

EXCHANGES

Neoliberalism, Governmentality, Ethnography: A Response to Michelle Brady

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There is an important discussion to be had about Foucault and the social sciences. As the author of a study on the relation of Foucault's "critical and effective histories" to the use of history in sociology and social theory, I tried to make a contribution to that debate some years ago.¹ Then Foucault was still a somewhat marginal figure; now, as many would be quick to point out, he is among the most cited authors in the social sciences. It would appear that today "questions of method" are less about meeting Foucault on something like his methodological home turf, that of genres of historical writing and analysis, or of textual exegesis and discourse analysis, and more about qualitative methodological techniques of interviews, focus groups, observations, participation, fieldwork and so on. There is doubtless a problem for scholars who want to maintain the use of methods that are indigenous to social anthropology and qualitative sociology, for instance, and who find considerable inspiration in a thinker who, despite his political engagements, largely confined himself to the analysis of texts. The latter was the case even in his one major analysis of contemporary material in *The Birth of Biopolitics* in which he began the genealogy of different forms of neoliberalism. Moreover, what do social scientists do when confronted with a thinker who remained deeply skeptical about them and was concerned to chart the field of political and ethical effects of a claim to a knowledge of subjectivity or a science of the human?

It is against this background that I was interested to see that what I had taken to be a decidedly "theoretical" journal, *Foucault Studies*, has devoted a special issue to "Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities." The issue includes an introduction and five papers, which vary in the extent of their reliance on ethnographic methods, construed very broadly. Four of these papers are on empirical topics, including urban police, the global south, educational activism and financial self-help. They more or less perform the case for ethnography in this area rather than argue for it. However, one paper, by the editor of the special issue, Michelle Brady, seeks to review the ethnographic literature "that interrogates neoliberal governmentalities,"

¹ *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault's Methods and Historical Sociology* (Routledge: London, 1994). I would like to thank Kristian Bondo Hansen for his constructive and encouraging comments on an earlier draft of this piece, and other interlocutors at the Departmental writing seminar at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, CBS, 2014, for helping me unlock the potentiality of this response.

particularly for Foucauldian scholars.² In doing so, it hopes to arrest what it views as something of a decline in Foucauldian studies of governmentality: their tendency to “present neoliberal transformations in monolithic and linear terms.”³ In other words, this paper promises to address a contemporary issue at the heart of the relation of Foucault to the social sciences.

“Ethnographies of neoliberal governmentalities,” as the title of her piece puts it, will arrest this tendency by beginning with the “everyday,” reject a priori coherence, and focus on “governmental ensembles (sic) (or assemblages) that link neoliberal political rationalities with non-liberal rationalities.”⁴ They “explore how neoliberal thought and practice is transformed across space and time.”⁵ One of the motivations for this move to ethnography is “a discomfort with the polemics, generalities and recycling of familiar narratives.”⁶ Among the advantages of this move is that it can address the “Achilles’ heel” of the governmentality literature, “its lack of attention to multiplicity and context,” and it can do this because of its attention to “actual people” as well as “actual processes” of subject-formation.⁷ Traditional text-bound governmentality studies, by contrast, “can more effortlessly bracket out this multiplicity and complexity” and “more easily conclude (or imply) that neoliberal rationalities are the most important rationality within an everyday social field.”⁸

We know there are many perspectives on Foucault and his work. But at least two are in play here: one is the Foucault of the schemata and the other the Foucault of multiplicity and complexity. The latter appeals to those undertaking ethnography in that he valorizes not the production of concepts (such as “discipline,” “biopolitics,” or “governmentality”) or schema (Bentham’s institutional plans) but analytical sensitivity to heterogeneity, multiplicity, contingency, locality, etc., over homogenizing, unifying, necessary and totalizing narratives. This genre of writing tends to pluralize just about everything, as the title of the article and special issue illustrates. In this sense, Brady is strictly correct to draw upon those Foucauldian approaches that stress the study of the assemblage of heterogeneous elements over narratives of the movement of one form of power and governmentality to another.

