

‘Governmentality’ and ‘the International’: A Power(ful) Love Story

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FLORIS VAN DOORN, JUL 3 2018

The arrival of poststructuralist theories of International Relations has generally not been met with open arms by the traditional International Relations theories, largely thanks to the fact that poststructuralism is invariably at odds with the materialist and positivist ontological and epistemological underpinnings that have long dominated the discipline. Nevertheless, the work of one philosopher, Michael Foucault, has been particularly popular amongst critical International Relations scholars; with a recent development being the introduction of his concept of ‘governmentality’ to improve our comprehension of productive power structures in international relations. However, the usefulness of ‘governmentality’ for understanding how power operates in global governance has been undermined by both a narrow ‘liberal’ conception of ‘governmentality’ as well as the traditional analytical conceptualisation of the ‘international’ as part of the ‘political’ instead of ‘the politics’. After defining what is meant by ‘governmentality’ we will demonstrate this by first following Neumann’s and Sensing’s line of thought regarding the usefulness of and limitations to the usage of the idea of ‘governmentality’ to understand the functioning of power in global governance. Through examining the limitations of their compartmentalisation of ‘governmentality’ itself and the ‘international’ more generally, it is then possible to explore how a generalisation of ‘governmentality’ and a deeper or reflexivist understanding of what ‘the international’ is could greatly expand the scope of the functionality of the concept of ‘governmentality’ in the International Relations discipline.

‘Governmentality’ is a term coined by Foucault to describe the mechanics of the power process encapsulated by the ‘art of government’, and has both a more general meaning and one that is historically specific. More generally, the concept refers to the way the collective but varying mentalities of government and authority govern the people and determine the regimes of practices that rule our society. In this respect, ‘governmentality’ not only describes the power mechanisms through which authority and truth are given meaning and truth by being produced and reproduced, but also the way we govern ourselves by the creation of identity and the notion of the ‘self’ (Dean 2010, 17-27; Joseph 2010, 25-28). It attempts to explain the way in which power, truth, and, identify together form a thought framework (episteme) in which our social conception of the world, our society or group, and ‘the self’ (ethos) are constructed and reproduced by means of the invocation of authority from a position of power (techne) (Dean 2010, 27-28). In this sense, government is best seen as the ‘conduct of conduct’, or the practises through which government as authority shapes and reshapes our perception of the possible and the impossible (of conduct) (Dean 2010, 17-24; Joseph 2010, 25-28). The notion of ‘governmentality’ therefore tries to capture the process through which power in the setting of authority works through the production and reproduction of truth and identity.

Foucault did however often focus on a more specified understanding of ‘governmentality’ by concentrating on the arrival of a new way of using power on the basis of a new way of thinking that could be described as ‘liberal governmentality’. ‘Liberal governmentality’ is characterised by Foucault as a historically contingent form of conduct that has been incrementally established since the 16 century. Its identifying features are the population as the target, the political economy as the main form of knowledge, and the security apparatus as the operating framework (Foucault 2000, 206-211, Dean 2010, 28-30; Jeffreys & Sigley 2009, 3-6). The government is there to be the ‘government of all’ and therefore intends to secure the interests of the entire population and every individual within it. The operating mechanism in order to achieve the flourishing of the population is an efficient economy. At the same time, protection of the flourishing of the population and the proper operation of the economy is ensured by a security

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apparatus (Foucault 2000, 207-211, 215-220; Dean 2010, 28-30, 134-140; Lipschutz 2005, 235-240). This mode of governing emerged alongside the already existing and oldest form of 'society as sovereignty', which focused on a territorial form of power operating for and over subjects; and 'society as discipline', which empathises the exercise of authority over the individual. Foucault asserts that in modern times the three forms of societies coexist, but that it is the 'society as government' that has long been the dominant mode of power in the modern Western World (Foucault 2000, 212-222; Dean 2010, 26-30). It is the dominance of this particular type of society with its features, mechanisms and power structures that is meant by 'liberal governmentality'.

