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## **An indigestible meal? Foucault, governmentality and state theory**

In his lectures of 1978 and 1979 at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault responded to some Marxist critics who had complained that the “genealogy of power” lacked an elaborated theory of the state.<sup>1</sup> Foucault remarked that he had refrained from pursuing a theory of the state “in the sense that one abstains from an indigestible meal” (2004: 78).<sup>2</sup> However, a few sentences later Foucault states: “The problem of state formation is at the centre of the questions that I want to pose.” (2004: 79)

This article explores this apparent contradiction and investigates the contribution of an “analytics of government” to state theory. This approach takes up methodological and theoretical considerations that Foucault developed in his “history of ‘governmentality’” (1991a: 102). It has three analytical dimensions. First, it presents a nominalist account that stresses the central importance of knowledge and political discourses in the constitution of the state. Secondly, an analytics of government uses a broad concept of technology that encompasses not only material but also symbolic devices, including political technologies as well as technologies of the self. Third, it conceives of the state as an instrument and effect of political strategies that define the external borders between the public and the private and the state and civil society, and also define the internal structure of political institutions and state apparatuses. After presenting the three analytical dimensions, the last part of the article will compare this theoretical perspective with the concept of governance and with critical accounts of neo-liberalism.

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations from French and German have been translated by the author.

## 1. Governmentality and transformations of statehood

Foucault proposed the concept of governmentality for the first time in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1978 and 1979 (2004; 2007). The notion derives from the French word *gouvernemental*, meaning “concerning government” (see Senellart, 2004: 406). The word “governmentality” was known even before it figured as a central term in Foucault’s work. Roland Barthes had already used the “barbarous but unavoidable neologism” (1989: 130) in the 1950s, to denote an ideological mechanism that presents the government as the origin of social relations. For Barthes, governmentality refers to “the Government presented by the national press as the Essence of efficacy” (1989: 130). Foucault takes up this “ugly word” (2007: 115), but detaches it from the semiological context. Governmentality no longer refers to a mythological symbolic practice that depoliticizes social relations, but represents the “rationalisation of governmental practice in the exercise of political sovereignty” (2004: 4).

Foucault deploys the concept of governmentality as a “guideline” for a “genealogy of the modern state” (2007: 354) embracing a period from Ancient Greece up until contemporary forms of neo-liberalism. I wish to emphasize two points here, as they seem important for an adequate assessment of the innovative potential of an analytics of government. First of all, the concept of governmentality demonstrates Foucault’s working hypothesis concerning the reciprocal constitution of power techniques and forms of knowledge and of regimes of representation and modes of intervention. Government defines a discursive field in which exercising power is “rationalized.” Ways in which this occurs include the delineation of concepts, the specification of objects and borders, and the provision of arguments and justifications. In this manner, government makes it possible to address a problem and offers certain strategies for managing or solving the problem.

Second: rather than presenting an analysis of the development and transformation of political-administrative structures, Foucault concentrates on the multiple and diverse relations between the institutionalization of a state apparatus and historical forms of subjectivation. He endeavors to show how the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other’s emergence. Like Norbert Elias (1976) he is interested in the long-term processes of co-evolution of modern statehood and modern subjectivity. But whereas Elias relies on a general theory of civilization presupposing a single historical logic of development (“the process”), Foucault analyzes heterogeneous and plural “arts of government” (2004: 4). He refers to the older meaning of the term government (Sellin 1984; Senellart 1995). While the word has a purely political meaning today, Foucault is able to

show that up until well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century the problem of government was placed in a more general context. Government was a term discussed not only in political tracts but also in philosophical, religious, medical and pedagogic texts. In addition to management by the state or administration, government also addressed problems of self-control, guidance for the family and for children, management of the household, directing the soul, and other questions. For this reason, Foucault defines government as conduct, or, more precisely, as “the conduct of conduct” and thus as a term which ranges from “governing the self” to “governing others” (Foucault, 2000a: 340-342). To mark the conceptual difference between this wider notion and the more recent concept of government, Foucault distinguishes between the “problematic of government in general” and “the political form of government” (1991a: 88).