My impression is that the most common word now used to designate a heterogeneous ensemble of practices, discourses, etc., in the Foucauldian literature is “dispositive” (*dispositif*), which Foucault himself most fully adumbrated in the first lectures of *Security, Territory, Population*.⁹ *Dispositif* has been translated as “deployment” or more commonly “apparatus,” e.g. in the English translation of *La volonté de savoir* and in the interview translated as “The Confes-

² Michelle Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities: from the Neoliberal Apparatus to Neoliberalism and Governmental Assemblages,” *Foucault Studies* 18 (2014), 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹ See, for example, the excellent articles by Jeffrey Bussolini, “What is a dispositive?” in *Foucault Studies*, no. 10 (2010), 85-107, and Sverre Raffnsøe, Marius Gudmand-Høyer, and Morten S. Thaning, “Foucault’s dispositive: the perspicacity of dispositive analytics in organizational research,” *Organization* (2014), doi: 10.1177/1350508414549885; Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78*, translated by Graham Burchell. (London: Palgrave, 2007).

sion of the Flesh.”¹⁰ Brady unfortunately offers no extended discussion of this concept in the literature—bar an indirect reference via the work of Tania Li—which would have been a key way of strengthening her case. Another possible reference is the French word *agencement*, which has been translated as “assemblage,” and has a distinctive Deleuzian heritage with certain resemblances to the idea of *dispositif*.¹¹ Indeed, there might be a tension between the Foucault that examines *dispositifs* and the one who elaborates concepts and narratives of power and governmentality.

Even allowing for this tension in Foucault himself, another obstacle presents itself to ethnography’s use of Foucauldian concepts according to Brady, what others would call its focus on “diagrams” or even on the programmatic aspects of power and governmentality. Thus she cites Foucault in “Questions of Method” as saying that the actual functioning of prisons was a “witches’ brew compared to the beautiful Benthamite machine.”¹² Ethnographies will help us, according to Brady, reverse this diagrammatic emphasis. They will, unsettle the distinction between “studies of governmentality and sociological studies of practice” (the latter is one word that does not get pluralized), by making us realize that we can only go beyond “a very thin sense of schemas for governing” by embracing an ethnographic methodology that can give us a “more finely grained picture” of the problems these schemas were addressing.¹³ Brady thus offers us a reversal of Foucault’s project, which is not a problem in itself, but she seems to fail to grasp what is at stake for Foucault himself. In the very next paragraph to the one she has just cited, Foucault says:

These programmings of behaviour, these regimes of jurisdiction and veridiction aren’t abortive schemas for the creation of a reality. They are fragments of reality which induce such particular effects in the real as the distinction between true and false implicit in the ways men ‘direct’, ‘govern’ and ‘conduct’ themselves and others [...] You see that this has nothing to do with the project—an admirable one in itself—of grasping a ‘whole society’ in its ‘living reality’.¹⁴

I have long argued that this discussion is a key, introduction to Foucault’s approach.¹⁵ It is noteworthy that Foucault does not imagine an ontological given of world of *practice* but speaks here of “practices,” the “regimes of practices” and “systems of practices.”¹⁶ While he is addressing historians at a roundtable here, his comments might also be of relevance to ethnog-

¹⁰ Part Four of Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. one: an Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1979), is entitled “The deployment of sexuality”; Michel Foucault, “The confession of the flesh,” in Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 194-6.

¹¹ See the extremely clear notes by Paul Patton, “Notes for a glossary,” *I & C*, no. 8 (Spring, 1981), 41-48. The word “ensembles” employed by Brady in the abstract, however, does not seem a particularly helpful clarification or addition here, as it neither an extant English term, nor, at least according to my *Collins-Robert French-English Dictionary* (second edition), a French one. Perhaps it is simply an unfortunate malapropism.

¹² Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities,” 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, “Questions of method,” *I & C*, no. 8 (Spring, 1981), 10-11.

¹⁵ See Mitchell Dean, “Questions of method,” in Irving Velody and Robin Williams (eds.), *The Politics of Constructionism* (London: Sage, 1998), 182-197.

