

Universal but not truly “global”: An intervention in the global governmentality debate¹

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Abstract

This essay responds to the charges raised against global governmentality studies by Jan Selby (2007), David Chandler (2009, 2010), and Jonathan Joseph (2009, 2010a, 2010b). In particular, it engages with three ideas: (1) that it is inappropriate to “scale up” Foucault given his interest in capillary power and domestic politics; (2) that Foucauldian theories of governmentality apply mostly to Western liberal states; (3) and that they overstate the unity and naturalism of the international sphere. Against these charges I argue that the task of global governmentality studies is to explore the strategies and technologies used to reaffirm liberal capital as a universal, albeit not yet global, measure of truth. While this does not dismiss the fact that more empirical evidence is needed on the conditions and structures that allow governmentality to work in different parts of the world, the promise of Foucauldian approaches to add a historical and human dimension to international studies should not be hampered by disciplinary admonitions.

Keywords

Foucault, global politics, governmentality, (neo)liberalism, disciplinarity

The work of Michel Foucault is not a novelty in International Relations. It was first popularized during the 1980s and 1990s when people like RBJ Walker (1993), Richard Ashley (1990 with Walker), Jim George (1995), Spike Peterson (1992), and Jens Bartelson (1995), sought to reveal that many of the *realpolitische* staples of IR, like “anarchy,” “sovereignty,” “state,” and “power struggles,” not so much describe as produce our international reality (Selby 2007:326). These so-called dissident scholars were the first to use Foucault (but also Derrida, Agamben, Said, Spivak, Bhabha) to denaturalize the disciplinarity of the field. More recently, however, a different Foucault has entered the discipline. Since the recent translation and publication of his latest Collège de France lectures, *Society Must Be Defended* (2003), *Security, Territory, Population* (2007), and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), Foucault’s reputation in IR has changed from that of a general “theoretical historian,” which questions and rearranges our traditional ways of producing knowledge (Neal 2009:540) to that of a historian of the present, rewriting the rationality of our contemporary condition. We have lost the Foucault of discourse analysis and

the archivist of pre-modern disciplinary programs and are instead being confronted with a thinker that is quite keen on making a *political* intervention in contemporary history. Especially with Foucault's much discussed return to questions of the state and sovereign power in the later lectures (Collier 2009:79) his writings on sovereignty, biopower, and governmentality seem to have a direct bearing upon the field of IR. For students of global politics this is a contentious issue: some are offended while others are thrilled.

In different ways, each of Foucault's Collège de France lectures broaches the subject of sovereignty through a detailed analysis of various institutional structures, spatial sites, and technologies of power. This makes the French theorist particularly attractive for IR scholars seeking to distance themselves from rationalist models of sovereign power propagated by realist and liberal-institutional theories (Joseph 2010a:224). The "master-category" of governmentality (Collier 2009:97) in particular, which haunts all of Foucault's later works, gives students of global politics the green light to study power above and beyond the territorial confinement of the nation state. We can distinguish here between, on the one hand, critical (bio)security studies, which seek to identify the militaristic as well as molecular strategies used to define "what life is, and what it is for" and, on the other hand, the burgeoning subfield of International Political Sociology, interested in how power affects and organizes the more quotidian content of our lives (Merlingen 2008:273; Kiersey and Weidner 2009:354). While it is inaccurate to speak of various Foucauldian schools of thought, there are stark differences between the two.

With minor exceptions (Nyers 2003), *biosecurity* approaches typically work with an Agambenean reading of Foucault. Their goal is to understand how biopolitics subsumes human life to the strategic calculations of power in ways that transgress the limits of legitimate rule. Rather than break away with sovereign power – i.e., power that has an arbitrary right to kill –, biopolitics, in this sense, represents the extension of sovereignty into the terrain of emergency and exceptionality. This reading of Foucault has featured prominently in post-9/11 IR theory, in particularly for analyses of the War on Terror, exceptional incarceration and interrogation practices, and the rise of digital and biometric surveillance and securitization strategies (Dillon and Reid 2001, 2009; Shapiro, Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004; Jabri 2006; Reid 2006; Dillon 2007; Dauphinee and Masters 2007; Salter 2003, 2008; Dillon and Neal 2008; DeLarrinaga and Doucet 2008). By comparison, the more benign and mundane effects of power, that is the ability of (bio)power to "exert a positive influence upon life" (Foucault cited in Kiersey and Weidner 2009:345), to administer, regulate, and ultimately optimize the human body and the body politic in general have remained relatively understudied. It is these rather "uneventful" facets of international political life, manifested in areas such as finance, education, housing, labor, architecture, art, and leisure, that global governmentality studies have turned to (Larner and Walters 2004; Walters and Haahr 2005; Kiersey 2009; Weidner 2009). These approaches, and particularly the latter one, have not been spared criticism.

This paper reviews and responds to the skeptical arguments raised recently by Jan Selby (2007), David Chandler (2009, 2010), and Jonathan Joseph (2009, 2010a, 2010b). I organize their claims into three broad categories. (1) First, it is argued that, because Foucault was mostly interested in the microphysics of power and especially in how power relations achieve social control in advanced liberal democracies, it would be inappropriate to "scale up" his conclusions to the international sphere as there is an "ontological gulf between the domestic and international arenas" (Selby 2007:332). (2) Second, because Foucauldian scholars have focused too heavily on the general operation of governmental techniques and not sufficiently on the specific conditions that make governmentality work in some situations and not others, governmentality studies

suggest a universal constant that is too global or complete to allow for empirical investigation (Collier 2009:97; Joseph 2010a; Chandler 2010). In reality, however, Foucault's theories of governmentality apply only to the Western world. In parts of the world that lack the preconditions of liberalism, governmentality "reverts back to something more basic" – what Foucault calls "disciplinary power" (Joseph 2010a:225). (3) Finally, Foucauldian readings of the international are said to exaggerate the premature triumph of liberalism when, in reality, our world continues to be governed by national interests, power struggles, violence and domination (Selby 2007). "Scaling up" Foucault overstates both the unity and the naturalism of the global while robbing us of a conceptual vocabulary to deal with national decision-making processes, structural inequalities, and historical conditions (Chandler 2009, 2010). In what follows I discuss both on the limitations and the promises of these charges.

