

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 37
Governmentality

Hello. In our critical concepts series we will deal with a very important concept: governmentality. Well, many of you might have already guessed that governmentality or ‘governing oneself’ is a remarkable framework developed by French thinker Michel Foucault. In the first lecture today I will run through Foucault’s contribution to governmentality through various means. And in the second half of the lecture today I will run through governmentality’s role in disability studies and then perhaps we can have one or two more lectures to elicit the usefulness of governmentality for literary disability studies.

Foucault, as I told you, is a remarkable French thinker and a superstar. He was one of the early ones to die from HIV/AIDS in early 1980s. He was a homosexual, mad (a rebel) and so on. So, although he was a superstar in his time and later on, during his time he was tormented so much from inside. This was because he was very self-reflexive and he did not neatly fit anywhere. Let me explain that. Foucault himself says. “I follow theory in an experimental sense. I consider myself more as an experimenter than a theorist. I do not develop deductive systems to apply uniformly in different fields of research. When I write I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before”. Well, think about a research paper. Maybe, I just want to prove that somebody is an ableist writer and then I go with that assumption and then write something throughout the research paper. I gather evidence to that effect and close the paper.

Well that writer may be an ableist writer but if you go with an assumption about something and stay there just to prove that then it is still not a fully ethical enterprise; that is how Foucault would see it. ‘I have never been a Freudian I have never been a Marxist and I have never been a structuralist’, you see.

So, it is hard to pin him down to one particular thing and we are dealing with that kind of thing I think when we are talking about a framework such as governmentality. What does

governmentality entail? Well, we know government is a position of authority, an administrative set up people have, that people create. So, that administrative system can see to it that the rule of law and some order prevails - Hobbesian control over things can happen. Otherwise, things will be in chaos without the government.

So, there are many situations where this governing need not come from about; it can come from inside, from you, me and among us. It can be a productive force. It need not be a negative system that controls me but a very positive and affirmative force that you and I can be governed in many ways. Foucault explored this throughout his career. His doctoral thesis on the history of madness was a starting point. And he never stopped with his curiosity on governmentality.

Let us deal with it further. Subjectivity was his important notion. What is subject? Myself.. inside I am made up of a person inside, my body seems to host it. If I go even further, in a religious way, then I host my body as a temple of god on in which soul resides. I am a rounded person covered with a skin and so on. I have a boundary, I have dignity. Inherently there is nothing wrong or devious about these frameworks but Foucault is thinking beyond self and subjectivity. In a sense he is seeing subject as creations of discourse - conversations, ideas, and *isms* that make us.

For example, suppose I call myself a teacher, then I have certain notions of teacher in my head. I have certain orientation about being a teacher. So, if somebody calls oneself a teacher they do not have just an empty universal idea in mind. The idea that person is a teacher is rooted pretty much in their historical and social context. So, in other words Foucault would say, 'your sense of subjectivity is not based on a personhood that you host inside or an inviolable self that you host inside; it is based on ideas, notions, frameworks, discourses that do the round'. So, thinking beyond the self and the subject is what Foucault is interested in. How you are influenced and how you yourself become the source of influence of those ideas and so on. So, that is where governmentality comes. Before coming to that word let me also say something beyond subjectivity.

When he talks about subjectivity he also talks about power. Foucault's view of power is very dynamic; he does not mean power as a force of repression. Take for example, me and my students. Well, I mark my students; I give marks to them and I grade them. I select certain syllabus, certain lessons and not others, I want silence in the classroom and so on. So, there is some kind of crude power. Well, I am walking in you all should maintain silence because it is a classroom and so on and so on. He is not talking about that power. He is talking about power in everyday life; it is not about coercion, it is not about aggression; it is not even about unruly things that people do to each other. It is not about a system's power over us. For example university authorities have power over students and teachers. The ruling government in a state has lots of power over citizens through police, law and so on. But he is not concerned about the way these arms of the state can be used to exercise immediate power by way of suppression and repression.

He is talking about subtle forces of power that circulate between you, me, others and everyone. Does that mean he is vague? No, not at all! He is saying that violence has a way to power but that is not the only way. Even in peace, even when people are in love, even during the most benign situation, there is power. And power is a productive force; it need not always be negative; you have to be careful, observational, vigilant and cognizant of it. There are a list of things where he says people have mistaken things to be what they call power. According to Foucault the mistaken notions of power - it is not mistaken per se, it is what he called 'juridico-discursive power', relating to law, basically in our social and cultural structure.

For the rule of law, law is a kind of paternalism; it rules through diktat; it is considered universal, it is uniform and so on. But that is not how it works. It is true that law is there but the way this crude power (things like law) works are through subtle ways. You rule yourself through things like taboo and censorship and so on.

And that is why we need to understand what kinds of categories of power Foucault is pointing us to think about. He has three kinds of notions about power: 'sovereign power', 'disciplinary power' and 'biopower'.

Sovereign power: consider a pyramid at the top of which sits the king or a ruler, in the middle ministers and educationists, intelligentsia, elite club and so on. At the bottom are common people. So, the assumption is that the diktat comes from above and everybody below follows. Foucault says in the pre-modern period when monarchies were prominent then there was sovereign power; king could say anything; suppose he is unhappy with my teaching style then that person can give me a death sentence.