It is this latter conception of 'liberal governmentality' that is employed by Neumann and Sending, as they contend that this form of 'governmentality' is useful to better understand the modern operation of power in a system of global governance that is at its core marked by struggle and competition. They take a realist or Morgenthauian understanding of 'the international' as their point of departure, which is characterised by power struggles in a system of self-help due to the absence of a world ruler (Neumann & Sending 2007, 677-679, 685-687). However, they also argue that we should interpret Morgenthau's understanding of the 'international' as an ideal-type and hence historically contingent. In modernity, the essence of the 'international' as power struggle remains unaltered, but the modality of governing as a form of power has changed (Neumann & Sending 2007, 679-685, 690-694). The contemporary 'international' is best seen as a system of 'liberal governmentality' in which this liberal understanding of 'governmentality' has fundamentally transformed the way power struggles take place globally. This mode of governing is in line with the constructivists' contention that transcendental norms, liberal embeddedness and the transcendence of anarchy now best characterise global governance[1] (Neumann & Sending 2007, 687-694, 696-699). The 'international' that we currently find ourselves in is therefore still based on power as struggle, but its mode of operation in the form of 'liberal governmentality' has been fundamentally reshaped.

At this stage it is useful to better understand what Neumann and Sending mean by 'power' by using the taxonomy of power formulated by Barnett and Duval, with 'liberal governmentality' representing a form of 'productive power'. Productive power differs from 'compulsory', 'institutional', and 'structural' power by working through diffuse relations and by operating within 'the political'. 'Productive power' does not work specifically or directly, but instead diffusely or indirectly impacts the relations and mechanisms that make up the social world (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 43-45, 47-49, 55-56; Edkins 1999, 1-3). Secondly, and for our purposes more importantly, it is located not within 'the politics' or the more narrowly defined sphere that we normally refer to as 'politics', but within 'the political'. Contrary to being preoccupied with the relations of power within the already established social order it is concerned with the constitution of this same social order and the process of contestation that precedes and institutes it (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 43-47, 56-57; Edkins 1999, 1-4). Neumann's and Sending's notion of 'governmentality' is intended to improve our understanding of this process of constitution internationally, or the way in which the institutional socialisation of liberal norms remodels the international order (Neumann & Sending 2007, 694). For Neumann and Sending, power as 'liberal governmentality' therefore operates diffusely and within the 'political' by indirectly reshaping 'the international' as we know it.

However, the narrow definition of 'governmentality' as 'liberal governmentality' constrains the usefulness of the concept by limiting its applicability to liberal societies, which equally restricts the meaningful scope of what is meant by 'productive power'. This point is convincingly made by Jonathan Joseph, who contends that we cannot apply the liberal conception of 'governmentality' universally simply because the world is not universally liberal. Arguing from a Marxist perspective he contends that the world is best characterised by 'uneven and combined development'[2] (Joseph 2010, 224-225, 229-234). The implication of this is that applying the concept of 'liberal governmentality' globally will produce varying results (Joseph 2010, 237-238; Rosenberg 2006, 313-329). Yet the more important critique levelled against this comprehension of governmentality is that the distinction between society as 'liberal governmentality' and society as discipline is now easily blurred, since the usage of a liberally inclined framework to understand processes in non-liberal societies easily amounts to the imposition of a liberal framework on non-liberal societies in a disciplinary manner (Joseph 2010, 224-227, 237-238, 243). Extending this criticism even further, the consequence of this is that the scope of productive power of 'governmentality' itself is constrained by assuming the existence of a liberal world order and the lack of questioning how this dominant episteme or thought framework itself came to be (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 55-57; Edkins 1999, 1-4; Dean 2010, 24-27). Consequently, restricting the meaning of 'governmentality' by defining it as 'liberal governmentality' not only limits the applicability of the concept

'Governmentality' and 'the International': A Power(ful) Love Story

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itself, but also runs the risk of reproducing the same power structures that the generic conception of 'governmentality' aims to uncover.

Nevertheless, there is a more profound critique to the way the concept of 'governmentality' is often used in International Relations that has to do with the presupposition of the existence of 'the international' itself. This point of criticism applies to both Neumann and Sending and Joseph as they implicitly consider 'the international' as given. For Neumann and Sending, this is the Morgenthauian ideal-type of 'the international' as inherently conflictual (2007, 677-687); for Joseph it is 'the international' as de facto 'combined and uneven' (2010, 224-225, 229-234). The problem is that 'the international' is therefore treated as an interactive and not a constitute element of power. In other words, they regard 'the international' as part of 'the political' instead of 'the politics' (Barnett & Duvall 2005, 45-47; Edkins 1999, 1-4). The issue here is not the pre-defined understanding of a specific perception of 'the international', but the presumption of the pre-existence of 'an international' (Beitz 2000, 682-683, 688-694). The ramification of this is that 'the international' as a domain in whichever form is effectively treated as given, which leaves no space for a critical evaluation of the concept of 'the international' itself. Consequently, the usefulness of the concept of 'governmentality', even when defined generically, is constrained by the presumption that there already is 'an international'.

