
Chapter 13: Critically Framing Education Policy: Foucault, Discourse and Governmentality

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Critically Framing Education Policy: Foucault, Discourse and Governmentality

Robert Doherty

Policy analysis is a diverse and interdisciplinary field involving many researchers and specialists, in varying institutional setting, working under such banners as policy advocacy, policy research, policy development. One sector of the field of policy analysis, 'critical policy analysis,' has emerged around a focus and commitment to unmask or decode the ideological dimensions, values and assumptions of public policy. A feature of education policy in late modernity is its relentless predisposition to fix the boundaries and horizons of national projects of education at all levels. Such policy production now takes place in an atmosphere infused by the economic, political, social and cultural affects of globalisation. As a consequence, education policy is now cast in moulds that reflect this 'new complexity' in the policymaking climate, a complexity comprised of the interrelation between the supranational, the nation state and the regional.

In approaching policy analysis in the context of the new complexity, this chapter assumes a political dimension to the phenomena of education policy. Education policy is taken to be an expression of political rationality, and as a constituent of the scaffolding that establishes and maintains certain hegemonic projects. This section considers two ideas; 'governmentality' and 'discourse,' and their related theorisation, provided by the thought and analytical approaches of the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. Discourse and governmentality offer us the possibility of marking out a distinctive and penetrating analytical approach with which to undertake the task of critically reading education policy. The main focus of this chapter will be on governmentality, but it seems inopportune in considering approaches to critical policy analysis not to highlight the usefulness of Foucault's treatment of discourse.

Discourse

Discourse, from a mainstream social science perspective, could perhaps be thought of as a body of ideas, concepts and beliefs that have become established as knowledge, or as an accepted way of looking at the world. Such discourses form a set of lenses that have a profound influence on our

understanding and action in the social world. Texts could be thought of as establishing, embodying, symbolising or expressing such discourses. A variety of approaches to the study of texts, across different disciplines, would understand and identify their techniques in terms of being discourse analysis. However, there is no commonly agreed definition of the idea of discourse or of the nature and scope of discourse analysis, this is an area marked by ongoing and complex theoretical debates. One common assumption underlying various approaches to discourse analysis is an intellectual commitment to understanding discourse as ‘constructing’ the social world, rejecting a realist perspective on language as a neutral medium that allows the describing and categorising of that world. Foucault’s work has been a major inspiration in the growth of interest and engagement with the idea of discourse across the humanities and social sciences. The centrality of discourse in the work of Foucault is illustrated by its dominance in the intellectual manifesto he sets out in his inaugural lecture upon taking up his chair at the elite College de France:

Here is the hypothesis which I would like to put forward tonight in order to fix the terrain – or perhaps the very provisional theatre – of the work I am doing: that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. (Foucault, 1984, p.109)

The ‘statement’ is a central constituent of Foucault’s analytics of discourse, statements or speech acts, or elemental parts of texts, are not of interest in terms of a detailed textual analysis, but in discerning the rules by which certain statements, or truth claims, as opposed to others, can emerge, operate, and come to comprise a discursive system: “...the term discourse can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation; thus I shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse” (Foucault, 1969, p. 121).

Central to Foucault’s understanding is a commitment to a materialist conception of language; this goes beyond attention to signs and meaning in language to embrace its affects in the social world. Olssen (2004) points to Foucault’s formulation of discourse as functioning as an alternative conception to what we would understand as ideology. This formulation of ideology operates, not in a Marxist sense of false consciousness, but as a more or less coherent system of ideas shared by a particular group within the social order. Such an ideology attempts to establish and maintain the normalisation, the naturalization, of the values, assumptions and prescriptions for action shared by its adherents and sponsors. Discourses are not simply texts, they are a form of

power. For Foucault, power relations cannot be established, maintained, extended, resisted or mobilised into action, or given material form, without the mediation of discourse. Statements may be patterned into discursive formations according to sets of rules, but such formations have a tangible, concrete affect in structuring practices, relations of power and subjectivity, hence the materiality of language. This relation of power, ideology, language and discourse marks out the territory of interest and engagement for critical policy analysis. Discourses are the resources, the very fibre, from which policy texts are produced. Dominant, complimentary, persuasive, legitimating, contrasting and discordant discourses form the fabric of policy texts. The breadth of this fabric extends to include, policy documents, statements, legislation, speeches, events, training materials, websites, and the whole plethora of locations that embody authoritative statements of values, prescriptions, futures, priorities and obligations.