I take issue, in particular, with the critics' ontological purism, which compels them to reduce Foucauldian concepts to IR's stale and abstract disciplinary vocabulary. I also disagree with their narrow definition of the liberal project, which they treat as an abstract set of principles about limited government, legitimate rule, and individual rights divorced from the everyday political acts that give it meaning. Whether using a Marxist or a liberal framework, Selby, Joseph, and Chandler rely on a rationalist notion of world politics (where the world is made up of discreet sovereign units and politics is the sum of competitive and uneven relations that bind them) to advance a hasty critique of Foucault and his epigones. The absolutism of their position is, in turn, what allows governmentality scholars to dismiss all criticisms as conservative efforts in "border-policing" (Kiersey et al. 2010:143) instead of taking their challenges seriously. I agree that governmentality scholars need to anchor their claims in more rigorous empirical research on the conditions and structures that allow the liberal ideal to become effective in various parts of the world. But the point of this program should not be to determine why certain states are suitable to liberal rule while others lag behind, as Joseph suggests (2010a). Instead, it should explore the sum of strategies and technologies used to reaffirm the liberal project as a universal, albeit not yet global, measure of truth. The liberal rationality of government remains an exclusionary, divisive, and hierarchic program of rule precisely because it takes the global as its problem field and site of intervention, and because, in doing so, it must convert or destroy any form of life that exists outside the bounds of liberal capital (Reid 2009). Individuals, even entire communities, must show themselves worthy of the normative benefits of liberal government by acting as responsible and entrepreneurial agents (Rose 2000:1397-8). Some will succeed, others will fail, and many more will be somewhere in between. If Foucault, just like his IR critics today, ignored the material and historical conditions that allowed liberal market relations to take hold in the West, the same should not be said of his students in their discussion global governmentality.

The argument is structured in three parts. In the first section, I show how Foucauldian concepts of power and governmentality bypass the level-of-analysis problem by rejecting IR's theoretical binaries (e.g., inside/outside, domestic/international, micro/macro-levels) and inanimate abstractions (e.g., state, sovereignty, the international, global civil society) in order to repopulate global politics with social relations, mundane practices, and human actions. In the second section I admit that should we want to talk of global governmentality a lot more empirical research is needed to qualify the possibilities and limitations of this concept. At the same time, however, I suspect that the Marxist social ontology Joseph and Selby use to make this argument is simply a realist ontology in disguise to make Foucauldian approaches "abide by rules of disciplinary utility" (Debrix 2010:197). Finally, the last section, takes up the conceptual confusion that lies at the heart of this exchange. Whereas liberal and Marxist scholars fear global

governmentality studies might exaggerate the liberal character of global politics, Foucault does not use liberalism in the same sense as political theory, neoliberal institutionalists, and global governance scholars do, that is to say, as a theory for political representation, legitimate rule, cooperation, and freedom. Rather, he defines liberalism in much more economic terms, as a global regime of power that selectively grants privileges to those whose conduct conforms to the responsibility, autonomy, and resourcefulness expected from good capitalist subjects. I conclude with a brief overview of Foucauldian contributions to IR all the while keeping in mind that Foucault is better used to interrogate our loyalty to disciplinary knowledge than to refurbish its vestiges.

The level-of-analysis problem

Broadly speaking, governmentality describes a radical reorientation in the rationality and practice of Western political rule. Beginning with the 16th century a new political literature emerged which, instead of giving advice to the sovereign prince or tracing his power to a divine order, identified government – the government of one’s self, one’s body, and one’s health as well as the government of family, household, children and life in general – as the central object and limit of sovereign power (Foucault 1991:87). The strength of a state was said to derive not from its territory, land, or natural resources, as dictated by the *raison d’état* logic, but from its ability to enhance the docility and productivity of its population. A strong state was a state with a healthy, productive, and generally content citizenry. While early attempts to implement this new “art of government,” as Foucault called it (ibid.), sought to micro-manage the conduct of the populace through disciplinary means, such as police and mercantilist regulation, by the 18th century a rising population and increasingly complex network of socio-economic affairs were making it increasingly difficult for centralized power to know and manage the conduct of its entire populace. In response to these changes, physiocrats and early liberal thinkers started pressing government to delegate many of its original responsibilities to non-state agencies of power, communities, and even households (Merlingen 2006:183; Joseph 2009:417). Liberal theory, being at the same time a political model for legitimate rule and individual rights and an economic science of free market relations, introduced a fundamental tension between the multiplicity of economic subjects and the totalizing logic of sovereign power. To resolve or, at least, relax this tension sovereign power had to operate “at a distance” – it had to sacrifice its unitary and prohibitive style of rule for less hierarchical and more subtle technologies (Protevi 2009). The culmination of this transformation are contemporary neoliberal programs, where the state is being degovernmentalized and government is being destatized (Lemke 2007:10) in an effort to extend a flexible entrepreneurial ethos across the entire social field that would maintain the steering capacity of the state intact (Foucault 2008). In this context, the term government – the central activity of the state – is not limited exclusively to the administration or management of a territorial unit. Much more accurately, it describes “a way of acting to affect the way in which individuals *conduct themselves*” (Burchell 1996:20; original emphasis) in a variety of social, economic, and personal spheres without violating the formally autonomous character of their being (McNay 2009).

There are two distinct charges brought against this redefinition of government. On the one hand, Foucault’s approach to power is said to be too microscopic – interested mostly in societal processes and individuation practices – to tell us anything about the macro-level processes International Relations is interested in (Albert and Lenco 2008:256). On the other

hand, it is argued that “a theorist whose focus was primarily the ‘domestic’ social arena” (Selby 2007:325) cannot be used to study an ontologically distinct site – the international (ibid. 332; Joseph 2009:414). Both accusations relate to a level of analysis problem that says more about IR’s own ontological obsessions than about the impossibility of using Foucault in global studies. It shows IR to be a field so eager to guard its conceptual territory (e.g., states, nations, institutions, policies, civil society, etc.) that it makes it difficult to see the study of global politics as anything but an apologia of sovereign power (Neal 2009).

