

Title of paper: Beyond the Limits of Governmentality: Towards an Ethnographic Governmentality Approach in IR

Abstract:

In recent years, many critically oriented International Relations (IR) scholars adopted Michel Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' as a diagnostic device through which to diagnose relations of power operating at national, international, and global levels. However, the study of governmentality in IR has a tendency to ally itself with the omniscient viewpoint of the administrator by focusing much on the mentality aspect, on discursive rationalities, programmes, and technologies of power, rather than on those who are (supposedly) subjected or resistance against governmental practices. Moving beyond the top-down analytic optic and text-centeredness of conventional governmentality studies, a new crop of scholars suggests that an awareness of, and a focus on, governmentality's limits opens up ways to examine governmentality ethnographically from the bottom up. These scholars argue that while governmental practices may seek to attach individuals to particular identities and to encourage particular kinds of experience, they do not necessarily succeed in so doing. Accordingly, ethnographic governmentality researchers adopt an actor-centric approach which looks at how particular agents embrace, adapt, or, most importantly, refuse forms of collective and individual identity promoted by practices of government. In this paper I argue that both modes of empirically exploring forms of governmentality and their limits are problematic as they ignore Foucault's central insights concerning how (governmental) power operates in society. The paper has two objectives in mind. First, moving beyond the dichotomy top-down/bottom-up of contemporary governmentality research, the paper develops an ethnographic governmentality approach which seeks to bring agential and structural capacities together in explorations of processes and mechanisms of subjectivation by paying equal attention to discursive rationalities and technologies of government at the macro-level and everyday forms of agency and types of subjectivity at the micro-level. Second, by adopting a 'counter-conducts' approach to resistance, rather than an actor-centric approach, the proposed ethnographic governmentality approach seeks to destabilize the binaries of power and resistance, and government and freedom, that are at the heart of contemporary ethnographic governmentality studies and show how forms of resistance both disrupt and rely upon, and even reinforce, the strategies, techniques and power relationships they oppose. The paper concludes by briefly discussing how I intend to use this ethnographic governmentality approach for my PhD project.

Key Words: Critical IR Theory, Foucault, Governmentality, Counter-conducts, Resistance, Methodology, Ethnography