Has that sovereign power gone completely? Foucault says yes, but thinking about Foucault in the twenty first century we can say that sovereign power and the pre-modern impulses have not yet fully disappeared; think about Guantanamo Bay or laws like the Goondas Act and many more - even the sedition law. It is entirely possible that somebody invokes that by whim and puts somebody in the bar.

Disciplinary power: this is where the notion of panopticon comes into business. What is disciplinary power? Well, let us put it this way: I wear certain kinds of brands of clothes. I fancy about going to certain kinds of disciplines. I want to get first rank. I want to present myself like this when I go for an interview. I would like to pursue certain kinds of disciplines. Even in sciences I would do certain disciplines as opposed to others. I would present this kind of body language when I go on stage, when I am with my friends I will display this kind of body language. Due to taboo and internalized oppression women may be forcing themselves to wear dresses to wear costumes and so on in some particular way. Maybe there is a notion of shame, dignity and many more ideas that determine how they want to present themselves. So, what is happening here? There are knowledge systems that come to govern you from your heart, your mind, your affectations, your friendships, your stature as a student, teacher, child, adult, elderly and so on. So, they govern you and you make them govern yourself and you perpetuate those ideas by spreading them to others by having expectations of others to behave in a certain way and so on.

So that is what you call disciplinary power. Using Bentham's idea, Foucault calls this as panoptic power. Panopticon is an architectural arrangement. Suppose there are prison cells at the bottom

and in the middle there is a tower. On top of the tower sits a watchman or there is assumed to be a watchman.

The thing is that the prison cells' prisoners are there and they have a window and when they look up they can see the watchtower above and when they see the watch tower they also feel that the guy who is disciplining them is watching from about. Well, they will think about the watching business even if that person is not there anymore. Think about the 21st century; we have Facebook, we have active internet, we have mobile phones. We have different kinds of surveillance technology including the CCTV and so on. Sometimes I used to wonder, "how on earth does somebody know that I was looking for a pair of shoes in my browser?". I would be browsing about pair of shoes today but next day I will get a pop-up on my machine saying this brand of shoes is available for this much amount of money. How did they know? That is because our internet and so on have become sources of surveillance and there is data mining happening everywhere. It is not just a 21st century phenomenon; it happened all the time it is just that I am using this example to show how things work now in terms of disciplinary power. So, what is Foucault alerting us to now? Disciplines is what we are. There is nothing called 'discipline' out there and we somehow fit you into it as first group, second group, third group people; it is not like that. Discipline gets the shape through us and it is us who shape what discipline is. And disciplines in a broader sense of the term could be physics, it could be military, it could be our training to become an academic, it could be our training to become parents and so on.

Apart from sovereign power and disciplinary power, Foucault also talks about biopower. Yes, it relates to 'bio', that is, life. . Think about the following examples: 'smoking is injurious to health', 'unsafe sex causes HIV'. Now the previous two sentences are in some sense government advertisements and you see it on cigarette boxes and so on.

Inherently they are supposed to be protecting citizens from premature death or even injury and so on. But ask these questions; how did people know that smoking is injurious to health. There is statistical evidences, there is medical evidences, epidemiological calculations going on.

So therefore, because of statistics, epidemiological surveys, medical knowledge that is spread around everywhere. Now we know that certain kinds of population are a 'high risk' category. So, somebody with diabetes, middle age, teenage being people being vulnerable to mental health conditions because of the mobile phone, people who use headsets a lot are vulnerable to hearing loss,, that kind of statements. Since they come as scientific truth they have biopower, meaning a systemic influence over our life courses from infancy to grave when we get influenced by different kinds of truth. And we also circulate them as agents. Suppose I have a friend and he smokes a lot. Then I am going to cite that advertisement to him/her so that they stop smoking.

Foucault is not saying that these are all negative. It is a way biopower works on us through statistics, diagrams, charts, flow charts. Do you remember Lennard Davis' bell curve on normalcy in the previous course? I strongly recommend that you watch my interview with Davis on that normalcy, where Davis does fantastic Foucauldian analysis to come up with an idea of normalcy.

In the end, what do I say about governmentality? Well Foucault comes with the composite term I call composite because they are translated together, power/knowledge. So, in a very simple way, power is not a repressive force. It is the way we conduct ourselves with each other as friends, learners, familial members, citizens, classmates, yoga mates, hostellers and much more.

It is through that conducting that we influence each other through power and that power can be negative, positive, affirmative, promoting mutuality desires and so on. It is there in every action. And this power is the source of knowledge and through that knowledge power generates itself. It is a generative force; it is productive and by no means a repressive entity.

What do we do with it? Well being aware of it will make us flexible in our introspective method. Secondly, by no means it is an overarching way of doing things; it is not deterministic. So, some say Foucault is deterministic, like Freudianism. They would say, "it is all power". No, it is not that way. It is about being aware, being careful, being self-reflexive and not being complacent.

In my next lecture I will walk through how Foucault's notion of power/knowledge, subjectivity, government and so on can help us understand how self-governing or governmentality can be applied to disability studies, and how disability studies help us to understand governmentality better for the 21st century. Thank you.