This is important because this conceptual limitation of the applicability of 'governmentality' prevents the concept from being used to uncover how the power structures behind the notion of 'the international' govern the formation of beliefs and identities that produce the 'self' and the 'other'. By presupposing the existence of 'an international' the domestic domain and the international realm are treated as pre-given categorisations. As a result, we cannot employ the concept of governmentality to study the mentality of such identity formation itself (Walker 1990, 12-14; Dean 2010, 24-27, 236-241). In other words, 'a self' and 'an other' are pre-assumed categories, for there cannot be a domestic without an international. By considering 'an international' to be part of 'the politics' we can avoid this issue, as we can now meaningfully explore the 'conduct of conduct' of government at its most foundational level (Dean 2010, 17-24, 236-241; Edkins 1999, 1-4). This enables the concept of 'governmentality' to be significantly more useful in order to understand how productive power works in and constitutes global governance.

This critique with respect to the way 'governmentality' is constrained in its usefulness is part of a wider debate between analyticist and reflexivist approaches in International Relations theory, with Neumann and Sending at least partially subscribing to the former view. Both analyticists and reflexivists accept the premise that the world cannot be separated from the mind. Or put differently, theories or conceptions of the world cannot be separated from the human minds that explore them (Jackson 2011, 31-33, 116-117, 126-127, 196-201). However, they differ with regard to their understanding of the relationship between knowledge and observables. For analyticists like Neumann and Sending, their point of departure and the subject of their academic enquiry is that which can be empirically observed, with knowledge seen in terms of its ability to tell us something useful about the world we live in. In order to do this they make use of analytic narratives, in this case Morgenthau's ideal model. Uncharacteristically, they then employ the concept of 'governmentality' to criticize this ideal model (Neumann & Sending 2007, 677-685; Jackson 2011, 141-146, 152-155). Yet for reflexivists it remains the case that by using Morgenthau's ideal model as their starting point, they have overlooked the transfactual nature of knowledge. We cannot merely know what we observe, but also what we cannot observe. In this context, the aim of enquiry is not to know, but to understand how particular knowledge constructs came about (Jackson, 2011, 155-160, 196-201). It is by treating 'the international', and even a specific model of the international, as provided by Neumann and Sending and many others using the concept of 'governmentality' in International Relations, as given that they stand in contrast with a reflexivist approach that seeks to uncover how knowledge at its most foundational level was formulated and reformulated within IR.

In conclusion, the usefulness of the concept of 'governmentality' to understand power in global governance could be greatly improved by defining 'governmentality' more generally and by treating 'the international' as part of 'the politics' instead of 'the political'. A liberal conception of 'governmentality' significantly limits the applicability of the concept to non-liberal societies and runs the risk of reproducing the dominant liberal episteme in a disciplinary fashion. Furthermore, by not presupposing the existence of 'an international' the ability of the concept of 'governmentality' to lay bare the governing process at the root of the notion of 'the international' can be explored; which is crucial to enable an understanding of the formation of identities and beliefs at the most foundational level.

‘Governmentality’ and ‘the International’: A Power(ful) Love Story

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These two points of critique concerning the usefulness of ‘governmentality’ that are raised against Neumann’s and Sending’s conception of the concept are part of a wider debate between analyticists and reflexivists; whereby a reflexivist perspective is strongly preferred here. This does neither imply that the debate between both viewpoints is useless, nor that the debate is definitively settled in favour of reflexivism. However, when it comes to applying a traditionally reflexivist concept to the study of International Relations it is firmly argued that embracing a reflexivist outlook is best.

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Notes

[1] Global governance is defined here in its most general sense, encompassing everything and everyone that ‘governs’ within a non-isolated globally present structure. This is done consciously and for reflective reasons (see later discussion on analyticism vs reflectivism).

[2] This notion was coined by Leon Trotsky (Rosenberg 2006, 309-310).

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