Policy texts, and their context of production in the incubator of the state apparatus or institutional context, form a primary locus for the forensic analysis of their form, ideological ambitions, components and identity. The work of uncovering the ideological influences and ambitions of texts, unmasking the social relations of power and domination that they submerge, is a central preoccupation for critical policy analysis. Foucault's development of discourse provides a powerful critical orientation and line of analysis and has been a major inspiration to those who have extended and developed discourse theory (Fairlough, 1989, 1995, 2003; Luke, 1995). Commonly, the discourses embedded in policy texts operate to constitute, position, make productive, regulate, moralise and govern the citizen. Such texts are also indelibly marked by hidden conceptions of government, the task of governing, and its associated technologies. Foucault understood the activity of governing as only becoming possible through the development, harnessing, incorporation and active employment of discourse.

Governmentality

The idea of governmentality, as patented by Foucault (1991), offers a second horizon in relation to education policy scholarship. A number of researchers have noted the fragmentary and uncollected nature of Foucault's writing on governmentality, a line of enquiry that emerged in the latter period of his work. His investigation into this question of government informed a series of lectures delivered at the *College de France* in 1978. Foucault's approach to the concept of government was not problematized within the conventional terms of the state, constitutional theory or political philosophy, but in a broad sense of the 'conduct of conduct,' embracing all procedures, inventions, calculations, tactics and

institutions implicated in this 'specific' and 'complex form of power.' In this sense, the practice of government leads to consideration of the multitude of techniques, schemes, structures and ideas deliberately mobilised in attempting to direct or influence the conduct of others. For Foucault, the family, the workplace, the profession, the population, are just some of the many sites within which the operation of government is to be found. In relation to the state, Foucault is concerned with unearthing the evolving rationalities of government, illustrated by his identification of the movement away from Machiavelli's problematic of reinforcing the power of the prince, to a new rationality for the state in relation to itself and its own flourishing.

But government is not just a power needing to be tamed or an authority needing to be legitimised. It is an activity and an art which concerns all and which touches each. And it is an art which presupposes thought. The sense and object of governmental acts do not fall from the sky or emerge ready formed from social practice. They are things that have to be—and which have been—invented. (Burchell et al. 1991, p. x)

Governmentality is a prism that illuminates a particular stratum of enquiry, a perspective that examines, with a historical gaze, governing, as a deliberate, purposeful, technicised activity, directed at the subject, the society, or some consciously categorized subdivision of the social body. This activity resides and operates in a conflictual milieu, complicated by the contingent, the unexpected, and continually unbalanced by the outworking of discursive struggles. Governmentality is a perspective that resists systemisation or a neat explanatory theoretical ordering of government or politics, but tends to complexity, silhouetting a multi-dimensional matrix of intersecting problems, ambitions, protagonists, struggles, technical apparatuses, and discursive structures. For Foucault, the central labour around which such a matrix forms, under a liberal mentality of governing, is directed toward the constitution of the self, the configuration of the subject under the action of government.

An examination of political power from the vantage point of a history of governmentality focuses on such strategies, techniques, methods and technologies that have been deliberately employed or incorporated by the state in maximising its resources (crucially, its population). Foucault's attention is drawn to the task of giving an account of 'government reason,' its evolving nature, historical increments, periods of ascendancy, its changes and discontinuities. This analysis is particularly sensitive to patterns of state intervention into the lives of citizens. For Foucault, the state in modernity is characterised by an increasing governmentalization of the social order as the state intervenes on behalf of what it perceives as its own interest. The arrival of liberalism marks the advent of a distinctly modern form of government. Liberalism is identified by Foucault as

the propagator of a unique form of the art of government, emerging out of the breakdown of the restrictions of feudalism and the dawn of a market capitalist society.

Critical to this is the 'freedom' of the citizen of the liberal state as they internalise norms and directions to regulate their own behaviour. Liberty, therefore, becomes a resource for government. This is a novel understanding of the operation of freedom in the theorisation of how the state can be governed. This theory of governing evolves in reaction to a realisation of the limits of the state to know, to see, to govern through pervasive observation, measurement and the regulation of every detail of life. The liberal state assumes a certain type of citizen, a responsibilised, socialised citizen, who within, and because of, their arc of freedom, serves the well being of the state. Governmentality is as much about what subjects do to themselves as what is done to them. As Peters (2001) puts it, "... government in this sense only becomes possible at the point at which policing and administration stops; at the point where government and self-government coincide and coalesce" (p. 1).