¹⁶ E.g., Foucault, “Questions of method,” 5, and 6.

raphers today. He is here directing us to an aspect of reality that emerges only when we suspend our desire to grasp living reality or everyday life: the way we are governed according to distinction between true and false and the particular and very dispersed effects this has in the real. It is not the sociological reality of the singular ontological domain of practice that Foucault addresses but how practices are interconnected with our production of such a knowledge of reality. Regimes of the production of truth, or what Foucault increasingly calls from this point on, "regimes of veridiction," are clearly central to his critical project. In this sense, this project, for good or for bad, is not one of a sociological description of practice or actual forms of "governance," but of the ways in which we make governing thinkable and actionable through our divisions between true and false, the real and not real, the complex and the linear, and so on. Foucault is *not* a social scientist, a sociologist, or a social historian, and nor is he a political scientist studying governance. He is not concerned with gaining access to how things really operate, but with something he admits is more irritating and troubling, how our "finely grained pictures" of reality are produced and the diverse realm of effects they have within certain practices. Foucault, again in the same text, locates himself in a nominalist, not a realist tradition: he seeks not the real, but the effects in the real of how we think about and "name" the real. He is concerned, he says, following the interpretation offered by the historical sociologist of ancient societies, Paul Veyne, with "the effect on historical knowledge of a nominalist critique formulated elsewhere by way of a historical analysis."¹⁷

Now this might be no more than philosophical gobbledygook to the ethnographer seeking a fine-grained picture of the real problems faced by the individuals and populations under study engaged in "practice." It does not mean that the ethnographer cannot pursue such problems, or that they should refrain from criticizing Foucault and some of those who have followed him. But I think we should allow Foucault the right to have defined the singularity of his own project, and be clear among ourselves what this project was and how it is different from other, similar sounding projects, such as those of governance, practice, etc., in the social sciences. If I can put it bluntly, Foucault is not seeking to access the complexity of everyday life but the conditions under which we form a knowledge of and seek to govern such domains as everyday life.

This brings us to the deeper problem here. It has nothing to do with the strengths and weaknesses of ethnography, but with the kind of claim made for ethnography by Brady. It is this claim that is entirely anathema to the perspective Foucault sought to pioneer. It is the claim that a particular methodology or approach (whether it be ethnography, phenomenology, social history, or for that matter discourse analysis) has a special access to the real in the form of "actual people" and "actual processes." Aside from the naivety and epistemological imperialism of such a claim, it adopts a posture completely at odds with Foucault himself who described his concern as with the "different modes [...] by which human beings are made subjects" or, as Ian Hacking would put it, with "making-up people."¹⁸ People are neither the al-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), 208; Ian Hacking, "Making up people," in Thomas Heller, Morton Sosna and David E. Wellberry (eds.), *Reconstructing Individualism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 222-236.

ways-already given data of Foucault's analysis nor the terminus of techniques and practices of government or of the self. In fact his approach might be said to assume a necessary non-correspondence between the elusive and evanescent reality of who we find ourselves to be and the personae, subjectivities and identities formed and fitted out by various practices and technologies, the human sciences, public policies, welfare reforms, or whatever. To put this even more strongly, one could trace a deep recalcitrance in Foucault's work from the *History of Madness* to his last interviews against all claims to know or to discover a real consisting of "actual people" and their experiences in the human and social sciences. Again it is not Brady's departure from Foucault that it is problematic, or ethnography as a method or approach, but first, the epistemological imperialism of her claims for ethnography and, secondly, that she wishes to give them authorization from Foucault himself. Undeterred by the need to understand the elementary nature of his project, Brady invokes the authority of Foucault to resurrect a realist social science that claims to be able to know "actual practices" and "the actual processes and forms of subjectivity formation over time."¹⁹

Having in this sense completely misunderstood the aim and the orientation of Foucault's approach, Brady wants both to establish the provenance of her claims in Foucault and to locate the source of the problem which "ethnographies of neoliberal governmentalities" will remedy in the allegedly "cookie cutter" nature of certain governmentality analyses.²⁰ Reviewing the literature of governmentality and specifically naming Ulrich Bröckling, Peter Miller, Thomas Osborne, Nikolas Rose, and myself, Brady writes:

Specifically, this review argues that Foucault's distinctive interpretation of neoliberalism (and advanced liberalism) initially enabled scholars to produce novel analyses of neoliberal social change, but over time this literature has fallen into the trap of tending to identify liberalism or neoliberalism as the only significant form of power, and producing "cookie cutter" descriptions of neoliberal rationalities.²¹

On reading this, the reader would be understandably concerned and search the paper for the sources of this tendency in the governmentality literature. The idea of the essay as a "review" suggests a familiarity with that literature, but over twenty-two pages and 135 footnotes I could not find a single article that is directly cited as a case of producing such descriptions.