To be sure, Foucault’s “genealogy of governmentality” is more of a fragmentary sketch than an elaborated theory, and most of it is to be found in lectures that were never prepared for publication. Nevertheless, the concept of governmentality has inspired many studies in the social sciences and historical investigations. Especially in Great Britain, Australia, Canada and the US (Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991; Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996; Dean and Hindess, 1998; Dean and Henman, 2004), but also in Germany and France (Bröckling, Krasmann and Lemke, 2000; Pieper, Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2003; Meyet, Naves and Ribemont, 2005), scholars have sought to refine and extend Foucault’s work as a tool for the critical analysis of political technologies and governmental rationalities in contemporary societies.<sup>3</sup>

A major focus of studies of governmentality has been the shift from the Keynesian welfare state toward so-called free market policies and the rise of neo-liberal political projects in Western democracies. An analytics of government helps to provide a dynamic analysis that does not limit itself to statements about the “retreat of the state” or the “domination of the market”, but deciphers the apparent “end of politics” as a political program. As many scholars have noted, the critique of direct state interventions is a positive technique of government which entails a transfer of the operations of government to non-state actors. As a result, current political changes are understood not as a decline of state sovereignty but as a promotion of forms of government that foster and enforce individual responsibility, privatized risk-management, empowerment techniques, and the play of market forces and entrepreneurial models in a variety of social domains (Rose and Miller, 1992; O’Malley, 1996; Rose 1996; Cruikshank, 1999; Henman, 2004).

While the concept of governmentality provides a very promising tool for the analysis of transformations in (contemporary) statehood, there are also some limitations and blind spots

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<sup>3</sup> For overviews of “studies of governmentality”, see Dean, 1999; Lemke, 2000; Meyet, 2005.

to be noted. To start with, it is mostly the territorially sovereign nation state that serves as the implicit or explicit frame of reference in the governmentality literature. This perspective is often informed by a Eurocentric approach excluding all forms of “fragmented” or “graduated sovereignty” (Ong, 2005) that characterize statehood in many parts of the world (Schlichte 2005). Until more recently, studies of governmentality mostly neglected non-Western as well as non-liberal contexts (Sigley 2006). Furthermore, there is rarely any consideration of how transformations of Keynesian forms of government on a national level are linked with international developments or of how the appearance of new actors on the global or European scale is paralleled by a displacement of the competences of the nation state.<sup>4</sup> Such an approach makes it impossible to investigate the new forms of government that are indicated by the increasing significance of international, supranational and transnational organizations like the UN, IMF and World Bank, and it does not account for the new role of transnational alliances of Nongovernmental Organizations. As James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta rightly stress, it is necessary to extend an analytics of government to include modes of government that are being set up on a transnational and global scale. They criticize the way in which “institutions of global governance such as the IMF and the WTO are commonly seen as being simply ‘above’ national states, much as states were discussed vis-à-vis the grassroots. Similarly, the ‘global’ is often spoken of as if it were simply a superordinate scalar level that encompasses nation-states just as nation-states were conceptualized to encompass regions, towns, and villages” (2002: 990). As the recent discussions of “transnational” or “global governmentality” show, scholars are already rethinking and questioning spatial and scalar framings of sovereign states that are too often taken for granted in the literature on governmentality (Lippert, 1999; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Larner and Walters, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; Perry and Maurer, 2004).

In the following, I will propose an analytics of government that takes up some of the insights of Foucault’s work on governmentality while seeking to avoid the shortcomings in the conceptualization of contemporary statehood that I have mentioned. Three dimensions that will be briefly described in the remaining part of the article characterize this theoretical perspective.

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<sup>4</sup> For a notable exception to this general tendency see Barry 1993; 2001.

## 2. The historical ontology of the state

The point of departure of an analytics of government is “the ‘governmentalization’ of the state” (Foucault, 1991: 103). According to Foucault, government by state agencies must be conceived of as a contingent political process and a singular historical event in need of explanation rather than a given fact. A series of “how” questions follow from this problematization. How does the state come to act, if at all, as a coherent political force? How is the imaginary unity of the state produced in practical terms? How does a plurality of institutions and processes become „the state“? How to account for the apparent autonomy of the state as a separate entity that somehow stands outside and above society?

To pursue these questions, Foucault proposes an analytical framework he sometimes calls “a political history of truth” or “historical nominalism” (e.g. 1991b: 86). This methodological-theoretical perspective informs not only his “genealogy of the modern state”, as in the 1978-79 lectures at the Collège de France, but also his book on the *Birth of the Prison* and the first volume of the *History of sexuality* (Foucault, 1977; 1979).<sup>5</sup> Foucault’s historical nominalism is a critical investigation consisting of a positive and a negative component. The latter is closely tied to subverting self-evidences and universal truth claims: “It means making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all. To show that things ‘weren’t as necessary as all that’.” (1991b: 76) The second “theoretico-political function” of historical nominalism consists of “rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies and so on which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary” (1991b: 76).<sup>6</sup>

This dual movement characterizes the specific profile of Foucault’s nominalism. The objective of this approach is not to dispute that there is some “object” to which “state” refers; rather, the point called into question is whether this referent is identical to the “state” itself. In

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault’s historical nominalism breaks with classical nominalism by taking up and radicalizing insights from French epistemology and the Marxist philosophy of Louis Althusser. On the difference between the two forms of nominalism see Phaller, 1997: 178-183. Ian Hacking proposes a similar distinction between “static” and “dynamic” nominalism (1986; 2004). See also Dean, 1998a.