The Liberal Tradition

Liberalism has become that dominant political tradition of the modern age, it has both battled and evolved in relation to its challengers, Marxist socialism, and conservatism. Liberalism defines the problem space of 'governing' in a distinctive way, the state under the liberal insignia, is charged with the maintenance of conditions in which two vital sectors; the market and civil society, can operate and thrive. Critically, Foucault locates the emergence of 'society' with the advent of liberalism and its establishment as the culture of government. A key constituent of the intellectual architecture of the liberal art of governing is the identification of the state as the potential cause and agent of harmful government. In governing this sphere of the social, the liberal state is at pains to govern within what it understands as the logic of civil society's own internal systems of regulation and order. The social sphere, together with the market, the free space of economic activity, requires a sensitive governance so as not to unbalance their intrinsic mechanisms for order, success and maintenance. Burchell (1996) describes early, or classic, liberalism in terms of 'naturalism':

It is in relation to this dynamic, historico-natural, both economic and non-economic domain that government as the exercise of nationally unified political sovereignty comes to define its tasks. Liberal governmental reason does not so much set out what in a particular case government policy should be, as define the essential problem space of government, and define it in such a way as to make a definite art of government

both thinkable and practicable. Early liberalism determines the questions of how to govern in relation to an object-domain which is a kind of quasi-nature with its own specific self-regulating principles and dynamic. This natural space is both what must be governed and what government must produce or, at least, maintain in the optimum condition of what naturally it is. Civil society becomes at the same time both object and end of government. (p. 24)

The late 19th century witnessed the emergence of social liberalism, or the 'new liberalism' in response to what perhaps could be described as the failures of classical liberalism to deliver in the realm of the social. It was the fate of the 'masses' under the demands of industrial capitalism that began to undermine the classical formulation of liberalism. It became apparent that the possession of 'liberty' did not compensate for poverty, economic hardship and social disintegration. Older liberal practices of philanthropy and regulation had failed as a response to the plight of the 'pauperised urban poor.' This new strain of state reason was marked by a more 'positive' view of freedom. In defence of this notion of freedom, under threat for a range of social evils, there followed a renegotiation of the liberal art of government. This 'welfare' liberalism, characterised by a more interventionist state, lasted into the early years of the 20th century and echoed beyond. The re-emergence, in the 1980s, of powerful strains of classical liberal thought into governmental reason marks the latest resurgence of liberal thought in the guiding rationality for governing. This emerging and re-emerging tradition of liberalism is characterised in one respect through the agenda, and importantly, the non-agenda of the state. This backdrop, of changing political rationality, can form a context for the consideration of public policy as an expression of governmentality.

Education Policy

Policy is commonly defined as a statement of government intentions. It is purposeful, directed toward a problem, need or aspiration, specifying principles and actions designed to bring about desired goals. The process of policymaking can be modelled in a number of ways, privileging, for example, process, reason or expert knowledge. This paper would endorse a view of policy making as essentially conflictual. Olssen et al. (2004) and his colleagues define policy in terms of "...any course of action (or inaction) relating to the selection of goals, the definition of values or the allocation of resources," (p. 71) policy is, therefore, bonded to the exercise of political power. This assures contestation, conflict, differing interests and competing views, reflecting asymmetries in power, representation and voice, in a political milieu fractured by divisions of class, race and

gender. There is an inextricable link between policy, and policymaking, and politics as the art of government. Public policymaking, in essence, is the machinery of the modern state, the very tissue of state physiology. Engaging in the study of public policy, both in relation to the policymaking process or specific policies, assumes some understanding of the state. The task of policy analysis is made possible by approaching the question of the nature and function of the state through recourse to a range of theoretical problemizations and the recognition of policy as an expression of political rationality.

In the shaping of conduct, power is exercised through the active construction of representations of the economic and social systems and through the issuing of complementary sets of instructions, requirements and guidance on how subjects should behave and respond. The educational state is both incorporated into such representations and is simultaneously persuaded to understand its identity in relation to such narratives. Approaching the analysis of a field like education policy from a 'governmentality' stance can open up a critical space, a space that centres on "...that dimension of our history composed by the intervention, contestation, operationalization and transformation of more or less rationalised schemes, programmes, techniques and devices which seek to shape conduct so as to achieve certain ends" (Rose, 1999, p. 20).