In the very next paragraph, Brady reiterates the claim and expands the list of grievances when she says that the paper:

[...] reviews the major critiques of studies of neoliberal governmentalities, including a tendency to produce "cookie cutter" explanations for neoliberal reforms, the failure to be open to the unexpected, an omission of minor neoliberal thinkers, and a tendency to view relations of power in terms of a singular apparatus.²²

¹⁹ Brady, "Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities," 13, 27, 32; 30.

²⁰ She uses this metaphor five times: Brady, *ibid.*, 14, 15, 22, 23, and 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14

²² *Ibid.*, 15

Again, the use of language conspires against the author. I take it that the final two words should be “single apparatus” because apparatuses (if by that one means something like Foucault’s concept of *dispositif*) might be “singular” and include multiple elements (rationalities, forms of power, diverse techniques, laws, architectural forms, etc).²³ The value of her list here is that it least starts to specify the charges against what she calls “studies of neoliberal governmentalities” but it is still difficult to find examples of the decadent literature. One possible identification of someone whose work might evidence some of these tendencies is Thomas Osborne but even this is unclear.²⁴

At the end of this review of studies of governmentality in the English-speaking world, Brady then returns to her “cookie cutter.”

Many of these studies drew on, and reiterated, the sketches of classical liberalism, social liberalism, and advanced/neoliberal political rationalities initially developed by Mitchell Dean and Nikolas Rose so that neoliberal political rationalities became an almost “cookie cutter typification or explanation” of contemporary policy change.²⁵

If there was such a cookie-cutter literature, which I would underline has not been demonstrated, I am sure that this statement would be true. My 1999 book has been well cited and Nikolas Rose’s book has been extensively cited.²⁶ For better or for worse, they stand among the canonical texts in the field. Perhaps this is why Brady hones in on her targets on the next page not by argument but by simply repeating the now rather tedious and banal metaphor:

Although neither Rose’s nor Dean’s frameworks explicitly preclude the possibility of multiple, overlapping forms of power and political rationalities, they nevertheless encourage a focus on a discrete governmental rationality or ‘way of governing.’ In this way these existing frames encourage a rendering of state power as forming a single apparatus, and “cookie cutter” analysis.²⁷

This strange set of claims is at the heart of her argument. In the first clause, the targets (Rose and myself) are both mentioned and absolved of any direct fault. Given no one else has been

²³ Compare Foucault’s list of the components of the heterogeneous ensemble of a *dispositif* in “Confession of the flesh,” 194.

²⁴ Osborne is either cited as an example of those “who commonly rehearse” familiar sketches of governmental transformation, or of critics of such a tendency. In any case it is difficult to know as this is an indirect reference by means of another text attributing ten words to him, lacking a verb. See Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities,” 22. His name is misspelt as “Osbourne” at Brady, *ibid.*, 14, and n.10 on 14, and n.67 on 22. The only time Brady accurately spells his name is in a reference that omits one of the editors of *Foucault and Political Reason*, Nikolas Rose, n.14 on 15. The inaccurate referencing continues in n.43 on 19, where Barry Hindess is said to have published in the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, an error that reveals the limitations of research by Google Scholar, which is the source of the mistake. I refrain from detailing the infelicities of Brady’s referencing of my own work.

²⁵ Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities,” 22.

²⁶ Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage, 1999).

²⁷ Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities,” 23. The punctuation is the original.

identified to be manifesting the faults of this critique, then it would seem that there is no fault at all, anywhere. So one might conclude that the argument that studies of governmentality have made or become prone to certain mistakes does not hold up! But the first clause only qualifies a second fault of *encouraging* others “to focus” etc. and “to render” etc. So no one mentioned commits the faults listed themselves and no major instances have been cited. On the one hand, there is no problem. Yet on the other hand, two individuals are singled out, not for committing any of these errors, but for *encouraging* them. In so far as Rose and myself have been cited by a large literature on governmentality, we could be said to have encouraged a fair proportion of it, the good with the bad, the subtle and complex with the simple and banal. But somehow we are still being charged here with something, that is, with encouraging unknown others in unknown cases to make a set of grievous mistakes (which can only be properly corrected by ethnographers!). In fact the claim takes a similar form to who claim that Islam encourages terrorism because many terrorists cite their allegiance to Islam. The only difference in Brady’s case is that she does not want to, or cannot, tell us whom Rose and I have encouraged to commit these mistakes. Luckily for both of us, nothing more is at stake than our scholarly reputations.

