

EXCHANGES

Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Ethnography: A rejoinder

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Mitchell Dean and I agree there is an important discussion to be had about Foucault and the social sciences. My recent article sought to advance this debate. Dean has responded because he views my article as an attack on his work. This interpretation is mistaken. My article is not focused on Dean's work though, as he points out, it does make reference to what he has called his "very simplified framework" for engaging in an analytics of governmentality.¹ My article seeks to explain the logics that underpin recent efforts to use ethnographic methods (broadly defined) together with an analytics of governmentality. The arguments that motivate these "ethnographic" works have been advanced by various scholars for a number of years. However, the visibility of these works has been reduced by the fact that they have been scattered across various social science disciplines. My article also locates these works within broader debates about governmentality studies, including common criticisms.

In his response, Dean pursues four key criticisms of my article, suggesting that it: (1) makes an untenable claim that Foucault was a realist sociologist "seeking to access the complexity of everyday life"²; (2) claims ethnography has "special access to the real in the form of 'actual people'"³; (3) accuses the governmentality literature of a tendency towards "cookie-cutter" analysis, but fails to name an author or work that displays this weakness; and (4) discusses what Dean has referred to as his "simplified framework" in *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*⁴ but fails to consider his other works. I will address each of these points in turn.

First, Dean devotes three pages to advancing the claim that my article argues that Foucault was a realist who addressed the "sociological reality of the singular ontological domain of practice"⁵ and who sought "to access the complexity of everyday life,"⁶ with

¹ Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (Thousand Oaks, Calif, London: Sage Publications, 2010, 2nd ed.), 33.

² Mitchell Dean, "Neoliberalism, Governmentality, Ethnography: A Response to Michelle Brady," *Foucault Studies*, vol. 20 (2015), 359.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dean, *Governmentality*, 33.

⁵ Dean, "Neoliberalism, Governmentality, Ethnography," 359.

⁶ Ibid.

the aim to generate “sociological description of practice or actual forms of ‘governance’.”⁷ No one with a basic understanding of Foucault’s work would claim that he was a realist sociologist.⁸ It would be surprising then if experts in Foucault, including the editorial board at *Foucault Studies* and the article’s reviewers, did not raise objections to publishing such an obviously flawed argument. The link between my article’s text and the interpretation Dean compiles in his response is unclear because he does not systematically reference my text when advancing his reading of my argument. In the very few places where Dean does make direct reference to the text of my article he either misquotes it or paraphrases in such a way that my argument is radically changed. A particularly illuminating example is where Dean writes:

They [ethnographies] 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 [sic] for governing [sic]” by embracing an ethnographic methodology that can give us a ‘more finely grained picture’ of the problems these schemas were addressing.⁹

The text Dean places in quotes does not match text that appears anywhere in my article and the argument that he summarizes bears little relation to the argument that appears on pages 27 and 28 of my article. On these pages I reflect on a specific case where “publicly available sources, such as policy documents, promotional material, legislation and political speeches provided a very thin sense of the ‘schemas’ that governed single mothers subject to welfare reforms.”¹⁰ I argue that an ethnographic study of employment services for single parents subjected to Welfare to Work requirements provides new insights into “the ‘schemas’”¹¹ that governed single mothers by illuminating how these employment services understood the problems they “were seeking to respond to.”¹² In other words, this ethnography enables us to understand how single mothers were “made subjects” by those responsible for delivering Welfare to Work services. In his response Dean paraphrases the article’s argument in a way that incorrectly reframes this study as a traditional realist ethnography that sought to document the objective problems that the employment providers aimed to remedy.

Dean’s fundamental misreading of what is being argued here ties into his second objection to my article. Dean asserts that my article claims that ethnography has “special

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ However, see Valverde’s argument that social scientists do commonly (and mistakenly) view Foucault’s key terms as sociological concepts rather than “tentative and dynamic abstractions” (Pat O’Malley and Mariana Valverde, “Foucault, Criminal Law, and the Governmentalization of the State,” in *Foundational Texts in Modern Criminal Law*, ed. M. D. Dibber, 1st ed. (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014), 331).

⁹ Ibid., 358.

¹⁰ Michelle Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities: From the Neoliberal Apparatus to Neoliberalism and Governmental Assemblages,” *Foucault Studies*, no. 18 (2014), 28.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

access to the real in the form of 'actual people'."¹³ Again, it is unclear how Dean arrived at this interpretation. Is it based solely on my article, or does he also believe that the authors of the other articles in the special issue take this stance? This mistaken interpretation then leads Dean to devote many pages to explaining the fundamentals of Foucault's position, including the idea that Foucault "locates himself in a nominalist, not a realist tradition,"¹⁴ that "Foucault is *not* a social scientist, a sociologist, or a social historian, and nor is he a political scientist studying governance,"¹⁵ and that Foucault is not addressing the "sociological reality of the singular ontological domain of practice"¹⁶ but instead "how practices are interconnected with our production of such a knowledge of reality."¹⁷ The scholars that produced the "ethnographic" studies that my article reviews would not disagree with these descriptions of Foucault's position, and neither does my article. My article does argue that ethnographic methodologies (broadly understood) may allow us to see practices, sites, and problems that would otherwise not be visible. Collier, who is quoted in my article, puts this eloquently when he says:

The detailed engagement of ethnography provided, thus, an orientation to a grouping of sites and a set of problems that I simply could not have stumbled upon otherwise.¹⁸

As Collier has explained in more recent articles, the argument that fieldwork has these benefits does not amount to what Dean calls "epistemological imperialism."¹⁹ Instead, what is being claimed is that fieldwork provides an orientation that is otherwise not possible. Such a claim does not involve asserting that fieldwork gives "any epistemic privilege."²⁰

Third, Dean objects to my argument that the governmentality literature has a tendency to produce "cookie-cutter" descriptions of neoliberal rationalities and practices. Dean protests that there is no evidence of a "cookie-cutter" tendency in the literature, and implies that my argument is entirely original and controversial when he writes:

On reading this, the reader would be understandably concerned and search the paper for the sources of this tendency in the governmentality literature [...] but over

¹³ Dean, "Neoliberalism, Governmentality, Ethnography," 359.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Stephen Collier, *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 29.

