Foucault Studies

INTRODUCTION

Foucault Studies Special Issue: Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities[1]
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This special issue is based on contributions to a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded workshop entitled *Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities* held at the University of Victoria, Canada in November 2012. This workshop drew together academics from a diverse range of disciplines who were using ethnographic or quasi ethnographic methodologies to analyse neoliberalism from a governmentality perspective in order to foster dialogue and debate around studies of neoliberal governmentalities. The aim of this special issue is to bring the work of some of these scholars together in order to demonstrate the theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions they are making to studies of neoliberal governmentality. Specifically, it aims to show that scholars working with ethnographic methodologies are developing new conceptual toolkits for understanding contemporary power that go beyond conventional analytics of governmentality. The ethnographies of neoliberal governmentalities presented here emerge at the intersection of two major concerns in the current social science literature: 1) a recognition of the analytical purchase that comes with understanding the present as strongly shaped by neoliberal rationalities for governance; and 2) an uneasiness with the ways that much analysis of neoliberalism lapses into a set of polemic generalities, and dispenses with nuanced descriptive investigation.

The content of this special issue thus seeks to extend familiar debates about governmentality and neoliberal governmentality into new terrains. *Foucault Studies* has been the location for important debates about Foucault's later works including his analysis of neoliberal political rationalities. However, to date the overwhelming emphasis has been on philosophical reflections on his corpus or philosophical application. Although a number of recent special issues, including on the special issue 'Neoliberal Governmentality' include contributions from social scientists, there has been relatively little reflection on the contribution

that social science scholars have made to Foucauldian scholarship, and particularly their contribution to his later work on neoliberalism.

This special issue emerges out of a workshop that put together social science work on neoliberalism and governmentality that is rarely considered together. Contributors come from diverse social sciences disciplines, including sociology, criminology, geography, and anthropology, and the articles address topics that range from a consideration of governance of non-market subjects in the global south, to the role of non-liberal rationalities in the governance of urban living. What these scholars and their articles have in common is that they use ethnographic methodologies to interrogate governmentality and neoliberalism. Although these scholars do not adhere to a single definition of neoliberalism, all refuse neoliberalism as a "master category"[2] or something that is necessarily "bigger, stronger, more structural and more structuring than other things in the field."[3] Together these articles suggest that neoliberalism is not the only important form of power within the social field. Second, the articles in this special issue move away from many of the easy assertions that dominate existing discussions about neoliberalism. Rather than assuming we know what neoliberalism is, and providing us with familiar stories about individualized market rule, these articles, which offer close-up examinations of neoliberal thought and practice in diverse geographic areas, illustrate that neoliberal rationalities are themselves diverse.

This special issue presents an extended review essay, the work of three scholars whose ethnographic explorations of neoliberalism extend over a decade, together with the work of an emerging scholar in the field. Each of these researchers simultaneously draws inspiration from Foucault's analytics of governmentality and his reflections on neoliberalism, while eschewing a reliance on archival methods. In the process these scholars have not only provided fresh empirical accounts of political rationalities and neoliberal rationalities, but they have also re-worked key concepts within studies of governmentalities.

As Tania Li states in her article in this special issue, in her previous work she has used her ethnographic work to examine the practices through which assemblages are pulled together and what happens to them when they hit the ground. Indeed over the space of approximately a decade she had used ethnographic material to re-think our conceptualization of governmental rationalities and neoliberal rationalities.[4] Her primary contribution to the field has been her concept of a "governmental assemblage," which, as she explains in her article in this special issue is the "field of knowledge, practices and devices

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[2] Jermier, John M., Knights, David, and Nord, Walter R. 1994. *Resistance and power in organizations.* London; New York: Routledge p. 158.