<sup>6</sup> See Mitchell Dean’s definition of an analytics of government: „An analytics is a type of study concerned with an analysis of the specific conditions under which particular entities emerge, exist and change. It is thus distinguished from most theoretical approaches in that it seeks to attend to, rather than efface, the singularity of ways of governing and conducting ourselves. Thus it does not treat particular practices of government as instances of ideal types and concepts. Neither does it regard them as effects of a law-like necessity or treat them as manifestations of a fundamental contradiction. An analytics of government examines the conditions under which regimes of practices come into being, are maintained and are transformed.“ (1999: 20-21; see also Gottweis, 2003)

fact, the idea of a universal and neutral state can itself be comprehended as a specific “state effect.” The concept of government is meant to historically situate statehood, to reflect on its conditions of existence and rules of transformation. An analytics of government studies the practical conditions under which forms of statehood emerge, stabilize and change – combining and connecting different and diverse “elements” in such a way that retrospectively an “object” appears that seemed to have existed prior to the historical and political process, presumably guiding and directing it. As Rose and Miller put it: “[T]he state can be seen as a specific way in which the problem of government is discursively codified, a way of dividing a ‘political sphere’, with its particular characteristics of rule, from other, ‘non-political spheres’ to which it must be related, and a way in which certain technologies of government are given a temporary institutional durability and brought into particular kinds of relations with one another.” (Rose and Miller, 1992: 176-177; Lascoumes, 2004)

According to Foucault, the state possesses the same epistemological status as politics and economy. These entities are “neither existing things nor illusions, errors or ideologies. They are something that did not exist and that is part of reality, [that is] the effect of a regime of truth that separates truth from falsity” (Foucault, 2004: 22). The state is not an object that is always already there, nor can it be reduced to an illusionary or ideological effect of hegemonic practices. Rather, the state is conceptualized as a “transactional reality” [*réalité de transaction*] (Foucault, 2004: 301), that is to say a dynamic ensemble of relations and syntheses that at the same time produces the institutional structure of the state and the knowledge of the state. An analytics of government investigates the “historical ontology” (Foucault, 1984: 45) of the state, searching for discontinuities and ruptures in the regimes of truth. The assumption that the state does not exist is followed by the question of how different elements and practices made it possible that something like *the* state possesses a historical reality and structural consistency over a longer period of time.<sup>7</sup>

It follows that an analytics of government takes seriously the historical and systematic importance of “political knowledge” (Foucault, 1997: 67) for state analysis. Historically, the emergence and stability of state agencies is intimately tied to the incessant generation, circulation, storage and repression of knowledge. The constitution of the modern state was closely connected with the rise of the human sciences and the production of knowledge about the population and individuals. It depended on information concerning the physical condition of the national territory, diplomatic and secret knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses

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<sup>7</sup> As Bob Jessop put it in a recent article: “In short, to study governmentality in its generic sense is to study the historical constitution of different state forms in and through changing practices of government without assuming that the state has a universal or general essence.” (2007:37)

of foreign states, and other forms of knowledge that made objects visible and rendered them into a calculable and programmable form. State actors and agencies used statistical accounts, medical expertise, scientific reports, architectural plans, bureaucratic rules and guidelines, surveys, graphs, and so on to represent events and entities as information and data for political action. These “inscription devices” (Latour, 1986) made it possible to define problems, specify areas of intervention, calculate resources, and determine political goals (Burke, 2000; Vismann, 2000; Desrosières, 2002; Collin and Horstmann, 2004).

In systematic terms, political knowledge plays a dual role in the constitution of the modern state. On the one hand, political rationalities provide cognitive and normative maps that open up spaces of government which are intrinsically linked to truth. State agencies produce and proliferate forms of knowledge that enable them to act upon the governed reality. On the other hand, the state is constituted by discourses, narratives, world-views and styles of thought that allow political actors to develop strategies and realize goals. What is more, these symbolic devices even define what it means to be an actor, who may qualify as a political actor and citizen (Nullmeier, 1993; Meyer, 1999; Steinmetz, 1999a; Müller, Rauber and Zifonun, 2002; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003). Finally, it would be a misunderstanding to reduce political knowledge to scientific reasoning and rational argumentation since it is also embodied in routine action, cultural self-evidence and normative orientations. Thus the state is not only a material structure and a mode of thinking, but also a lived and embodied experience, a mode of existence (see Maihofer, 1995; Sauer, 2001: 110-112).