The word “encourage” is used twice and so cannot be among Brady’s linguistic slip-ups. It is an active verb and seems to suggest a degree of intention. So, it seems to me that the charge against Rose and myself is to have encouraged unknown persons to commit vaguely defined mistakes in unknown places, while being clever enough not to commit these mistakes ourselves. This absolution of the commission of error is not in our favor, however, because no matter how much we could show we did not commit any of these errors, Brady’s judgment is that we encouraged others to commit them. It seems to me to be entirely fair to identify this piece as not so much an argument as, rather, a form of *polemics*. And this would seem to be at odds with her claim that one of the virtues of ethnography is “a discomfort with polemics.”

It is clearly impossible to defend oneself against these charges. The crucial question is why does Brady need to make these charges to establish the importance of the work scholars are doing using ethnography and, perhaps less centrally, why does she need to pose it as a continuation of Foucault’s project?

In any case, Brady’s paper made me want to return to my 1999 book on *Governmentality*. I wanted to revisit its first edition, to check whether I had there consciously, inadvertently, or even secretly, *encouraged* the mistakes that ethnography would now correct. It will allow me to make a number of points which might bear reiterating given the misapprehensions that seems to underlie Brady’s piece.

Let start with the idea that this was one of the books that encouraged a monolithic version of neoliberalism. After reviewing Foucault’s then limited published works on neoliberalism, I suggest in it that in “the most basic sense they alert us to the fact that there is more than one type of neoliberalism.”²⁸ This is a simple observation that did not require an ethnographic study. But I also wrote, at the beginning of a section on “Neo-liberalism and Foucault,” that:

²⁸ Dean, *Governmentality*, 57-58, emphasis added.

Foucault's own work on post-war liberalism stresses the *specific contexts* of the elaboration of its critiques of the irrationality of excess of government [...] He also emphasizes the plurality of liberalisms, and the particular character of the intellectual formation of each instance.²⁹

When one writes, it is often difficult to know if one is being clear. But I think here I was being clear enough. And today, there is no serious scholar who believes in a "monolithic" category of neoliberalism as anything but a straw man. The idea that *neoliberalism exhibits a heterogeneity in its multiple forms, a contingency upon different contexts, and an irreducibility to a single type*, has, I believe, its sources in the Foucauldian literature of the 1990s, and was especially and consciously emphasized in my own work. But this point is now standard not only among "Foucauldians" but also among intellectual historians, many of whom demonstrate varying critical relations to Foucault's own account.³⁰ Even important contributions by Marxist urban sociologists and geographers accept these postulates, despite being unfairly caricatured by Brady as ignoring diverse critiques, national variations, and different "economic-institutional-discursive forms of social government."³¹

Brady further insists that governmentality scholars encouraged unknown people to focus on a single "way of governing," or "to identify liberalism or neoliberalism as the only significant forms of power in a given society."³² In my own case, consider the list of contents of the first edition of this 1999 book or its second edition published in 2010. There readers would find an emphasis on the multiplicity of forms of power in modern, and indeed ancient, societies including chapters on pastoral power (Ch. 4) and biopolitics and sovereignty (Ch. 5). As for "ways of governing," they would find chapters on not only police science and reason of state (Ch. 4), liberalism (Ch. 6), neoliberalism and advanced liberal government (Ch. 8), but also on authoritarian governmentality (Ch. 7) and risk rationality and reflexive government (Ch. 9). Neither of the latter chapters was at that time an obvious "cookie-cutter" category of governing, or a component of existing "monolithic" narratives. In the second edition, ten years later, I added a chapter on "International Governmentality," again hardly an obvious candidate for such narratives. In fact, during my textual, historical, conceptual and theoretical studies I had already found in a completely unexpected way and believed I had communicated, that governing was in many cases taking other forms of governing and self-governing as its object (what I called "reflexive government"), and that many liberal ways of governing use "non-liberal" and even "illiberal rationalities and practices." This gives us two further important orientations I had hoped to encourage: that *forms of governmentality must be considered in their combination and recombination with other diverse, power relations, including sovereignty and*

²⁹ Ibid., 55-56.