I want to suggest a *two directional critique* offered by an analysis of governmentality as applied to public policy. If we consider the application of a governmentality reading to education policy, individual policies and related sectors of policy can be analysed in a backward direction in search of specific ambitions, deliberate objectives. Policy can be examined in a forward direction, in search of the technical forms, organisational arrangements, practices and forms of knowledge that are mobilised in making political reason operational and material. From this viewpoint, policy is read as an intervention, as the initiation and legitimation of a set of practices, as the planting and nurturing of certain screens of subjectivity, and as a retrospective display of 'state reason.' Policy is exposed, within a governmentality framework, as a direct, naked expression of state rationality, it becomes the theatre par excellence from which to view the living, breathing, evolving drama of government's understanding of governing. Policy, on a self-consciously governmentality reading, provides a window onto the troubled and ambitious soul of 'state reason.'

Very broadly, we might say that governments attempt to represent the short-term interest of the temporarily dominant coalition of forces within a social formation; these coalitions are represented in political parties, and party policy reflects, on the one hand, the shifts of interest and the influence between the groups making up the coalition and, on the other, its conceptions of what is required to secure majority electoral support. In

one sense, then, the government acts to mediate the State and its subjects to each other.
(Dale, 1989, p. 53)

In thinking of 'government' and the state, it is useful to position the executive in relation to the dispersed structures, bureaucracies, institutions and apparatus of the state infrastructure. The executive may in one sense be at the helm of this great vessel, but the state machine is a matrix of institutions and social actors with its own political economy, contestations, rivalries, contradictions and nodes of operation. The gravity around such nodes creates differing intellectual and policy climates through which the executive must prevail in its project of governance. In this context, it is perhaps instructive to ask an important question in relation to governmentality and public policy. Where, we may reflect, does governmentality reside? Where, or within whom, is reason of state, rationalities of the art of government, embodied?

Principally, we can assert that the knowledge that makes an art of modern government possible is widely distributed in a political and administrative elite. In the liberal state there is a legacy of knowledge and technical apparatuses that make, to use Burchill's phrase, 'a definite art of government both thinkable and practicable.' Nonetheless, primarily we must look to the executive of the current political project as the most unambiguous embodiment of state reason. Key components of this mentality of government will include an articulation of what the prosperous, secure, influential state looks like, together with a set of ideas and convictions as to how government must be enacted, operationalised in pursuit of this purpose. It is perhaps possible in attempting to answer this question more fully, to point to hierarchies of actors and networks within and around the organisational structure of the state. This ferment of intellectual and ideological activity is both a resource for the executive, a provider of technical and intellectual innovations in pursuit of its aims, and a privileged lobbyist and influencer of its project.

At this level, what perhaps we could think of as the *meso* level of state reason, policy scholarship has developed a range of approaches to conceptualising those spaces where governmental rationality resides. There would appear to be common conceptual ground between the focus of an analytics of governmentality and such conceptions as policy context, policy climate, policy culture, theories of agenda setting and control, think tanks, networks of influence, advocacy coalitions and epistemic communities. In applying one dimension of our two directional analysis, we can look back, in relation to a policy event, at its antecedents, looking to unearth the deliberate, purposeful, intentionality behind this expression of political rationality. The trajectory of intention can be traced back through the *meso* level to the principal level of ideological framing. This sector, composed of a political and administrative elite together with the multifarious

networks of experts, professionals, researchers, advisors that infuse and surround the apparatus of government, is the main depository of governmental reason. It is here, at this altitude, new mutations and selections of governmental reason, and its technical means of effect, develop and evolve.

The other dimension of our analysis looks to discover the technical character of policy, the disciplines, practices, techniques, conventions, and forms of knowledge arranged and mobilised to give concrete form to political thought. A governmentality reading considers critically the resulting outcomes, implications, distributions, subversions, miscalculations, and alterations of such operationalised political thought.