Foucault’s regicidal ambitions represent a heretic affront to this ontological purism (Pasha 2010:214). His approach to power (which is also the building block for his later theories of governmentality and subjectivization) is radically different from the juridical-institutional models used in political science, economics, and history (Foucault 2001:327). Rather than focusing on the “who” of power (Who can exercise it and against whom? What legitimizes power? What principles define the threshold of that legitimacy?), like IR does, Foucault preferred to study the way in which power is exercised in action: “The analysis of power relations within a society cannot be reduced to the study of a series of institutions or even to the study of all those institutions that would merit the name ‘political’. Power relations are rooted in the whole network of the social” (ibid. 344). If “power, in the substantive sense, ‘le pouvoir’ doesn’t exist,” as Foucault claims (1980:198), if power gains temporal permanence and spatial corporeality only through social action, then indeed it makes no sense to start our analysis from a priori objects like states, nations, or institutions. Instead of simply assuming that power emanates from central state agencies, we are better off tracing the organization and circulation of power through the entire social network. This much more empirical and grounded method will sometimes lead us to institutions, policy programs, and diplomatic agreements; other times it will point to scientific treaties, architectural designs, and other more mundane and inconspicuous practices (*see* Rabinow 1995).

In fact, Foucault was interested neither in domestic nor in international politics, neither in liberal nor in developing states. He plainly rejected the great ontological assumption IR takes for granted: sovereign power as the foundational moment of political life (Pasha 2010:214). Whether our analysis happens to end up at the micro-, meso-, or macro-scale, we must remember that these spatial categories are nothing more than theoretical abstractions. They are not “in and of [themselves] *necessarily* real” (Kiersey et al. 2010:146, original emphasis) so much as conceptual categories meant to help International Relations (and other disciplines) guard its discreet island of knowledge (Walker 1993; Beier 2005).² As such we need not shy away from abandoning these heuristic devices should the erratic and elusive “economy” of power relations take us into a different direction (Neal 2009:541).

Foucault’s theory of governmentality does indeed take us into a different direction: it shows that, while state institutions remain indispensable decision-making centers, politics (even global politics) is an essentially man-made process. Different from rationalist approaches, which anthropomorphize inanimate structures to give us a (static) picture of political action and unlike poststructuralist or constructivist theories, which produce a purely discursive analysis of power, governmentality studies place *the subjective condition* at the centre of political research “as the locus where the social link is forged,” the place where governmentality either fails or succeeds and where power relations are either subscribed to or shaken off (Yahya and Özsalcuk 2010:482). Just because Foucault was interested in how power operates at the subjective level, especially how it incites individuals to bind themselves to power spontaneously and voluntarily, as was the case in his later works (Foucault 2001:326), it does not mean that governmentality is

an entirely micro-physical process. The subjective condition can be used to denote a variety of things: in the individualizing sense of political subjects it can either solidify or reverse relations of power through their everyday actions; in the totalizing sense of populations that become the subject of rule through regulatory investments in education, housing, and finance; in the technical sense of experts that render the world thinkable through their reports, statistics, and recommendations; and in the historical sense as sedimented mentalities of knowing and doing that spill over into the present. By showing how mundane practices and humble acts are implicated in the production, reproduction, and circulation of power, governmentality approaches invite the repopulation of IR research (Larner and Williams 2004:4). This implies a radical break with the discipline's state-centric understanding of power and its radically dehumanized picture of the international. It is the discipline's tradition to filter human life, whenever it appears on the international stage, either through the voices and actions of official figures or through the interests of state institutions (Jabri 1998:594). While critical IR has made an effort to include women, indigenous people, and formerly colonized subjects in the conversation, the political dimension of everyday life is still mostly left up to sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies.

The contribution of governmentality approaches is that they "strip political rule of its self-evident, normal or natural character, which is essential for its operation" (Merlingen 2006:188). In showing that global politics is not only related to our everyday lives, but is something of our own making (in this "we" I include heads of state, policy-makers, and IR experts as well as migrant laborers, stock exchange traders, and housewives), Foucault presents us with a portrait of global power that is profoundly hopeful and engaging. The weakness of this approach is that, in repopulating the subject of government, it inevitably ends up using quasi-ethnographic examples or focusing on humble and mundane practices (ibid. 189). This allows critics to accuse Foucauldians of either ignoring sovereign power or of not doing international studies at all. Chandler, for instance, argues that the greatest problem with "scaling up" Foucault is that "the sovereign and the state disappear in terms of autonomous political agency. [...] Foucauldians in IR are led to efface the state or sovereign as political subjects, collapsing them into the rationalities of global power" (2010:139). This is of course just another attempt to banish human presence from global affairs, limiting it to policy-makers and diplomats, and to perpetuate a sterile image of international politics that is only accessible to initiated experts. This is why the responsibility of global governmentality studies, which many have already assumed (Ong 1999; Larner and Walters 2004; Walters and Haahr 2005; Collier and Ong 2005), must be to show how these various microworlds are juxtaposed into a "global" assemblage with various moments of capture and lines of flight.

The limits of governmentality

A much more serious charge argues that Foucault's notion of governmentality does not apply to developed and developing countries alike. Using a Marxist framework both Selby and Joseph warn that scaling up Foucault could result in "accounts which overstate [the] unity, evenness, and indivisibility" of the global (Selby 2007:336). If we were to take into account the historical, material, and geopolitical conditions of world politics, we would see that the international is a stratified place where the practices and technologies of neoliberal government are "much more unevenly distributed" than Foucault's theory of governmentality suggests (ibid. 339; Joseph 2010a:225). As Joseph rightfully argues, "[t]he uneven nature of the international means that techniques developed in one part of the world may unsuccessfully be applied in a

different part of the world. Unevenness also means that states coexist in hierarchical power relations” (2009:427), which makes certain states more susceptible to external intervention or influence, be it in the form of IMF structural adjustments plans, “good governance” campaigns, development programs, humanitarian interventions, or the global war on drugs, poverty, and terror. It is difficult to tell whether these programs take the form of governmentality or plain old imperialism. In either case, these transnational designs represent a push from the outside upon countries that lack the social basis and stable institutions necessary to develop a liberal program of their own (Joseph 2010a:237-8). Foucauldian scholars in IR know very well that we do not inhabit a smooth and homogenous global space and that we must be careful not to overstate the effects of this project or the term may become misleading and vacuous (Larner and Williams 2004:5). Still, we have very little grasp of “just how variable across the world bio-political administrative systems really are (or how much the practices of government and the constitution of subjects differ between, say, New York and New Guinea), or even more important, of why these differences exist” (Selby 2007:336).