This analytical perspective has two important theoretical merits. First, the commonplace contrast between state formation and policymaking loses credibility, since the former is not a single event but an enduring process in which the limits and contents of state action are permanently negotiated and redefined. It follows “that ‘policies’ that affect the very structure of the state are part of the ongoing process of state-formation” (Steinmetz, 1999b: 9; Gottweis, 2003). Second, this approach makes it possible to include the observer’s position in the process of theory construction. Political and sociological knowledge, operating with dualisms like individual and state, knowledge and power, and so on, plays a constitutive role in the emergence and reproduction of concrete forms of statehood. It provides a symbolic infrastructure that maps possible sites of intervention, and it is also inside this cultural framework that subjects define and live their relation to the state (Demirovic, 1998: 49-50; Mitchell, 1991: 94; Rose and Miller, 1992: 182).

### 3. Technologies of government: the materiality of the state

As the focus on “how” questions indicates, an analytics of government is particularly interested in examining governmental technologies as a way of accounting for state transformations and state policies. It proposes a concept of technology that seeks to grasp the materiality of technologies by circumventing two possible pitfalls that either reduce technologies to an expression of social relations or conceive of society as the result of technological determinations.<sup>8</sup> To counter expressivist and determinist accounts, an analytics of government extends the notion of technology in two ways.

First, an analytics of government examines how forms of subjectivity, gender regimes and life styles are produced in practical terms by distinguishing a plurality of governmental technologies. Foucault addressed four different forms of technology in his work. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and in *The History of Sexuality, vol. I* (1979) he analyzed technologies seeking to discipline the individual body or to regulate population processes, and in his later work he was also sensitive to the workings of “technologies of the self” and “political technologies of individuals.” While the former concentrate on processes of self-guidance and the ways in which subjects relate to themselves as ethical beings, the latter denote “the way by which [...] we have been led to recognize ourselves as a society, as a part of a social entity, as a part of a nation or a state” (Foucault, 2000b: 404).<sup>9</sup>

By focussing on diverse and distinct technologies, an analytics of government avoids the pre-analytical distinction between micro- and macro-level, individual and state. It conceives of both processes of individualization and practices of institutionalization as technologies of government. This approach makes it possible to ask questions about the relationships between different governmental technologies. For example, one can investigate how technologies of the self and political government are articulated with each other (see Foucault 1988; 1993: 203-4). This line of inquiry also opens up empirical investigations of historical forms of articulation between physical being and moral-political existence: how and when do certain bodily experiences become a moral, political or legal problem? This is the theme of Foucault’s last works on the *History of Sexuality* (1985; 1990). Finally, it is possible to investigate the “natural foundations” of national identities. For example, what relationship

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Barry (2001: 9) provides a very useful account of the relation between technology and politics: “To say that a technology can be political is not to denounce it, or to condemn it as a political instrument, or to say that its design reflects particular social or economic interests. Technology is not reducible to politics. Nor is to claim that technical devices and artefacts are ‘social constructions’ or are ‘socially shaped’: for the social is not something which exists independently from technology.”

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Barbara Cruikshank (1999) on „technologies of citizenship“. Mitchell Dean has proposed a systematic account of different technologies of government (1998b: 32-36).

exists between biological characteristics and questions of citizenship? (See Rose and Novas, 2005.)

Second, an analytics of government operates with a concept of technology that includes not only material but also symbolic devices. It follows that discourses, narratives and regimes of representation are not reduced to pure semiotic propositions; instead, they are regarded as performative practices. Governmental technologies denote a complex of practical mechanisms, procedures, instruments, and calculations through which authorities seek to guide and shape the conduct and decisions of others in order to achieve specific objectives. These technologies include: “methods of examination and evaluation; techniques of notation, numeration, and calculation; accounting procedures; routines for the timing and spacing of activities in specific locations; presentational forms such as tables and graphs; formulas for the organization of work; standardized tactics for the training and implantation of habits; pedagogic, therapeutic, and punitive techniques of reformulation and cure; architectural forms in which interventions take place (i.e. classrooms and prisons); and professional vocabularies” (Inda, 2005: 9; Miller and Rose, 1990: 8; Rose and Miller, 1992: 183).

Let us once again note two theoretical implications of this perspective. On the one hand, the distinction between soft and hard, material and symbolic technologies, between political technologies and technologies of the self, becomes precarious. An analytics of government proposes an integral account that investigates the dynamic interplay of elements that are often systematically separated. On the other hand, this theoretical perspective questions the notion of a state apparatus confined to the structural and organizational characteristics of the state as an institutional ensemble. An analytics of government reverses this “institutionalcentric” (Foucault, 2007, 116) account by conceiving of institutions as technologies. Instead of taking institutions as the point of departure, it focuses on technologies that are materialized and stabilized in institutional settings. Rather than attributing political transformations to the policies of an autonomous state, an analytics of government traces them in new technologies and forms of knowledge that provide the “very possibility of appearing to set apart from society the free-standing apparatus of a state” (Mitchell, 1991: 92).<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Strategies and state effects

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed account, see Timothy Mitchell’s critique of neoinstitutionalist concepts of the state (1991: 91-94; also Foucault, 2007: 119-20).

