (2006) *Mellem Ting: Foucaults filosofi*, Copenhagen: Det lille Forlag, p. 19

[20] Ibid. pp. 19-22

[21] On *dispositif* see: Ibid. pp. 36, 44-48, 177, and 189; The *problem-solution-experience* triangle is very clear in for example, Foucault, Michel (1965) *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Translated from French by Richard Howard, New York: Random House; and (1977) *Discipline and Punishment: The birth of the prison*, Translated from French by Alan Sheridan, London: Penguin Books.

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[25] Foucault, Michel (2007) *Security, Territory, Population*, pp. 106-110.

[26] Ibid. p. 107-108.

[27] Dean, Mitchell (2010) *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: SAGE, p. 29.

[28] Jensen, Anders Fogh (2006) *Mellem Ting: Foucaults filosofi*, pp. 189-309.

[29] Foucault, Michel (1983) 'The Subject and Power', in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, University of Chicago Press, p. 224.

[30] Ibid. p. 224.

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pp. 119-138.

[34] For an overview see, Steinmetz, George (1999) 'Introduction: Culture and the State' in Steinmetz, George. (ed), *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*, Cornell University Press, pp. 1-49.

[35] Mitchell, Timothy (1999) 'Society, Economy and the State Effect' in Steinmetz, George (ed), *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*, Cornell University Press p. 76.

[36] Gorski, Philip S. (19) 'Calvinism and State-Formation in Early Modern Europe' in Steinmetz, George (ed), *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*, Cornell University Press p.161

[37] Dupont, Danica and Frank Pearce (2001) 'Foucault contra Foucault: Rereading the "governmentality" papers' in *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol. 5(2) pp. 123-158.

[38] Ibid. p. 133.

[39] Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p. 222.

[40] Timothy, Mitchell (1999) 'Society, Economy and the State Effect', p. 76.

[41] For more on the discussion, on explaining 'change' and 'stability' with regard to Foucault, see: Friedland, Rodger and Robert R. Alford (1991) 'Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices and Institutional Contradictions' in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, Edited by Powell, Walter W. and Paul J. DiMaggio, London: The University of Chicago Ltd. pp. 248-253 and 253-254

[42] Cited from Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, p. 129; In fact the original Danish title of *Making Social Science Matter* was 'Det Konkrete Videnskab' (Science of the Concrete).

[43] Flyvbjerg, Bent (2001) *Making Social Science Matter*: for an example of this way of inquiry applied to domestic politics see: Flyvbjerg, Bent (1998) *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*, Translated by Steven Sampson, Chicago University Press.

[44] Flyvbjerg, Bent (2001) *Making Social Science Matter*, p. 131

[45] Flyvbjerg, Bent (2001) *Making Social Science Matter*, p. 131

[46] Nøhr, Andreas Aagaard (2011) 'The Governmentality of Biodiversity in the EU's Common Fisheries Policy.' in *The Interdisciplinary Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 7 Nr. 1 pp. 1-14

[47] Ibid. p. 10-11

[48] Ibid. p. 12

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