[3] Durkheim, Émile, and Karady, Victor. 1975. *Textes. 2, 2.* Paris: Éd. de Minuit p. 191

[4] Tania Murray Li, "Beyond "the State" and Failed Schemes," *American Anthropologist,* vol. 107, no. 3 (2005), 383-394; Tania Li, "Practices of Assemblage and Community Forest Management," *Economy and Society,* vol. 36, no. 2 (2007a), 263-293; Tania Li, *Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2007b).

from which particular programs of intervention are derived."[5] Through this concept Li provides an original way of understanding the relationship between political rationalities, neoliberalism, and practices. Li posits that a "governmental assemblage" is "assembled under a dominant governmental ethos or rationality—a characteristic way of understanding the work of government".[6] Thus we can distinguish between different variants of governmental rationalities. But this does not mean that rationalities operate autonomously. Instead there is "often more than one rationality present in a particular assemblage".[7] Finally, "rationalities become inscribed in practices or systems of practice that take shape in relation to problems to be solved, an accumulation of laws formulated in different eras, habits of thinking, inscription devices, material elements (trees, soil, water, labour etc), forms of knowledge, social relations, compromises, and critical responses to previous assemblages and their effects." Li places "assemblages" rather than rationalites at centre stage and thus argues that our focus needs to be on "rationalities (what makes it rational to think in this way, to proceed in this manner)" and on "the work of assemblage, which involves managing fractures, dealing with incoherences, and forging alignments."[8] Within her article she puts this approach to work in order to understand the shifting governmental assembledges for governing non-market subjects in the global south, drawing attention to the work of assemblage, and also the ways that colonial assemblages were shaped by liberal rationalities while contemporary assemblages are shaped by neoliberal rationalities.[9]

Randy Lippert has similarly sought to re-think neo-liberal governmentalities through ethnographic work, but his particular focus has been on the role of non-liberal rationalities. In his work *Sanctuary, Sovereignty, Sacrifice: Canadian sanctuary incidents, power, and law*[10] Lippert drew attention to contemporary pastoral power and the ways that this logic of governing intertwined with and re-worked neoliberal rationalities and practices. Within his article in this special issue Lippert once again draws our attention to the presence of non-liberal rationalities. As he argues "largely absent from governmentality-related accounts of urban neo-liberalism is acknowledgement of other relevant governing logics, including those operating in … private (or privatized) urban realms, or across private-public boundaries".[11] Specifically, through an ethnographic study focused on business improvement districts (BID) and the condominium corporation (condo) Lippert draws attention to the logic of the "police" in urban governance noting that when the rationality of the "police" is invoked in governmentality studies it "typically appears as the defunct antecedent

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[5] Li, *Foucault Studies*, Issue 18 (2014), 34-48.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Randy K. Lippert, *Sanctuary, Sovereignty, Sacrifice: Canadian Sanctuary Incidents, Power, and Law* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 226.

[11] Lippert, *Foucault Studies*, Issue 18 (2014), 49-65.

of early liberalism,[12] thus serving as a convenient foil for Foucault's account of liberal governmentality".[13] Drawing on Stephen Collier's work, he argues that what "is now required [is] to show how styles of analysis, techniques or forms of reasoning … are being recombined with other forms, and to diagnose the governmental ensembles that emerge from these *recombinations*."[14] Lippert concludes that 'there is little evidence that "police power" has become less prevalent in Western cities through the 20th Century or since urban neo-liberalization commenced.'[15] Instead "police" and neo-liberalism co-exist within urban governance, and the logic of the "police" is being transformed through marketization.[16]

Within geography Kathryn Mitchel has sought to use an analytics of governmentality together with quasi-ethnographic methodologies to interrogate neoliberal subjectivities, and to map similarities and differences across distinct geographic spaces.[17] As she argues in her co-authored article with Chris Lizotte in this special issue, "It is through genealogy and ethnography on specific sectors and in particular places that one can identify the moments and practices through which assumptions about moral authority and markets become common sense."[18] Drawing on existing literature on neoliberal thought and morality, archival research on philanthropy and education as well as personal interviews with Seattle-based reform advocates, representatives of philanthropic organizations, and school administrators they show how certain forms of moral agency are activated and enhanced by philanthropic funding while other kinds of agency are discouraged.[19] Through focusing on a specific place and sector they reveal unexpected aspects of neoliberal governmentality. In particular they challenge a more straight forward understanding of responsibilisation whereby responsibility is shifted from the state to the individual by showing that parents were encouraged to engage in certain moral economies of care for their children's education (supporting charter schools), but discouraged from engaging in others (supporting alternative schools that form part of the public system).