The third feature of an analytics of government is that it conceives of the state as an effect and instrument of political strategies and social relations of power. The state is an *effect* of strategies since it cannot be reduced to a homogeneous, stable actor that exists prior to political action. Rather, *the* state is to be understood as an emergent and complex resultant of conflicting and contradictory governmental practices. Bob Jessop's idea of a plurality of state projects fruitfully illustrates this point. Jessop rightly reminds us that "whether, how and to what extent one can talk in definite terms about the state actually depends on the contingent and provisional outcome of struggles to realize more or less specific 'state projects'" (Jessop, 1990: 9; 1996). Like state projects, "arts of government" are not the objects of political theories or abstract ideologies, but an integral part of a regime of practices that specifies the objectives of governmental action and is regulated by continuous reflection (see Foucault 2004: 4). But grounding the state in a network of governmental practices does not mean that the state is a secondary category that could be dispensed with. On the contrary, it occupies a strategic position: "It is certain that, in contemporary societies, the state is not simply one of the forms of specific situations of the exercise of power – even if it is the most important – but that, in a certain way, all other forms of power relation must refer to it. But this is not because they are derived from it; rather, it is because power relations have become more and more under state control [...]. Using here the restricted meaning of the word 'government', one could say that power relations have been progressively governmentalized, that is to say, elaborated, rationalized, and centralized in the form of, or under the auspices of, state institutions." (Foucault, 2000a: 345)

This strategic approach goes well beyond a juridical conception of the state. The state is neither the result of a social contract nor does it rely on the "active consent" of the governed, as Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony suggests; also, the state cannot be understood as a compromise between classes, gender or other group identities. "Compromise", "consent" or "contract" are the result rather than the origin of strategic articulation. These categories are in need of explanation rather than given facts (see Foucault, 2000a: 340-348). Rather than understanding the state in juridical categories, we have to conceive of it within the logic of strategic relations that constitute a collective will that did not exist beforehand. While ideas of contract, compromise and consent are insufficient to understand the transformations and dynamics of state action, the concept of translation in actor-network theory might prove more helpful. In their critique of the Hobbesian model of the social contract and the concept of juridical sovereignty, Michel Callon and Bruno Latour propose "a sociology of translation." In their view the contract is merely a specific instance of the general phenomenon of

translation. By translation they understand “all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force” (Callon and Latour, 1981: 279). From this perspective, translation does not mean the correct transmission of an already existing text or will into another, but something quite different: translation produces this text or will by expressing in one’s own language what others say and want, why they act in the way they do (Callon, 1999: 81).

However, the state is not only an effect but also an instrument and a site of strategic action. It serves as an *instrument* of strategies insofar as it establishes a frontier regime that is defined by the distinction between inside and outside, state and non-state. This borderline does not simply separate two external and independent realms, but operates as an internal division providing resources of power. It constitutes a differential frontier regime that establishes and reproduces structural gaps between private and public, residents and foreigners, and so on (Mitchell, 1991, 89-91; see Valverde, 1996: 367-369). As a result, the fact that some actors and processes are regarded as private may secure them a privileged role or, alternatively, may deprive them of financial and organizational resources and legal protection – a “bareness” that may in turn be exploited in economic or ideological terms (see Agamben, 1998). Examples of this include the situation of illegal immigrants in Western societies and male violence in the family. Concerning the latter, feminist state theory has observed that modern statehood was marked by a “dual face” (Sauer, 2004: 117): monopolization and centralization of the legitimate means of violence in the hands of the state corresponded to the father’s right to employ physical violence in relations with other family members.

Furthermore, the state is also a *site* of strategic action. The inner structure of the state is characterized by a materiality that Bob Jessop, drawing on Nicos Poulantzas’ account of the state as a social relation (1977) has defined as “strategic selectivity.” The term refers to the state’s differential impact on the capacity of different political forces to pursue their strategies and to realize their goals (Jessop, 1990: 9-10). It addresses the relational character of this selectivity and focuses on the constraints imposed by existing institutional structures. As Jessop puts it: “Particular forms of state privilege some strategies over others, privilege the access of some forces over others, some interests over others, some time horizons over others, some coalitions possibilities over others. A given type of state, a given state form, a given form of regime, will be more accessible to some forces than others according to the strategies they adopt to gain state power.” (Jessop, 1990: 10) A certain type of state is more suited to the pursuit of some types of economic and political strategies than others, because of the modes

of intervention and resources characterizing the structure of the state. However, this structure does not determine the success or failure of political strategies. The differential impact is not inscribed in the state apparatus as such, but is the result of the dynamic and mobile interactions between state structures and the strategies adopted by different forces towards it (Jessop, 1990: 260-262).<sup>11</sup>

