

Foucault Studies

© Michael Lait 2015

ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No. 19, pp. 262-265, June 2015

REVIEW

Stephanie Rutherford, *Governing the Wild: Ecotours of Power*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011), ISBN: 978-0-8166-7447-3

The concept of “green governmentality” is something that Foucault — whose back was decidedly turned away from nature¹ — would have never envisioned. Studies of green governmentality first appeared in the mid 1990s and have continued to appear at a steady pace since then.² Stephanie Rutherford’s *Governing the Wild: Ecotours of Power* is the first monograph to analyze green governmentality, with case studies of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), Disney’s Animal Kingdom, ecotours at Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, and Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Rutherford eschews the genealogical method that is typical of governmentality studies in favor of a “strict Foucauldian view of discourse analysis” (183). The privileging of discourse becomes evident in the stated aim of the book, which is to critique the regime of truth linked to green governmentality. Discourse analysis helps Rutherford find the “underlying narratives” (xxiv) in the different case studies, and she discerns two inter-related themes common to them all. First, scientific authority is invoked in the framing of environmental issues, with uncontrolled population growth and wasteful consumption practices routinely identified as key contributing factors. Second, the range of solutions offered in all the cases remains limited to transforming consumer choices, implementing policy changes, and/or deploying technological fixes (165). The central thrust of Rutherford’s critique consists in pointing out the notable absences in this truth regime: “So, for example, the kind of environmental justice work that pays attention to the intersections of race, class, gender, and nature is not present. Nor is a sustained critique of industrial capitalism and its effects on nature” (86, see also 95, 135). Further, neither the AMNH, Disney, ecotour operators, nor

¹ Didier Éribon, *Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 46, cited in Éric Darier, *Discourses of the Environment* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 6.

² See, *inter alia*, Eric Darier, “Environmental Governmentality: The Case of Canada’s Green Plan”, *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1996), 585-606; Paul Rutherford, “The Entry of Life into History”, in Éric Darier (ed), *Discourses of the Environment* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 37-62; Timothy Luke, “Environmentality as Green Governmentality”, in Éric Darier (ed), *Discourses of the Environment* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 121-151; Angela Oels, “Rendering Climate Change Governable: From Biopower to Advanced Liberal Government?” *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2005), 185-207; Stephanie Rutherford, “Green Governmentality: Insights and Opportunities in the Study of Nature’s Rule”, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2007), 291-307.

Al Gore “take apart the neoliberal order that both creates and increasingly commodifies environmental problems” (81). Like some of the other concepts invoked in the book (e.g., Baudrillard’s “simulacra” and “hyperreal,” Latour’s “immutable mobiles” and “rituals of purification”), an explication of capitalism and neo-liberalism are never provided to the reader. Nevertheless, given the limitations found in the narratives she examines, Rutherford remains convinced that, “although there is never one truth, there are better stories to tell” (182).

Before proceeding to address her search for these alternate narratives, this review will further unpack the contents of the discourse analysis, one which does not approach green governmentality as a monolithic entity (195). Instead, there are four “kinds” of green governmentality: scientific, corporate, aesthetic, and ethical. On the basis of this attention to empirical specificity, Rutherford claims that her analytic grid surpasses “Foucault and studies that use governmentality [which] often seem to marginalize or erase difference in the administration of rule” (xv).

Each case study exemplifies one particular kind of green governmentality, but all are present to varying degrees. The operation of scientific green governmentality is prevalent at the AMNH, which discursively frames nature as under threat and in need of scientific management (2, 20, 39). The museum is an agent of scientific green governmentality: it governs the truth of nature, circumscribing how it is understood and acted upon, without taking into account the “global structures of inequality that in large part produce ecological destruction” (35). The same is true of Disney’s Animal Kingdom, which ignores the structural causes of ecological catastrophe: “Not mentioned are the environmental costs of suburban life, the American reliance on oil, or the complicated impacts of resources extraction...” (81). Instead, Disney sanitizes its representations of nature and non-Western cultures; it offers an example of corporate green governmentality, wherein nature is commodified to be “experienced as fantasy, play, and spectacle” (44). While these findings are rather unsurprising, Rutherford’s analysis confirms other scholarly studies of the AMNH and Disney which have shown that the presumed separation between museum and theme park has now been more or less elided. That is, both institutions are engaged in forms of “edutainment.” In order to improve visitor numbers, the AMNH has drawn upon the “tools of theme park culture” (13). For its part, Disney is involved in the production of knowledges about nature, commissioning studies as well as conducting its own research. (75) Rutherford argues that Disney has become “a site where “truths” about nature are produced and circulated” (82, see also xxi). So, although Disney is the epitome of corporate green governmentality, it functions on scientific registers as well.