In eluding the structural, historical, and institutional conditions that make governmentality possible in certain locales but not others, the concept risks being generalized or exaggerated beyond the point of explanatory utility (Collier 2009:97; Joseph 2010b:203; Joseph 2010a:241). In part this can be blamed on the fact that Foucauldian approaches “have a tendency to focus much on the mentality aspect,” that is, on discursive agent-less rationalities, programs, and technologies of power (Joseph 2010a:241). There is a long-standing tradition in Foucauldian studies to treat governmentality as a form of thinking or *mentalité* about how to make social reality knowable and manageable (Collier 2009:96; *see* Gordon 1991; Rose 1996; Lemke 2001). Another reason is that, so far, governmentality studies, whether they have dealt with insurance, security, accounting, crime, health, or international affairs (e.g., the European Union, international organizations, global civil society), they always tended to focus more on how governmental rationalities and practices worked than on how they are met with resistance. The assumption here is that the governed are already docile or enthusiastic enough to conform to the regulatory injunctions imposed by liberal rule (Merlingen 2006:190). The study of global governmentality could benefit a lot, Joseph argues, by looking also at the obstacles that cause the governmentalisation of populations to fail (2009:427) or “revert back to something more basic” – what Foucault calls “disciplinary power” or imperialism (Joseph 2010a:225). According to Joseph, this seems to be the case for most non-liberal contexts:

The concept of governmentality does not necessarily bring anything new to an analysis of lawlessness in Sierra Leone, the displacement of populations by war or the role of guerilla movements and village chiefs. (ibid. 236)

[C]an the idea that power is exercised over ‘free’ subjects really be applied to Afghanistan? Do we find in sub-Saharan Africa the exercise of power through free and autonomous individuals? Can the rationality and ethos of liberalism really be applied to the Middle East? (ibid. 242)

In parts of the world that lack the preconditions for liberal rule (e.g., frugal government or government at a distance; the population as object and limit of government; political economy as standard of reference for both state and society; competition as the organizing principle of political life; government through individual freedom, right, and responsibility), governmentality applies neither as an explanatory theory nor as a political practice (Joseph 2010b:203). It

“applies to these cases only insofar as it does not apply, in which case concepts like ‘contragovernmentality’ should provide an explanation of why this should be the case” (Joseph 2010a:236). Joseph proposes two solutions to this problem. Either we say that governmentality “applies to places like the EU, but not to places like sub-Saharan Africa,” in which case the concept is limited spatially. Or we say that the EU can be governmentalized much easier than sub-Saharan Africa where the socioeconomic and institutional conditions present a greater challenge, in which case we need to look at the state forms and capabilities that determine when and how governmentality is effective (ibid. 239). Either way, Joseph demands a much more empirically rigorous investigation of the conditions and structures under which the management of populations and states becomes effective.

There is much to this intervention that is worthwhile considering. First off, we should take seriously questions such as: What is the object and what are the agents of governmentality? Why is governmentality effective in some places and not others? What are structural and historical conditions of possibility? Does governmentality exist in other parts of the world? How global is governmentality? (Joseph’s 2009:414) These are useful reminders that our loyalty to Foucault should stop the moment his theories cease to be relevant for the moment we live in.³ Just like Foucault did not hesitate to abandon concepts the moment they no longer seemed useful, we also must not remain servile to Foucault’s theories should our present predicament exceed his legacy (Neal 2009). Whether we have indeed reached this point is debatable. Rather, I would be inclined to argue that the merit of Foucault was to anticipate many of the dilemmas we are confronted with today, such as the global dissemination of liberal capital, to which I shall return in the final section. Suffice it to say for now that Joseph’s provocation dovetails nicely with earlier calls to ground the otherwise disembodied and agent-less grammar of governmentality in empirical evidence. The only difference is that, because most of these requests have been voiced in anthropology (Ong 1999:3-4; Collier 2009:98-100) and sociology (Rose n.d.), the preferred solution has been to advocate for ethnographic inquiries into the micropolitics of everyday life (Ong 1999:3-4). I doubt that this “anthropology of neoliberalism” (Collier et al. 2006) or “anthropology of the present” is what Joseph had in mind when he called for a greater specification as to “where governmentality can be applied [and]... what sort of governmentality is being applied” (2010:235). Rather what Joseph seems to be interested in is a macro-physics of power relations that can explain how governmentality and sovereignty connect with one another (2010b:203).

This is not an entirely unreasonable request: every rationality of government is a “system of correlation,” to borrow Foucault’s phrase, that combines elements from both poles. Government, understood as the conduct of conduct or governance without government, is usually seen as separate from or subsequent to sovereign power and its reliance on law, consensus, and force. A careful reading of Foucault, however, reveals that the two need not be mutually exclusive (Merlingen 2006:185; Collier 2009:89).⁴ Governmentality is best understood as a set of rationalities, programs, and practices that occupy different points on the sovereignty-discipline-government continuum (Joseph 2009:416). At every point in space and time, governmentality – the art of rendering social reality knowable and manageable – is made up of an amalgam of elements: some will be interventionist, others laissez-faire; some will have regulatory others autonomist qualities. For instance, the neoliberal rationality of government, instead of concentrating power relations in the form of the state, transfers social technologies to a variety of quasi-autonomous non-governmental bodies, formulates programs in light of professional expertise and performance indicators, and encourages citizens to assume individual

responsibility through empowerment techniques (Rose 1996:54-60). The same techniques can be used to strengthen authoritarian regimes like in post-Soviet Russia or leftist democracies like in Lula's Brazil (Collier 2009:99-100). Therefore, the task of global governmentality approaches must be to study how different forms of power are combined in a "topology of power" that either reproduces or transcends the liberal master category (Collier 2009:89). Joseph's advice deserves being taken seriously:

"[D]o not try and make [governmentality] do too much. Distinguish clearly how it works. Explain its limits and how it intersects with other processes. ... [E]xplain how governmentality connects with sovereignty and disciplinary power and how governmentality is to be distinguished from the more general working of biopower." (2010b:203)

There can be no total definition of governmentality – for the concept to work it must always "deployed alongside other concepts and ideas" (Joseph 2009:415).