Let me again emphasize two important consequences of such a “strategic logic” (Foucault, 2004: 44). First, if we take seriously the strategic dimension of statehood, a range of problems and questions will be opened up for state theory that have mostly been regarded as “private”, reflecting a failure to recognize that the private domain does not signify a protected and separated space outside state interventions, but is itself the object of the state’s power of definition and regulation. An analytics of government asks what forms of identity are accepted, proliferated or on the contrary hindered or even suppressed by the state. What gender regime is coupled to concrete forms of statehood? What apparatus of sexuality, what forms of family and reproduction are promoted, marginalized or even repressed?

Second, an analytics of government goes well beyond the limits of both positivist accounts of the state and theories that dispense with the category of the state altogether. It proposes an approach to the state that does not take for granted the idea of some originating subject that pre-exists and determines political processes and is referred to as *the* state; nor does it simply denounce the statist account as an ideology or myth that doesn’t correspond to the complexity of political and social reality. While it is necessary to refuse to take for granted the apparent autonomy of the state and the state-society distinction, an analytics of government goes one step further. It not only criticizes “idealist” accounts of the state, but also seeks to explain how the “myth” of an autonomous state is produced and reproduced in social relations at the same time as it remains an integral and organizing part of it.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. Governmentality, governance, and critique

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<sup>11</sup> See Jessop’s comparison of Poulantzas’ and Foucault’s analysis of the state (2004).

<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, Richard Warren Perry and Bill Maurer explain their approach to the analysis of globalization processes as follows: “To focus on the forms, as it were, of globalization, looking for the real behind the global hype or the global hope – misses the crucial question of why the global should assume such forms in the first place. We do not seek simply to demythologize Bourdieu’s ‘myth of globalization’, or to “unmask” globalization, or to “de-dupe” those “blinded” by its wonders. We also seek to understand these wonders and their effects.” (2003: xvii; Mitchell, 1991: 89-91)

An analytics of government enables us to overcome some theoretical blind spots of the governance discourse that dominates contemporary accounts of state transformations and policies. The term “governance” was introduced into political science and organizational theory as an academic term in the 1980s. Since then it has enjoyed an impressive career, and is used today as a “catch-all term” (Smouts, 1998: 81) or a “buzzword” (Jessop, 1998: 29) to refer to any mode of co-ordination of interdependent activities.<sup>13</sup> In a very general sense the word signifies any strategy, process, procedure or program for controlling, regulating or managing problems on a global, national, local or organizational level. The scientific literature ranges from governance in public administration and public policy, international relations and European governance to corporate governance (Kooiman, 1993; Marks et al., 1996; Prakash/Hart, 1999; Willke, 2007). Governance involves a shift in the analytical and theoretical focus from “institutions” to “processes” of rule and announces the eclipse or erosion of state sovereignty. It accounts for the growing interdependencies between political authorities and social and economic actors capturing the policy networks and public-private partnerships that emerge out of the interactions between a variety of bureaucracies, organizations and associations. Governance encompasses on the one hand the displacement to supranational levels of practices that were formerly defined in terms of the nation state (e.g. the European Union or the United Nations); on the other hand, the governance literature stresses that there are important mechanisms of social regulation besides the state – such as the community, organizations and the market (Rose, 1999: 15-17; Benz 2004).

There are several themes and topics the governance discourse shares with an analytics of government. First, a common feature of both approaches is an interest in “how”-questions and a focus on governmental practices thereby taking a distance towards political studies that concentrate on attitudes, mentalities and opinions to understand politics. Second, governance and governmentality extend the scope of political analysis beyond the domain of the state and institutional politics. They are both investigating “political power beyond the state” (Rose/Miller, 1992), that is to say the forms of power that configure apparently non-political sites like the school, the prison or the family. Third, the two theoretical accounts are characterised by a relational understanding of power. Power is not conceived as a stable and fixed entity that could be “stored” at particular institutional sites but signifies the result of a mobile and flexible interactional and associational network (Walters, 2004: 31-33).

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Mette Kjær (2004: 1-2) notes that between 1986 and 1998 „governance“ appeared in 1,774 articles listed in the *Social Sciences Citation Index*. In the three years from 1999 to 2002, the Index had already registered 1,855 entries for the term.