³⁰ See the contributions to Philip Mirowski, and Dieter Plehwe (eds.), *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: the Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

³¹ Brady, "Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities," 24-25; Neal Brenner, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, "Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways," *Global Networks*, vol. 10 (2010), 182-222; and Jaime Peck, Nik Theodore and Neal Brenner, "Postneoliberalism and its malcontents," *Antipode*, vol. 41(2009), 94-116.

³² Brady, "Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities," 23, and 24.

*biopolitics*³³ and that we must be attentive to the *relationship of liberal and neoliberal rationalities to non-liberal and even illiberal rationalities and practices*.³⁴

Staying, however, with my *Governmentality* book, the source of the apparent confusion, I tried to make this point even more strongly in a chapter on neoliberalism called “Neoliberalism and Advanced Liberal Government.” It was written seventeen years ago but I think it still has some use, even if I would perhaps employ a somewhat different language today. If I may, I shall quote one of the introductory paragraphs:

In the course of the following discussion, we shall use the term ‘neo-liberalism’ to refer to specific styles of the general mentality of rule, and to distinguish that mentality from others such as communitarianism and neo-conservatism. Advanced liberalism will designate the broader realm of the various assemblages of rationalities, technologies and agencies that constitute the characteristic ways of governing in contemporary liberal democracies. Such a distinction enables us to consider how neo-liberal rationalities exist in complex interrelations with neo-conservatism and populist, anti-governmental reaction, as well as with debates on morality and community. While neo-liberalism might be characterized as the dominant contemporary rationality of government, it is found within a field of contestation in which there are multiple rationalities of government and a plurality of varieties of neoliberalism.³⁵

It seems to me that this sums up many of the points Brady would like to make and claims can only be made with the use of a privileged method or approach, ethnography. As should be clear enough here, not only did I seek to distinguish a diverse set of neoliberal rationalities from diverse assemblages of advanced liberalism, but I also thought I had there indicated how fruitful the study would be of the relationship between such rationalities with other, somewhat distinct ones, with various political movements, and with their fields of contestation. I would also note the one implication of this is that neither liberalism nor neoliberalism are approached as forms of power (as Brady assumes) but as rationalities, styles of rule, forms of critique of government and at best, arts of government. If there is a scholar wielding a somewhat blunt cookie-cutter, it is not me all those years ago but Brady herself today.

In a section on the kind of problems and critiques identified by ethnographers, Brady introduces a more specific problem concerning the use of the “later” Foucault’s work on techniques of the self. She claims that governmentality writers failed to note that Foucault moved away from his earlier analyses and tended “to view practices of the self as an extension of kinds of disciplinary technologies” and “conflate practices of the self with practices of normalization and discipline.”³⁶ Here there is an example in a footnote: a paper in which I tried to chart the very specific set of shifts in the administration of the unemployed from a Labor gov-

³³ A problem on which I am still working. See Mitchell Dean, *The Signature of Power: Sovereignty, Governmentality and Biopolitics* (London: Sage, 2013).

³⁴ To which I devoted several articles including Mitchell Dean, “Liberal government and authoritarianism,” *Economy and Society*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2002) 37-61 and “Powers of life and death beyond governmentality,” *Cultural Values: Journal of Cultural Research* vol. 6, no. 1/2 (2002), 119-38, and a book, *Governing Societies: Political Perspectives on Domestic and International Rule* (New York: Open University Press, 2007).

³⁵ Dean, *Governmentality*, 149-150.

³⁶ Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities,” 25.

ernment in Australia to a newly elected conservative one.³⁷ In a footnote she reduces its argument to, “how individuals are enticed to transform themselves into an enterprising subject through learning to promote their personal attributes to prospective employers.”³⁸ Whether or not this is an accurate gloss on one of the several arguments presented in the paper in quite some empirical detail, Brady’s sentence does connect how people govern themselves to how they are governed in a broader institutional set of arrangements. To say this, however, is neither to conflate techniques of the self with discipline, nor see them as an extension of it, but to offer an empirical description of how techniques of the self might interact with techniques of governing. In this respect, it worth recalling Foucault’s remarks on October 25, 1982 (that is, unfortunately late in his life): “This contact between the technologies of the domination of others and those of the self I call governmentality.”³⁹ If one was to study what Brady is proposing that I did then study, then this would not be a departure from Foucault but realizing his program for the study of governmentality as he elaborated it twenty months prior to his death on June 25, 1984.