Aesthetic green governmentality is most prominent in the ecotours of Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks that Rutherford participated in. While the “wild” animals inhabiting these parks were once shot at by the guns of hunters, they are now captured by the cameras of eco-tourists. According to Rutherford, “green governmentality can work on an aesthetic register, not only governing the production of knowledge but also how we come to see the wilderness as beautiful and rejuvenating, and because of these characteris-

tics, in need of human protection" (90). Once again, it is the subject-position elaborated at this site that serves as the main target of Rutherford's critique. In the ecotours, consumption—paying thousands of dollars to experience "pristine wilderness"—is equated with action, which, in turn, leads to redemption (137). The environmental citizen is one who consumes consciously, while more or less accepting the status quo, i.e., "neo-liberal capitalism." Rutherford's final case study serves to further reinforce this view. Al Gore's documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, exemplifies ethical green governmentality. Relying on "the impartiality and unquestioned truth of science to warn of impending global apocalypse" (176), Gore then exhorts "us"—the viewer and consumer—to individual action. As Rutherford points out, Gore's "recommendations offer a particular kind of subjectivity that, as in the previous cases elaborated in this book, largely hinges on a form of green consumption" (164). Having found the limitations to the regime of truth (of American environmentalism), Rutherford then seeks "to think of a space outside of green governmentality" (42, see also xii, 138).

The search for a space outside proves futile however. As Rutherford writes in the conclusion to the book: "I am sad to say that I provide no coherent answers here, no roadmap for change" (196). Her inability to find an escape-route from the green governmentalities she diagnoses has less to do with the absence of an outside space than her selection of the case studies themselves. In the introduction, Rutherford contends that "[t]o understand the ways in which sites of consumption are important for how nature is imagined, deployed, and ruled, there must be traffic between notions of governmentality and commodification" (xviii). Leaving aside the methodological question of why governmentality studies have strenuously avoided the latter, Rutherford's case studies have not only created traffic, but outright congestion. Because the AMNH, Disney, ecotour operators, and Al Gore are so heavily invested in processes of capitalist exchange, the four forms of green governmentality appear inextricably linked to the commodification of nature. But are green governmentalities restricted to sites of consumption? Could they also be operative in sites of production, such as co-operative farms where discourses of nature govern practices and shape subjectivities? Thus, there is a clear asymmetry in Rutherford's selection of case studies, and this has consequences for her overall diagnosis.

Indeed, for someone who has been influential in the development of green governmentality studies, it is surprising that such a negative critique would be levelled. It must be tempered, and Stephanie Rutherford makes a number of caveats throughout the book that would appear to support this. For instance, she does not think that the prescriptive appeals to consumption choices "are inherently bad; indeed, I have incorporated many of them into my own life as I seek to mediate my own role in environmental destruction" (35). Nor does she want to come across as "dismissive" of Disney's efforts to reduce its ecological footprint (80). Taken together, these examples already reveal that, perhaps, there is not such a "desperate need" to find a space outside of green governmentality (203). Are its various "agents" all reducible to functionaries and allies of neo-liberal capitalism? Even if there are problems with green governmentality, seeking an outside at this point seems premature,

especially when the only alternative suggested by Rutherford is a vague call to practice a “relational ethics” (197). It seems that the task at this point is less to find an outside to green governmentality, than to re-invent it.

Michael Lait
PhD Candidate
Department of Sociology
Carleton University
1125 Colonel By Drive
Ottawa Canada
K1S 5B6
michael.lait@carleton.ca