Where I part ways with Joseph, however, is in a different piece, where he tries to arrange sovereignty and governmentality into a linear progression with disciplinary rule coming *before* regulatory power and with developing countries being governed by more rudimentary or conventional styles of rule than the sophisticated and networked methods present in the Western world (2010a:225). This slightly racist gesture, which banishes gendered and racialized corporealities from the contemporary moment (Fabian 1983), might seem strange in combination with Joseph's self-declared Marxism. But Joseph's "Marxist social ontology" (2010:225), just like Selby's (2007) is more of an abstract sensibility to the idea of global "unevenness," strategically used to legitimize their call for disciplinary rigor, than an outspoken political position. In fact, I would go as far as to argue that Joseph and Selby's Marxism is simply a realist ontology in disguise: talk of developing countries only strengthens their belief in a world made up of discreet territorial units, each with its own clear geopolitical interests, strategic positions, and material strengths and weaknesses. While Joseph and Selby do well to remind us that theories of governmentality are not always prepared or equipped to talk of authoritarian countries and non-liberal state-society relations, there is no mention of the systems of colonial expansion and primitive accumulation that allowed liberal capitalism to take hold in the Global North in the first place and which continue to give these countries a *carte blanche* for expanding their governmental rationalities the world around (Venn 2009; Agathangelou 2010). Rather, they use Marxism simply as a pretext to convince governmentality scholars to structure their analyses around the traditional staples of International Relations – i.e., states, international organizations, and civil society – although Foucault and his aficionados went to great length to explain that the legislative and administrative structures of the state do not exhaust the possibilities for government.

Foucault famously refused to give us a *theory* of the state in the same way "that one abstains from an indigestible meal" (2008:77). Instead of thinking of the state as a self-evident resting place of sovereign power, Foucault treated it as a political process to be explained, a historical event to be unraveled. He demoted the state from explanatory framework to object of study (Lemke 2007:5). Although "real," the state is neither an exclusive nor an exhaustive mode of systematizing political power, only one of the multiple ways in which the problem of government can be arranged and codified (Rose and Miller 1992:176; Lemke 2007; Vrasti 2009). This being said, sovereign power remained central to Foucault's work (Lemke 2007:1). The reason why no other political formation has been endowed with the same spatial and temporal

permanence as the state is owed in large part to the mutating character of sovereign power. The state rarely has “the unity or the functionality [usually] ascribed to it” (Rose and Miller 1992:174-5)⁵, but sovereign power shows great ability in preserving the state form as a central instrument and site of power. For instance, in the post-war period, the New Deal and the Marshall Plan helped Western countries reach a Fordist consensus between labor, business, and government that would lead to unprecedented levels of prosperity and human security. Once student riots, cultural revolutions, and the civil rights movement exposed the unsustainable effects of this arrangement, advanced liberal democracies had to forge a new social contract – one which combined the cultural logic of multiculturalism, identity politics, and autonomy with the ethos of multinational capitalism (Zizek 1997). The enduring geospatial stability of the state form is a consequence of heterogeneous developments such as these, not given from the outset.

We see here that at the root of the conflict between rationalist (realist, liberals, or Marxist) and Foucauldian IR scholars lies an ontological problem: while neither of them can afford to deny the reality of the state, the latter understand it as an effect of power, whereas the former take the state as the starting point for social reality. Global governmentality scholars prefer to construct a bottom-up picture of how sovereign power takes shape through minute and mundane strategies. For them the unity and centrality of the state must be demonstrated and cannot be taken for granted. Meanwhile their critics fear that this approach will bypass the state and the political developments it gave birth to, such as the social contract and the doctrine of the rights of man (Chandler 2010:140). To this governmentality scholars respond by invoking the ghost of the Enlightenment: the disciplinary absolutism demonstrated by people like Selby, Chandler, and Joseph is intended to banish any critique of power that falls outside the ontology of the state and protect a definition of politics that is inspired by racially- and culturally-laden epistemic categories (Kiersey et al. 2010:150). This is an accurate, if somewhat abstract, accusation. What worries me the most about Joseph and Selby’s (but also Chandler’s) position, however, is their political quietism.

Different from previous Marxist critiques of continental thought (*see* Callinicos 1991; McGee 1997; Brennan 2005), there is no mention here of capitalist violence, objective class interests, or political utopia. With Joseph (2009, 2010a, 2010b), for instance, we cannot even be certain where he stands with regards to governmentality: whether he sees it as a desirable goal (his insistence on finding out in what places and under what conditions liberal governmentality works seems to be indicating so) or whether he is purely agnostic about it (which in and of itself is also a political position). It seems to me, Joseph and Selby pay lip-service to Marxist ideas of structural inequality purely as a way to justify IR business as usual. Surprisingly enough, it is precisely students of global governmentality that are trying to break this silence – so dismal in a discipline that claims to be interested in global politics – by presenting the liberal ideal as something more ambitious and hence more dangerous than just a set of democratic principles and institutional designs (Kiersey 2009; Weidner 2009). If indeed they exaggerate the liberal character of world politics, as Joseph (2010) and Chandler (2009, 2010) claim, it is only because they refer to a different type of liberalism – an economic variant that hangs on the cusp between Foucauldian theories of power and post-Marxist critiques of capital. It is this conceptual confusion that I turn to in the final section.