¹⁹ Dean, "Neoliberalism, Governmentality, Ethnography," 360.

²⁰ Stephen Collier, *Fieldwork as Technique for Generating what Kind of Surprise? Thoughts on Post-Soviet Social in Light of 'Fieldwork/Research'* (University of California, Irvine, Department of Anthropology, November 2013), 14.

twenty-two pages and 135 footnotes I could not find a single article that is directly cited as a case of producing such descriptions.²¹

My suggestion that there is such a tendency is far from original. One of the sources I cite in support of this critique is Nikolas Rose, Pat O'Malley, and Mariana Valverde's highly influential 2006 article entitled "Governmentality." This article openly states that there is a practice of "cookie-cutter typification or explanation"²² within studies of governmentality. Specifically they write:

If one of the attractions of governmentality has been its capacity to render neoliberalism visible in new ways [...] a marked tendency has been to regard it as a more or less constant master category that can be used both to understand and to explain all manner of political programs across a wide variety of settings [...] [and this practice] readily lends itself to a kind of cookie-cutter typification or explanation, a tendency to identify any program with neo-liberal elements as essentially neo-liberal, and to proceed as if this subsumption of the particular under a more general category provides a sufficient account of its nature or explanation of its existence.²³

In a more recent article, Valverde has repeated this critique arguing that "the 'governmentality literature' certainly prospered for a decade or so, and much of this did indeed turn 'governmentality' into another conceptual cookie-cutter."²⁴ Similarly, in their introduction to *Governmentality: Current Issues and Future Challenges* Bröckling, Krasmann, and Lemke complain of various tendencies in "studies of governmentality" and they include the claim that "in increasingly small-format empirical studies they distil the always identical rationalities, strategies, and technologies of neoliberalism."²⁵ In summary, it would not have been productive for me to give examples of authors who exhibited this tendency in a context where many of the leading theorists in this area have already critiqued the literature for exhibiting these flaws. Thus my claim is not original.

Finally, Dean objects to my statement that his self-described "simplified framework" in *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* encourages "a focus on a discrete governmental rationality or 'way of governing'."²⁶ Dean objects to this statement on the grounds that his *Governmentality* book points out that Foucault's works "alert us to the fact that there is more than one type of neoliberalism."²⁷ Here Dean reframes what I am actually arguing into an entirely different argument. My argument

²¹ Dean, "Neoliberalism, Governmentality, Ethnography," 360.

²² Nikolas Rose, P. O'Malley and M. Valverde, "Governmentality," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, vol. 2 (2006), 97.

²³ *Ibid.*, 97-8.

²⁴ Mariana Valverde, "Beyond Discipline and Punish: Foucault's Challenge to Criminology," *Carceral Notebooks*, vol. 4 (2008), 206.

²⁵ U. Bröckling, S. Krasmann and T. Lemke (eds.), *Governmentality: Current Issues and Future Challenges* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011, 1st ed.), 16.

²⁶ Dean, *Governmentality*, 33.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 362.

was not that Dean does not recognize more than one type of neoliberalism, but simply that if one answers the four sets of questions which he lays out in *Governmentality* they will tend to focus on a discrete governmental rationality and associated technologies. In contrast, one could ask these questions in a way that encouraged a focus on assemblages. Valverde has recently posed a set of five questions that do just that. Rather than asking about “specific ways of acting, intervening and directing, made up of particular types of practical rationality (‘expertise’ and ‘know-how’) and relying upon definite mechanisms, techniques and technologies”²⁸ she asks “What are the techniques used to build the governing assemblage in question, including legal forms such as the contract? Were these techniques borrowed and repurposed, and if so, what kinds of governing effects trail in their wake?”²⁹ In my article I am careful to point out that Dean’s framework in *Governmentality* does not “explicitly preclude the possibility of multiple, overlapping forms of power and political rationalities”³⁰ and I never claim that Dean does not recognize that there is “more than one type of neoliberalism.”³¹ However, in reading Dean’s response I see that I could have been more careful not to associate his work as a whole with problematic tendencies within the literature.

In the closing pages of his response Dean writes “What then can ethnography do and what can it not do? Brady cites many excellent studies with intricate and subtle analyses.”³² Unfortunately Dean’s response devotes absolutely no space to explaining what he views as excellent about the studies that I review. Beginning with these strengths might have been a better place for starting the necessary discussion about Foucault and the social sciences.

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²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁹ M. Valverde, “Ad Hoc Governance: Public Authorities and North American Local Infrastructure in Historical Perspective” (Draft, Research Gate, 2014). Available online at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274072388_Ad_hoc_governance_urban_infrastructure_partnerships_in_historical_perspective

³⁰ Brady, “Ethnographies of Neoliberal Governmentalities,” 23.

³¹ Dean, *Governmentality*, 57-58.

³² Dean, “Neoliberalism, Governmentality, Ethnography,” 365.