What then can ethnography do and what can it not do? Brady cites many excellent studies with intricate and subtle analyses. The claim however is that these studies allow a critical engagement with the “real,” always in scare quotes. I would ask, however, that if such studies allow us to refine or dispense with certain concepts, to recombine others, to reveal “resistance,” or to analyze “politics,” then what is their *necessary* condition?⁴⁰ It would seem to me that the necessary condition for any of these statements is the existence of concepts. In a way her article is really about a kind of privilege of the “real” over concepts that ignores its own dependence on concepts to access its “real.” For neoliberalism, governmentality, resistance, politics, biopolitics, sovereignty, techniques of the self, and even freedom and agency—and even the world of “practice”—are above all concepts by which we try to make sense of the world in which we live. Brady would have provided us with a more compelling case for the value of ethnography if she had posed the question of how concepts can inform ethnography and how the knowledge produced by ethnography might help us form new and even reshape existing concepts.

Perhaps as a self-professed ethnographer, Brady could consider the making of concepts a way of life, a way in which a particular organism navigates its relation with its environment. As Foucault said in relation to Georges Canguilhem: “*To form concepts is a way of living and not a way of killing life; it is a way of living in complete mobility and not of immobilizing life.*”⁴¹ As

³⁷ Mitchell Dean, “Administering asceticism: re - working the ethical life of the unemployed citizen,” in Mitchell Dean and Barry Hindess (eds.), *Governing Australia: Studies in Contemporary Rationalities of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 87–107. This paper was in fact following developments already presented in Mitchell Dean, “Governing the unemployed self in an active society,” *Economy and Society* vol. 24 (1995), 559-83.

³⁸ Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities,” n.90, 25.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the self,” in Luther H Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton, *Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock, 1988), 19.

⁴⁰ As she claims for works by Lisa Hoffman, Randy Lippert, Tania Li and Stephen Collier (Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities,” 32).

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, “Georges Canguilhem, philosopher of error,” *I & C*, vol. 7 (1980), 60.

such, it should be approached like any other way of living, with care, with sufficient attention to detail, awaiting patiently its surprising aspects, being ready for its minor differences and variations, rather than being reduced to monolithic stereotypes as she does here.

Without concepts the world would indeed become as Brady claims ethnographers have found it: “fuzzy” and “incoherent”,⁴² and so, like hers, might our arguments for what we most passionately believe. Intellectual historians, social analysts, political thinkers, philosophers, and all those whose trade is in ideas, and for whom “forming concepts is a way of living and not of killing life,” no doubt rejoice at the existence of those ethnographers, as they do that of journalists and documentarians. They might say to them: we support your brave excursions into the messy jungles of the real. But they might also say to any ethnographer who exhibits the hubris of her article: please spare us your piety and the imperious assertions of your superiority over our poor, native way of life. Just because you have drunk from a “witches brew”⁴³ that you found in the upper marshlands of the real, please allow the rest of us to remain sober. We are happy to listen to what you say but only if you would like to taste our humble cookies we have made with our concepts. They might sustain you in your arduous adventures.

The broader question concerns the conditions of the appearance of this article in *Foucault Studies*. One possibility is that a certain “regime of veridiction” has formed itself around notions of practice and the everyday, and more broadly around the valorization of real life and its complexity. The obviousness of this regime is proving increasingly difficult to challenge since, in its more radical forms, it is assuming the metaphysical-theological character of vitalism. The genealogy of this regime passes through neoliberalism itself with, for example, the notion of complexity.⁴⁴ In fact, it is a regime that is now seeking to enlist, and not without some success, the intellectual and political legacy of Foucault.⁴⁵

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⁴² Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities,” 26, and 32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27, and 32.

⁴⁴ Friedrich A. Hayek, “The theory of complex phenomena,” in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 22-42.

⁴⁵ Kaspar Villadsen and Mitchell Dean, “State phobia, civil society and a certain vitalism,” *Constellations*, vol. 19 (2012), 401-20.