The premature triumph of liberalism

A final point of critique argues that Foucauldian scholars exaggerate the liberal character of world politics neglecting, on the one hand, the continued persistence of inter-state anarchy and competition (Joseph 2010a:230) and the domestic crisis of political representation that plagues the liberal project, even on a domestic level, on the other hand (Chandler 2009, 2010). According to both Joseph and Chandler, scholarship that transcends state-based governance does not accurately capture or outright ignores global political realities, hence making for a liberal turn in IR theory. For Joseph the problem with global governmentality and its emphasis on liberalism is that it suggests a smooth functioning, consensus-based international order:

The ironic danger of over-applying the concept of governmentality to IR is to reinforce the ideological claim that we live in a liberal international order. Given that governmentality is intimately connected to liberalism (or, in today's specific form, neoliberalism), IR theories of governmentality tend to take for granted the spread of (neo)liberalism through international institutions. In reality we have suggested that the international order is far from liberal, and far from being liberalized, despite the best of efforts of neoliberals to speak or act as if it were. (2010a:242)

Rather than focusing on instances of cooperation, rule-making, and network action, governmentality scholars would be better advised to study the contexts in which the liberal ideal cannot be realized because of certain unlawful, illiberal, or violent states as well as the general competitive and hierarchical nature of world politics (ibid.). For Chandler, the root of the problem with the liberal internationalist dream lies elsewhere, not in the inherently anarchic character of international relations, but in the failure of national politics. Contemporary Foucauldian approaches, Chandler argues, just like cosmopolitan theories of the 1990s, assume that we live in a global (as opposed to an international) order marked by the ever-expanding forcefulness of the liberal way of rule, when in fact liberalism is clearly losing ground. Late modernity has brought on a crisis of political representation which caused many people to retreat from political life and become apathetic or hyper-individualistic creatures. Levels of political participation are at an all-time low, making it impossible for state governments to forge a shared sense of political destiny (Chandler 2010). The “hollowing out” of territorial politics, in turn, renders the liberal project, especially on a global level, more improbable, not more potent as cosmopolitan and global governmentality scholars would like to argue (Chandler 2009). Our task, as IR scholars, should be to solve liberalism's crisis of representation, not to exacerbate it by shifting power from the national to the global level, thus letting the nation-state and its citizenry be little more than the handmaiden of free-floating global forces (Kiersey et al. 2010:144).

These critiques seem to suggest that Foucauldian scholars suffer of the same naivité idealists and Wilsonians did almost a century before them. The assumption here is that, although (global) liberalism may be a desirable goal, political reality is still a long distance away. But this is where the critics are mistaken: *when Foucaudians invoke “liberalism” it is always as a critique, never as an aspiration.* Instead of discussing how Joseph and Chandler's critiques impose an ontological straitjacket around the study of global politics, something which has already been explored at length both in this paper and elsewhere (Kiersey and Weidner 2009; Kiersey et al. 2010; Pasha 2010), in this section I prefer to focus on the conceptual confusion that lies at the heart of this debate: instead of the increasingly suspect nature of nationally defined liberalism, what makes the world go round, according to global governmentality scholars, is a different type of liberalism – one inspired by neoliberal economic principles (Kiersey 2009:363).

The very meaning of liberalism changes here from a political project that guarantees the equal rights of a territorially bounded population by imposing limits on political power or, at the global level, exports democratic rule-making and peaceful cooperation to all corners of the world (Hindess 2004:25) to an economic regime of power that selectively grants privileges to those whose conduct conforms to the responsibility, entrepreneurship, and autonomy expected from good capitalist subjects (see Kiersey 2009; Weidner 2009). The two are not entirely divorced. The political principles of liberalism, e.g., individual rights, rule of law, and liberty of expression, remain necessary for a functional market economy organized around private property, competition, and entrepreneurship. But while liberalism, which is always both an economic and a political theory, has been treated in most IR scholarship as an abstract set of principles for legitimate rule, representation, and rule-making, so-called “neoliberal *economic* governmentality” (Kiersey 2009:367, emphasis added) draws attention to the material foundation of this project.

Up until this point I have not insisted on distinguishing liberalism from neoliberalism, but for this final section the differentiation becomes necessary. As recent post-Marxist contributions have shown (see Lazzarato 1997; Hardt and Negri 2001, 2004), Foucault’s definition of neoliberalism has more in common with the Marxist (esp. the Frankfurt School) understanding of the term, where liberalism is a way of spreading capitalist relations across the globe, than with the liberalism of political theory, global governance, or critical security studies, which Chandler and Joseph are referring to. This being said, Foucault’s neoliberalism should not be mistaken with vulgar applications of the term which define it either as a continuation (or intensification) of classic liberal economic theories or an ideological cover-up for the reforms introduced by neoconservative or archliberal governments in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Foucault 2008:130). Foucault’s version of neoliberalism touches upon both these interpretations but gives us a much more rigorous (i.e., archaeological) understanding of how we have come to this moment.

Neoliberalism, Foucault explains in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), is a style of government developed in the 1930s and finally exported to most advanced industrial nations in the 1970s that seeks to optimize the welfare of the population by promoting social and moral orders that are conducive to entrepreneurial conduct. Engrossed in the fervor of post-war reconstruction, 20th century liberals (both German Ordoliberals and American neoliberals) were not prepared to let the market function freely, steered only by individual interests and instincts. This “naïve naturalism” is what caused so many of the early 20th century destructions, both economic and human. For the market to function as the organizing principle for both state and society, an ambition which was integral to the post-war efforts to rationalize social affairs, the market had to be carefully orchestrated and embedded in appropriate forms of policy and sociality. This is not to say that government should correct the destructive effects of the market (as in Keynesian policy). More accurately, government should intervene in society to produce the types of subjects and social relations a market economy needs (ibid. 117-20). This is what Foucault referred to as biopolitics and the German Ordoliberals before him called *Gesellschaftspolitik* (societal politics): to produce a healthy and productive workforce, create a society that can thrive with only limited government intervention, and disseminate the necessary rights and freedoms for individuals to give their lives an entrepreneurial shape.⁶