Yet in spite of these similarities, there remain some important differences concerning the fundamental assumptions and the theoretical orientations between the governance discourse and an analytics of government. The first difference relates to the ontological status of the objects of governance. As Bob Jessop remarks, “much of the literature on governance assumes that the objects of governance pre-exist their coordination in and through specific governance mechanisms” (Jessop, 2003: 6). This realist approach to politics contrasts with the nominalism of an analytics of government. The latter does not start from the assumption that there is an external relationship between government and its objects; quite on the contrary, it recognises that government is also actively involved in constituting agents, identities and interests.

This brings us to a second difference that relates to the role of politics in governance literature. The governance discourse involves dialogue, participation, representation and the inclusion of “the governed”. It seeks to give visibility to interests that are often ignored and extends the public sphere insofar as it promotes the consultation and implication of a whole range of societal and economic actors who are addressed as “partners” or “stakeholders”. However, there are some serious shortcomings to be noted that limit the promise of an increasing democratisation. The governance literature assumes that political decisions are based on neutral facts or rational arguments, thereby ignoring the role of strategic options and political alternatives. As a consequence, it often marginalizes central conflicts between different social groups and classes or downplays contradictions between political interests and objectives – and is rightly criticized for “failing to take note of important aspects in the analysis of political processes that pertain to a sociology of domination” (Mayntz, 2004: 74; Smouts 1998). For example, most of the literature on global governance takes it for granted that the political and social cleavages between those who profit from globalization and those who do not can be bridged by “modern” or “good” governance. In this view, poverty and wealth have nothing to do with each other, and economic growth, ecological considerations, political democracy, social solidarity, healthy living etc. appear to be equally achievable – without radically changing established political and social structures (Brunnengräber and Stock, 1999; Rucht, 2001; Brand, 2004). While an analytics of government endorses a strategic account stressing the constitutive role of political conflicts and confrontations, the governance discourse seeks to minimize “frictions” and is characterised by an “antipolitical politics” (Walters, 2004: 33-7; Hirst, 2000; Mouffe, 2005).

It follows that the governance discourse promotes a technocratic model of steering and managing – this feature marks the third point where the governance discourse departs from an

analytics of government. Most of the governance literature relies heavily on a certain kind of metanarrative. It claims to be a political response to the growing social complexity that calls for multilevel, networked, cooperative, heterarchic alternatives to hierarchic and state-centred forms of regulation (Jessop 1998).<sup>14</sup> However, this account represents a rather distorted image of the past ignoring the multiple ways in which even the most interventionist welfare states governed by “indirect” mechanisms and forms of cooperation and implication: “Governance theory works with a somewhat exaggerated conception of the power of the postwar welfare state. This has the effect, in turn, of overemphasizing the novelty and significance of many of the phenomena of ‘steering’, ‘regulation’, and indirect control typically grouped under the rubric of ‘new’ governance.” (Walters, 2004: 38) The caricature of a time when states were “whole” (and not yet “fragmented” and “decentred”) serves as background for the claim of a decisive historical break: The diagnosis of a growing complexity of the social world – the globalisation of financial and other markets, the importance of informational and communicate technologies, the appearance of new forms of production etc. – is linked to an idea of the “end of politics”, to a “post-ideological” world order that is no longer governed by fundamental conflicts and oppositions. In this view, governance is about steering and regulating a world without radical alternatives, it is animated by the search for “rational”, “responsible” and “efficient” instruments of problem management. On this reading, strategic interests are reduced to technological concerns; politics just seems to follow the dictate of a structural logic of complexity. In contrast to this technocratic and managerialist approach, an analytics of government is more reflexive concerning the function of political knowledge and the intimate link between politics and technology. It does not take the “complexity” narrative at face value but investigates the role it plays in constituting and legitimising governance as a particular style of rule (Walters, 2004: 40-41).

Seen from the perspective of an analytics of government, the governance discourse represents a particular “art of government” that is firmly rooted within a liberal concept of the state. It stresses political consensus, mutual accommodation and collective problem solving and searches for mechanisms that foster coordination, cooperation and harmonization. The governance discourse translates fundamental antagonisms and political oppositions into modes of articulation of different interests. It conceives of strategic confrontations as diverse “inputs” to reach a decision or to carry out a programme. In this conceptual frame, conflicts are not regarded as a threat to social order, but as a means of social progress: “Governance [...] marks the space of a liberal game of assimilation. Where many political discourses seek

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<sup>14</sup> For a genealogy of “complexity” in European governance see Barry/Walters 2003.

