
An interview with Thomas Lemke: Foucault Today.

On the theoretical relevance of Foucauldian concepts of “governmentality” and “biopolitics”

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Précision

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Interview

Stéphane Baele: *I am here with Mr Thomas Lemke, who is Professor at Frankfurt University.*

Thomas Lemke: In fact, I am not a professor but a Senior Researcher at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt.

You studied political sciences, sociology and law. You were also visiting fellow in various places such as New-York and London. You have published articles in various fields related to political theory, sociology of organisations, Foucault, and, more recently, biopolitics, databases, etc. Maybe we would like to centre this discussion on the relevance of Foucault and Foucauldian theory today in the social sciences and regarding issues

such as biopolitics, ethics, genetic databases and so on. We will start with more general questions on Foucault and social sciences in general, and then move on to your recent research on biopolitics. What strikes me as a young scholar in the social sciences, is the fact that people keep “classical” frames of interpretation of the social, in the sense that they still use a lot of statistical analyses as well as – if I were a bit rude – old-fashioned authors less “flexible” than Foucault. So my question would be, quite directly: did Foucault have any real impact, twenty years after, in the social sciences?

Yes, of course, he does. As far as I know, Foucault is now the most cited author in the social sciences and in the humanities. So he certainly has a huge impact at the moment. This is due to the fact that he is interesting for several disciplines. While Foucault was a philosopher and a historian, his work is not only relevant for philosophy or history, but also for political sciences, sociology, cultural studies, media studies, and many more. Also, in a way you have various Foucaults in the sense that you can make use of different instruments from his famous “tool kit”: “discourse” to do discourse analysis, or more recently, notions like “governmentality” and “biopolitics”, that have been taken up by different people for various objectives.

Maybe my second question would be this: we have seen that Foucault uses a classical notion of the economy as “oikos” in his work on governmentality; he builds up his notion of governmentality on this classical notion of the “oikos”, of the “pater familias” who has to guide his household. Does this classical notion of the economy disable the use of his concept of governmentality in today’s more financial, more market-oriented, less Keynesian economy? Does the fact that we are moving away from a classical Keynesian model of the economy to a more financial economy, disable the use of the notion of governmentality in today’s political sciences?

What Foucault seeks to show in his lecture on governmentality is how the modern economy emerged as a distinctive epistemological and political field. In this process the old concept of the economy as “oikos” was transformed by the rise of capitalism and the modern state, into a reality of its own, independent of the “pater familias” and so on. This “invention” of the modern economy is of course still relevant if we look at our present. The interesting question would be, in terms of governmentality: what are the technologies and the rationalities of government today, and what role does the economy occupy in them (and how are its meaning and borderline shifting historically)?

The notion of “governmentality” seems still relevant today.

The notion of governmentality has been taken up by many scholars in different countries and contexts. They were looking for an analytical instrument that would be able to account for the radical transformations which altered welfarist regimes into neoliberal societies. Not simply in terms of detecting abstract political ideologies that took over, but rather in terms of undertaking concrete empirical analyses in specific societal fields: what rationalities emerged in this or that field, what technologies have replaced older ones, and how exactly are they informed, what objectives do they seek to achieve and what are the means that are put into practice, and so on. In these terms, governmentality proves to be a useful *analytical tool* but also very useful instrument for *social critique*.

This leads us to your current work on the link between biology and politics. How is today a crucial context regarding this link between biology and politics? I personally think about the existence of databases, since my work is for example focusing on European databases such as EURODAC. Is today a crucial context regarding this link, and could we interpret this link and this context with tools such as “governmentality” and “biopolitics”?

Yes, I think that this is possible. The usefulness of the concept of biopolitics lies in the fact that it allows us to distance ourselves from naturalist concepts of politics – politics as informed by or relying on biology – on the one hand, and “politician” concepts of politics on the other. The latter claim that biopolitics is the result of new technological developments in biomedicine and biotechnology and that politics has to regulate technological developments, or that it has to forbid some technologies. The Foucauldian notion of biopolitics allows for a more historical and relational account. It does not link biopolitics to recent developments in biomedicine or biotechnology but to “political modernity” that comes up when life is taken into account by political strategies, when population emerges as an object for politics, as something that can be transformed, that can be optimised, on which one can intervene, which can be used to achieve certain ends. The notion of biopolitics as brought up by Foucault also links biopolitics to liberal modes of governing that stress processes of self-regulation and to the constitution of biology as a distinctive scientific field, as a specific knowledge about the living.