Surely, this does not mean that the world is governed exclusively by market principles or that the *homo oeconomicus* model of action is a global or ubiquitous one. To quote Kiersey, “global neoliberal government [...] does not, and cannot, work on a truly global population”

(2009:385). For now, at least, the liberal ideal seems to describe best the condition of advanced industrial nations or select urban conglomerations and high-value production sites across the globe. But this does not undercut the hegemony of the liberal program. Global governmentality manifests its force not through the actual number of populations or states it controls, but by acting as a standard of reference against which all forms of political life (individual, communal, political) can be assessed according to modern standards of civilization, beauty, and order. Those individuals who possess the skill, talent, market value, and entrepreneurial spirit to respond opportunistically to the demands of capital will enjoy greater access to job markets, housing options, residence permits, and cultural goods around the world. Similarly, those states that can abide by the dictums of good governance, fiscal responsibility, and foreign security will enjoy better credit ratings, lending agreements, and international support. Those who fail to conform will become second-order citizens, confined to slums and ghettos, doomed to perform low-skilled and tedious jobs, or perpetually developing states stuck in a tight spot between foreign intervention and humanitarian assistance. Global liberalism is not a universal reality, as Joseph, Selby, and Chandler already note, but a quite selective and stratified “field of possibilities” (Foucault 2001:341).

Governmentality scholars know that terms such as “global” or “international” are ideal types that describe a site of intervention or a problem to be solved, “useful only to the extent that we keep in mind their nature as virtual potentials” (Kiersey 2009:386). That is why the task of this body of scholarship is not to explain why certain nations refuse or fail to embrace modern forms of citizenship, sovereignty, secularism, rationality, and private property, but to explore the sum of governmental strategies and technologies used to reaffirm the liberal project as a universal measure of truth (Pasha 2010:214).

Conclusion

We can see then from this discussion of neoliberalism that “there is much more to global governmentality than a totalizing discourse of ubiquitous power that elides the particulars of globalization” (Kiersey 2009:376).⁷ First, governmentality approaches explore a dimension of biopolitical liberalism that is often ignored in biosecurity approaches, namely, the ambition to produce and organize the space *between* birth and death according to liberal market principles. Mitchell Dean explains that, if biopower

is concerned with matters of life and death, with birth and propagation, with health and illness, both physical and mental, and with the processes that sustain or retard the optimization of the life of a population [, it] must then also concern the social, cultural, environmental, economic and geographic conditions under which humans live, procreate, become ill, maintain health or become healthy, and die. From this perspective, biopolitics is concerned with the family, with housing, living and working conditions, with what we call ‘lifestyle’, with public health issues, patterns of migration, levels of economic growth and standards of living. It is concerned with the bio-sphere in which humans dwell. (cited in Selby 2007:333)

Critical IR has been more interested in how the liberal way of rule “kill[s] to make life live” (Dillon and Reid 2009) than in how it uses capitalist principles to give expression to life’s highest ambitions. Governmentality studies seek to make up for this omission by focusing on the way in which biopower “exert[s] a positive influence upon life” by organizing and optimizing

life according to market principles (Foucault cited in Kiersey and Weidner 2009:345-5). This relates to a second advantage. By showing how personal, mundane, and everyday practices are implicated in the way power is dispersed, exercised, and experienced, governmentality makes possible the repopulation of IR (Larner and Williams 2004:4). This implies a radical break with the discipline's state-centric understanding of power and its radically dehumanized picture of the international. As Davies and Niemann explain, IR theory mystifies and obscures the reality of global affairs "behind a veil, which designates the practice of IR as the exclusive domain of experts, statesmen, diplomats, and, more recently, the chieftains of global business" (2002:561). Although critical IR has made an effort to include subaltern voices, everyday life only seems to be politically relevant if it serves as an example for the discipline's favorite subjects of inquiry – war, survival, violence, and competition. Governmentality studies have the potential of returning the discipline to the promise contained in its title, namely, the study of international *social* relations in all their richness and randomness (ibid. 567). Finally, a last contribution of Foucauldian approaches, and perhaps the greatest, is their ability to offer a more comprehensive history of global liberalism.

Historically, the rise of the liberal doctrine has been inextricably linked to the genealogy of Western modernity as it spread through technological developments, trade and economic networks, colonial and neocolonial violences, and other "apparatuses of capture" (Venn 2009:206; Agathangelou 2010:5). The need to destroy or convert all forms of life that exist outside the limits of capital or, reversely, to spread the necessary forms of subjects and social relations that can support this ideal persists to this day. The Bush Doctrine, for instance, brought together neoconservatism with liberal internationalism to produce a so-called "Wilsonianism with teeth" that can expand the dream of liberal capital to spaces left "vacant" after the demise of the Soviet Union (ibid.). Foucault's work and especially his discussion of neoliberalism (2008) have been criticized for downplaying the historical conditions that have been central to establishing the hegemony of liberal capital to focus exclusively on the discursive processes of biopolitical power within Europe. But it seems to me that the most recent interventions promise to rectify this point (*see* Kiersey and Weidner 2009). By viewing liberalism as a gendered and racially determined mechanism of power that cannot tolerate an "Other" and which must constantly stretch into space as a technology of colonization (Venn 2009:206; Agathangelou 2010:15), governmentality approaches can "make visible [...] what the 'invisible hand' of free market and laissez-faire capitalism hides from view": the tyranny of expert and scientific knowledge, exploitative work conditions, geographical displacements, and neocolonial warfare (Venn 2009:211). Seen from his perspective, it is ironically scholars like Chandler, Joseph, and Selby, not Foucauldian scholars, that treat liberalism as an abstract rootless force divorced from the everyday political acts that give it meaning.