Daniel Fridman's article engages with the growing sociological literature on the economic actor in neoliberalism (or the *homo economicus*). As he points out much of this literature focuses on programmers' plans rather than on uncovering "the nuances of the micro-

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[12] e.g., Alan Hunt and Gary Wickham, *Foucault and Law: Toward a Sociology of Law as Governance* (Boulder: Pluto Press, 1994).

[13] Lippert, *Foucault Studies*, Issue 18 (2014), 49-65.

[14] Stephen J. Collier, "Topologies of Power: Foucault's Analysis of Political Government beyond 'Governmentality'" *Theory, Culture, and Society*, vol. 26, no. 6 (2009), 51. *Emphasis added*.

[15] Lippert, *Foucault Studies*, Issue 18 (2014), 49-65.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Katharyne Mitchell, "Educating the National Citizen in Neoliberal Times: From the Multicultural Self to the Strategic Cosmopolitan," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2003), 387-403; Katharyne Mitchell, "Neoliberal Governmentality in the European Union: Education, Training, and Technologies of Citizenship," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2006), 389-407.

[18] Mitchell and Lizotte, *Foucault Studies*, Issue 18 (2014), 66-89.

[19] Ibid.

processes through which their subjectivity is formed."[20] Furthermore, while studies of governmentality frequently point out that governance occurs beyond the state there has been comparatively little attention focused on the ways that *homo economicus* is promoted via non-state media such as books about financial self-help. Fridman's ethnographic study of financial self-help in New York City and in Buenos Aires, Argentina, enabled him to document "the self-constitution of subjects in relation to finance as it happened".[21] As he argues "ethnography offered what archival research cannot: observation of ongoing micro processes of self-formation."[22] Fridman argues that this enables researchers to have greater empathy for their research subjects, something that is particularly important "when the researcher is critical of the advocacy of those subjects, as it is largely the case in studies that use the term neoliberalism, a view from afar runs the risk of impeding an adequate understanding of local cultures for lack of political or ideological empathy."

In summary, these scholars draw on ethnographic methodologies that combine interviews and participant observations, together with documents, to produce accounts of social change that recognize neoliberal rationalities as incredibly influential and powerful, but not the sole, or necessarily the most important, factor shaping all facets of social life, or social change. In these accounts the relative importance of neoliberalism becomes a question rather than an assumption. These accounts seek to be attentive to the multiplicity and dynamics of social life, and the use of ethnographic, or quasi-ethnographic methods help to foreground the presence of non-liberal rationalities, as well as the dynamics of social life, including dynamics of political alliances, and resistances and failures, and the actual processes and forms of subjectivity formation over time.

At the same time Tania Li's article offers a timely reminder that while ethnography can figure as a "form of critical knowledge" about governmental assemblages, ethnographic knowledge also plays a role in forming and supporting them. In her article she examines how ethnographic knowledge was used to "manage relations between rural populations and land in the global south" by helping to fix "particular types of land, and particular types of people, as non-market subjects".[23] She illustrates how this fixing first emerged in the colonial period in the context of liberal political rationalities and is currently being renewed under neoliberal rationalities that she argues operate with an explicitly universal view of human nature as *homo economicus*. Thus within neoliberal assemblages ethnography is not focused on "discovering the natural processes intrinsic to particular social groups in order to secure them" but instead on identifying "contextual factors that rational actors incorporate into their decisions, so that those factors can be adjusted".[24]

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[20] Fridman, *Foucault Studies*, Issue 18 (2014), 90-112.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Li, *Foucault Studies*, Issue 18 (2014), 34-48.
[24] Ibid.

In summary, the papers in this special issue illustrate how ethnographies of governmentalities may figure as a "form of critical knowledge" but also how ethnographic knowledge has historically formed part of oppressive governmental assembledges and will continue to do so.

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