Regarding this context, could you briefly explain why you are so deeply interested in genetic testing?

Genetic testing is a very precise empirical field that shows the usefulness of the governmentality perspective. In a way, you have the three dimensions that I take to be the key

dimensions of this perspective: forms of knowledge, power strategies, and technologies of the self. First, you find a very specific knowledge, a genetic knowledge that is by no means perceivable or accessible by the individual himself or herself, but is rather bound to a certain scientific expertise; medicine and biology can tell you something about yourself, about your identity, your future diseases and so on. The second element would be the political and societal changes that occurred during the last thirty years. Welfarist modes of regulation and concepts of social solidarity were replaced by forms of responsabilisation in which individuals are expected to care for themselves, to be attentive to possible disease risks, unemployment and so on. The interest in genetic testing is intimately linked to these political transformations that some describe as the emergence of a “risk society” and others as the move to a neoliberal society. Thirdly, the production and proliferation of genetic testing devices necessitates particular “technologies of the self”, a certain way to relate to ourselves: how are we incited to know about ourselves, how is this knowledge an essential resource in order to take care for ourselves and our families? Therefore you have these three dimensions that are, in a way, interplaying in the analysis of the social and political implication of genetic testing.

There is indeed a trend towards more and more testing, targeting for example the IQ. Unfortunately, we do not have enough time here to explore this problematic, which is clearly a central issue today. I am also convinced that concepts of “biopolitics” and “governmentality” are really closely linked and pertinent for this. So maybe we could come back to a more general question, that would be: we use these concepts in order to tackle an issue that Foucault couldn't possibly have thought of during his life – these problems of genetic testing, and so on. To what extent, according to you, aren't we corrupting these Foucauldian concepts by adapting them to new problems and contexts? It indeed seems to me that there is a kind of struggle between on the one hand going too far from the Foucauldian text and losing the original pertinence of the concept, and on the other hand staying too close to the text and not being able to explain anything else.

There is this very nice formula Foucault once coined: you can only be faithful to an author if you misuse him, if you distort his thinking. I think this was exactly what he wanted to be done with his own work. So I don't think there is any problem with a possible denaturalisation of Foucault's thinking; quite on the contrary this is the only way to pursue his ideas. Of course you have to use the concepts, and in using them you have to transform them. To limit ourselves to the exact contents that Foucault once gave to his notions and concepts: this would be the exact opposite of faithfulness.

This research ethos seems quite close to what Deleuze referred to when speaking about “faire des enfants dans le dos” of previous philosophers.

Exactly.

My last question is located in a more epistemological ground and relates to this fact that you have to adapt the concepts. This interrogation appeared after a reading session I had with my students. Aren't we in a dangerous position with Foucault's idea, framework of governmentality, in the sense that we are opened to Popper's critique of Marxism, that is, the impossibility to falsify this kind of explanation? In a way, governmentality could explain everything and anything. Do you agree with this?

I don't think that you can explain anything and everything by referring to the notion of governmentality. It is exactly not something that is put forward in a general way to account for any change or any transformation that you can imagine, but related to modest empirical endeavours and very precise modes of explaining concrete changes and the working of concrete institutions, or the formations of very limited experiences. The analytical strength of this perspective lies in the fact that you don't start with a generality, but rather with something very specific; which finally might enable you to derive some general conclusions from specific analyses. This is what I think makes this concept interesting. You don't generalise from the beginning, but maybe at the end and on the basis of certain research results, you might say that you can compare these results with developments in other areas; but you have to rely on the results of a research that is concerned with singularities.

You need to start from a concrete problem. Could that be the advice you would give to a young Foucault scholar or to any scholar who wants to integrate Foucault into his analysis? Would this be the one advice? To “problematise” – in a Foucauldian sense?

Yes, but more than that: to create a problem. Not only to start with something that is already visible as a problem, but to begin with something that doesn't seem to be a problem at all. Problematization in this sense means to question what appears to be well-ordered, rational, responsible, self-evident, universal or natural in order to show the selective format of these practices and the power effects inscribed in them.

Well, thank you very much indeed.

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