This being said, we should not fool ourselves into thinking that Foucault can help us refurbish the disciplinary vestiges of International Relations. The recurrent question – What can Foucault do or what has he already done to IR? – asked by both supporters and skeptics, represents two sides of the same coin. Yet it is, of course, the wrong coin.⁸ Skeptics are only prepared to incorporate external ideas and concepts as long as they can be made to work within the already existing framework. Their aim is to assess the use-value of Foucauldian approaches while leaving the disciplinary tradition intact, which is why they insist on treating scholars working with Foucault as a "relevant group identity" (Debrix 2010:198) than a legitimate body of scholarship. Supporters, on the other hand, rush to point out how Foucault's legacy can invigorate the study of International Relations: It can facilitate a hermeneutic understanding of

the seemingly abstract and removed processes global affairs consist of, place international political *life* in all its quotidian, connected, and conflicted aspects at the centre of our research agendas, and put an end to the discipline's political quietism. With these promises come also commensurate responsibilities. We cannot expect Foucault to offer us a novel theory of the international when his primary goal would have been to interrogate the ontological force of these concepts and fields. "Foucault can not do anything for IR if that 'for' implies leaving intact a 'we'," just like we cannot realize these potentials until we learn how to become undisciplined (Calkivik 2010:208). As Neal lucidly explains:

[t]here is some irony in taking a historian who is not a historian and a political theorist who is not a political theorist and trying to rethink him for International Relations (IR) or for the study of relations of capital. It is not possible to do so and remain faithful to those disciplines. To engage with the highly promiscuous thinker that is Foucault is to be unfaithful. It is not possible to engage with Foucault while holding onto even the most rudimentary of disciplinary commitments. (2009:541)

I would extend this call and argue that it is also not possible to work with Foucault while remaining in the shadow of this thinker. Being a "Foucauldian" – a term used only by his critics to identify those heretic enough to interrogate the integrity of disciplinary knowledge – is not about abiding to Foucault's every letter. Rather, it is about practicing Foucault's (1997) critical method on how we *are* and how we want *to be* governed while forgetting about Foucault.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

Notes

¹ I borrow the phrase "universal but not truly 'global'" from Anna Agathangelou (2010:5).

² Here we might also remember Saskia Sassen's (2000) warning about the tendency to think of the national and the global as two separate and mutually exclusive sites tied in a zero-sum game. We find this duality both in International Relations, where a split between domestic politics (as open to democracy, liberty, and prosperity) and international affairs (as inherently belligerent and uncertain) sustains the fiction of sovereign power (Walker 1993), and in Globalization Studies, where the state is viewed as a precarious entity in the face of accelerating global processes. If one is ordered and progressive, the other is chaotic and repetitive; when one is on the rise, the other is on the fall and vice versa (Sassen 2000:372). We are dealing here, on the one hand, with a factually incomplete picture of global politics: central governments will often download some of their responsibilities to other power agencies in an effort to maintain their steering capacity, just like any market economy, regardless of its geographical scope, depends upon state-sanctioned conventions regarding money, labour power, and the value of commodities (Brown 2003:3). On the other hand, the national/international dichotomy also represents an ontological fallacy because it suggests the globe is made of discreet and overlapping strata, when in reality these *scales* are nothing but heuristic devices which we have created to ensure the epistemic security of our *fields* of study. It is worthwhile wondering how much of these fantasies global governmentality scholars reproduce by adding the qualifier "global" to a concept that knows no fixed geopolitical anchorage just to gain parental approval from IR.

³ In a conversation with Foucault on the role of intellectuals, Deleuze – perhaps the most esoteric of continental thinkers – argues that a theory "must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. If no one

uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (who then ceases to be a theoretician), then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate. We don't revise a theory, but construct new ones; we have no choice but to make others" (Foucault and Deleuze 1980:208).

⁴ John Protevi (2009) explains that the present moment is the result of a succession of various rationalities of government: the medieval "cosmo-theological framework," where the responsibility of the sovereign is to guarantee the salvation of the people by acting in accordance to natural, cosmic, and divine law; 17-18th century *raison d'état*, where the prince has to secure the growth and survival of the state through various means of discipline, such as police, mercantilist regulation, and inter-state stability; 19th century physiocracy and classic liberalism, which introduce political economy as a science to both limit the power of government and ensure the growth and prosperity of the population; and, finally, 20th century neoliberalism, where the state intervenes in the social fabric to secure the smooth functioning of an artificial and fragile market. This progression must not be understood in the strict, linear sense. The present rationality of government is in many ways a principle for developing, perfecting, and strengthening moments past (Foucault 2008:29).

⁵ Only during the 18th century did states acquire the necessary administrative apparatus to exert a centralized authority, provide socio-economic services, promulgate and enforce a code of law, and exert military and police authority over its territory. But even from that time onwards, the state revealed much more flexibility and impermanence than we would like to imagine: responsibilities and prerogatives were always shared, negotiated, downloaded, contested, and reformulated according to constantly changing representations of what is rational, legitimate, and progressive (Rose and Miller 1992:176).

⁶ We see in this reading of biopolitics that, contra Agamben (1998), the term is not automatically violent. The original intent behind biopolitics is to reproduce life not reduce it to a worthless category (Foucault 1990[1976]:138).

⁷ I would agree, however, together with Chandler, that as far as critical (bio)security studies are concerned one could argue that we are dealing with a hyperbolic or imperial image of liberalism (*see* Dillon and Reid 2001, 2009; Shapiro, Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004; Jabri 2006; Reid 2006; Dillon 2007; Dauphinee and Masters 2007; Salter 2003, 2008; Dillon and Neal 2008; DeLarrinaga and Doucet 2008). What all of these accounts have in common is a tendency to treat "the securitizing logic of biopolitics [as a] globe-spanning regime of liberally imagined life" (Kiersey 2009:368). Recent engagement with the work of Carl Schmitt (2007[2007]) and his modern commentator Giorgio Agamben (1998) has led to the somewhat hasty and politically irresponsible conclusion that exceptions and emergencies are unavoidable faults of liberal democracy. This view not only "reifies exceptionalism as a structural inevitability" of world politics, it also presents the liberal way of rule (and war) as an all-encompassing force that lies outside the bounds of political decision-making (Neal 2008:46). The same cannot be said, however, of global governmentality approaches which are much more attuned to material, historical, and sociological processes as well as much more grounded in studies of everyday life.

⁸ I borrow the phrase from Sylvère Lotringer (2009).

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