Policy, at differing levels of creation, transmission and implementation, can be approached through an analysis of governmentality. Dimensions of government thought emerge into view under the application of this two directional critique. At the level of policy initiation, 'invention' or creation there is a searching for a 'rationality' that defines a policy trajectory, and shifts into a search for a *techné*¹ of implementation. At the *meso* level of policy production, we see a replication of the dynamic of the level above. This is a level of refinement, operationalization, a level of rendering practical, of discourse annunciation, text production, a surface of emergence and transmission. At the micro level of implementation, of arrangements, of techniques, all kinds of practices (administrative, bureaucratic, monitoring, auditing, training, performance managing) are enacted. Discourses, rationales and forms of knowledge support these socially mediated arrangements. Again the two directional critique can be applied. Remembering Foucault's conception that power is flexible, exercised, rather than possessed, productive as well as repressive, a governmentality reading has an insatiable concern for the resistance, subversion, penetration, failures and conflicts of operationalised policy.

Neoliberalism

The politics of the later part of the 20th century have been marked by the latest incarnation of liberal thought, the emergence of neoliberalism. Peters (2001), drawing on the work of British neo-Foucauldians, offers a very concise anatomy of neoliberal governmentality. He maps among its essential characteristics such elements as: retaining the liberal commitment to a perpetual critique of the state; the movement from naturalism toward an understanding of the market as an artefact shaped by cultural evolution and a focusing on the legal, regulatory framework of the economic sphere; the extension of economic rationality as a basis for the political; a revival of the rational, self-interest, utility maximising

subject of classical economics; the unlash of the techniques and rationality of business, the commercial, the private, into the public services and operations of the state.

Liberal democracies now subsist in a more or less neoliberal terrain, a dispensation that continually seeks to extend its reach. We live in an age in which a hegemonic neoliberalism is "...the closest thing to a global metanarrative we experience at the start of the twenty-first century" (Peters 2001, p. viii). We are all neoliberals now, or at least we live and move in a world whose geography is being refashioned by the evolving project of an imperious neoliberalism. The market state, whose arc of concern, or more precisely, its role, as allocated by this hegemonic discourse, and its mediations and compromises of electoral calculation, has become the recognisable face of contemporary governmental reason. The liberal democratic state, enclosed within the boundaries allocated by the global emissaries of neoliberalism, develops an art of government constrained by the limited options for self-interest that unfold within the operational possibilities of its allotted field of movement. This 'positioned state' is a contextual marker for the propagation of certain forms of state reason. Such a contour map of state prerogative allocates zones to the private, the public and new combinations and couplings of public, private, and third sector.

Late capitalism has an inherent reluctance to concede to the state anything other than a restricted field of movement, function or sector of control. At the same time, it seeks to co-opt, cajole and lobby the state to place its resources behind and around supporting those zones within which it has been declared trespasser or alien. The state is engineered as regulator, decontaminator, caretaker, insurer, actuary, keeper and curator of the markets infrastructure. It is within such an ideologically demarcated construction yard that the levers of state are assembled, connected and allocated a control function. The machinery of state is configured and designed to press, tension and be conspicuously demobilised within designated fields of action. This is the mechanical incubator that supports the growth of new strains of state rationality, evolving schemas for the activity of government that have as their object the: 'conduct of conduct.'

The global policy climate of developed, and developing nations is now impregnated by the tenets, assumptions, ambitions and operational technologies of a neoliberal ethos of government. When Tony Blair,² in the most high profile speech of the political calendar, addresses the governed as '*consumer and citizen*,' then the student of governmentality cannot be anything other than jolted by the implications of this powerful collocation. This observation, on the policy climate, has particular application to the construction of education policy, as it has moved into to a more central position in the strategic thinking of nation states.

This movement can be accounted for by a number of factors, notwithstanding, the primarily reason for its prominence can be attributed to the pressure exerted by the policy juggernaut of neoliberal economics.

A governmentality analysis would seem to offer policy studies a potent and interrogative framework from which to examine educational change and reform. A reading of education policy from a governmentality stance centres the use of freedom as a resource of the state, the constitution and regulation of the self, the development of subjectivities, and the active formation of the citizen. It also draws our attention to the reformation of the citizen, the modernisation of the citizen of former projects, the reengineering of the citizen to harmonise with current projects of state reason.

Notes

- 1 Greek term for the art, craft, or skill involved in deliberately producing something.
- 2 The leaders speech to the annual party conference; a discursive event invested with cultural significance and authority. Labour Party Conference, Winter Gardens, Blackpool, Tuesday 1st October 2002.

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