to articulate a field of antagonistic forces as agents of political transformation, governance seeks to implicate them as ‘partners’ in a game of collective self-management and modulated social adjustment.” (Walters, 2004: 35) Furthermore, a large part of the governance discourse seems still to accept the duality of state and society. Often governance is explicitly defined by a distance from the state, focussing on informal arrangements and decision-making processes below state institutions and beyond the competence of political authorities (“government”). Its proponents distinguish strictly between hierarchical interventions by the state and decentralized societal mechanisms exploring the interdependencies and networks between the two domains. By contrast, an analytics of government takes the state to be an integral part of governmental practices; it is an instrument and effect of these practices, not their foundation or counterpart. It follows that the opposition of state and civil society cannot be taken as a universal fact, but constitutes a contingent and internal element of governmental practices. On this reading, the government discourse illustrates what Foucault once described as an “overvaluing of the problem of the state” (1991a: 103) – the paradoxical result of reducing the state to an institutional ensemble and a hierarchical structure. As Wendy Larner and William Walters put it: “[G]overnmentality can offer a particular kind of historical perspective that is often lacking in the global governance literature. This would involve seeing global governance as a particular technology of rule and placing it within the much longer trajectory of liberal political reason.” (2004: 16-17; see also Crowley, 2003)

But an analytics of government not only offers a critical account of the governance discourse, it also exposes some shortcomings of approaches that suffer from an inverse fixation. While the governance literature often caricatures the state as a hierarchical and bureaucratic apparatus, the anti-globalization literature and many critical accounts of neo-liberal modes of government tend to invoke a nostalgic image of the nation state as an actor defending public interests against powerful economic actors (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1998). The problem with this kind of analysis is that it also essentializes the state, being preoccupied with a territorial nation state that is supposedly being eroded by global economic regimes. The argument is that there is some “pure” or “anarchic” economy that should be “regulated” or “civilized” by a political reaction on the part of society. This critical account ironically shares the (neo-)liberal idea of a separation between politics and the economy. The concept of governmentality proves useful in correcting the diagnosis of neo-liberalism as an expansion of the economy into politics, since it helps us to go beyond a theoretical position that takes for granted the separation of state and market (see Lemke, 2002).

Taken together, the two opposing forms of analysis result in an interesting theoretical-political constellation. While some scholars demand a “reinvention of government” (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992) which includes a comprehensive deregulation and privatization of state functions and the downsizing of the political apparatus in the light of new global economic challenges, others call for the state to resist “the economic horror” (Forrester 1999) in order to protect citizens from the negative aspects of globalization. Neither of these approaches recognizes the necessity of a relational, technological and strategic approach that takes into account the fact that the state *and* the economy are themselves being reconfigured and reinvented in novel ways. Both consider the nation state as a prefabricated and stable form, failing to see that the relations between state and economy, global and local, as well as the categories themselves, require theoretical attention (Perry and Maurer, 2003).

## 5. Conclusion

This article started with Foucault’s remark that he had refrained from pursuing a theory of the state “in the sense that one abstains from an indigestible meal.” At the same time Foucault claims to provide nothing less than a “genealogy of the modern state.” I have examined this apparent paradox in order to determine what an analytics of government might offer to state theory.

Foucault’s analytics of government combines the “microphysics of power” (see Foucault, 1977), which remained centred on questions of discipline and normalization, with the macro-political question of the state (Lemke, 1997). This approach investigates how power relations have historically been concentrated in the form of the state without ever being reducible to it. Following this line of inquiry, Foucault sees the state as “nothing more than the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities. [...] It is necessary to address from an exterior point of view the question of the state, it is necessary to analyse the problem of the state by referring to the practices of government” (Foucault, 2004: 79). When Foucault focuses on the “governmentalization of the state” (1991a: 103), he does not assume that government is a technique that could be applied or used by state authorities or apparatuses; instead, he comprehends the state itself as a dynamic and contingent form of societal power relations. Thus, governmentality is “at once internal and external to the state, since it is the tactics of government which make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not, the public versus the private, and so on; thus the

state can only be understood in its survival and its limits on the basis of the general tactics of governmentality” (1991a: 103).

In the light of this analytical framework, what we observe today is not a reduction of state sovereignty and planning capacities but a displacement from formal to informal techniques of government and the appearance of new actors on the scene of government. These processes indicate fundamental transformations in statehood and a new relation between state and civil society actors. In other words, the difference between state and society, politics and the economy does not function as a foundation or a borderline, but as an element and effect of specific governmental technologies (see Lemke, 2002).

As I have argued, an analytics of government is characterized by a triple movement of pluralization and decentralization that Foucault sums up as follows: “In short, the point of view [...] involved the attempt to free relations of power from the institution, in order to analyze them from the point of view of technologies; to distinguish them also from the function, so as to take them up within a strategic analysis; and to detach them from the privilege of the object, so as to resituate them within the perspective of the constitution of fields, domains, and objects of knowledge.” (2007: 118) Practices instead of object, strategies instead of function, and technologies instead of institution – this is certainly not a light snack, but it might be the recipe for a state theory that opens up new directions and research areas for political analysis and critique and provides a better understanding of current political and social transformations.

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