

Passing on Foucault's Poststructuralist Perspective: The Development and Application of Governmentality as Research Framework

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Abstract: From the 1960s, poststructuralism originated in France began to spread in the Western cultures, and merged with the postmodernism in the fields of literature, art, history, sociology, and political science, which brought about a wide impact on the research in social sciences. Following the principles of poststructuralism, scholars developed various fragmented, discontinuous, and diversified methods for investigating social issues. This paper focuses on the concept of governmentality put forward by Foucault as well as its development and application in the "post-Foucault" era. Governmentality is one of Michel Foucault's key academic theories and research approaches, and it well demonstrates Foucault's poststructuralist perspectives. As a poststructuralist research method, governmentality bears with itself unique critical perspectives. Through decades of development, especially the development during the Post-Foucauldian Era, governmentality has developed into a systematic research approach that offers unique viewpoints for the analyses of different social domains and has become one of the key perspectives of critique in the contemporary era. In this paper, we will start with the identification of Foucault as a poststructuralist, which serves as the source for Foucault to propose governmentality as a poststructural research perspective. Then we will explore in detail the development and application of governmentality in the post-Foucauldian era as well as the potential value of governmentality research with particular focus on the conceptualization of rationalities and technologies of government as research tools that can be adopted for investigations into various social issues. Such elaboration of governmentality will not only enrich our understanding of the governmental practices in the Western world but also enhance the reflection and exploration of the governing in contemporary China.

Keywords: Poststructuralism, Michel Foucault, Post-Foucauldian Era, Governmentality

1. Introduction: Foucault and Poststructuralism

From the 1960s, poststructuralism originated in France began to spread in the Western cultures, and merged with the postmodernism in the fields of literature, art, history, sociology, and political science, which brought about a wide impact on the research in social sciences. Since the research of poststructuralism provided methodological principles for postmodern social theories, it was widely accepted that poststructuralism was the core part and the main source of critical power of postmodernism [1-4]. However, with its

mission of criticizing and surpassing structuralism, poststructuralism cannot be simply summarized as a set of common assumptions, a method, or a school; instead, poststructuralism is an ideological movement that contains different forms of critical practice. It is a new mode of thinking, a new philosophical style, and a new way of writing. Nevertheless, for more than half a century, no specific theoretical paradigm has been developed for poststructuralism. On the contrary, both the early pioneers of poststructuralism in France and the later scholars who adopted poststructuralism as the research approach in various research fields all over the western world have abided with the unique principles of poststructuralism, that is, they

oppose the macro view of totalization, reject the concept of consistency, and advocate diversity, fragmentation and acknowledge uncertainty. From Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Bart and Kristeva in France to Giddens in Britain, Habermas, Baker, Bowman and Harvey in Germany, and Taylor and Macintyre in the United States, all these poststructuralist scholars have adopted fragmented, discontinuous, and diversified methods to investigate social issues. They criticize and surpass each other; they pursue the “truth”, yet they did not shape poststructuralism into any sort of “truth”, which is the most essential feature of poststructuralism. Therefore, to study poststructuralism is a process of studying the emergence, development, change and even criticism and reconstruction of the different thoughts, practices and research methods with the poststructuralist features [3, 4].

Among masters of poststructuralism, Michel Foucault (1926 ~ 1984) is regarded as one of the most influential representatives. He has also been acknowledged one of the greatest philosophers of France in the contemporary era. However, there have been many disputes about Foucault. He has been labeled by many schools, such as “Nietzsche”, “knowledge archaeologist”, “power/moral genealogist”, “social activist”, “homosexual” and so on. Moreover, although Foucault was considered as a key figure in structuralism school juxtaposed with Levi Strauss, Barthes and Lacan, he clearly denied that he was a structuralist [1]. In fact, Foucault’s theories are complex, and the boundaries of disciplines mean nothing to him. His research fields range from the relationship between madness and civilization, the formation of clinical medicine, to the reform of prison system and the history of “sexual culture”. He has also studied the historicity of discourse practice, the emergence of science about “man”, and even literature and culturology. Such complexity and inclusiveness make it difficult for people to classify or label Foucault. He is not a pure philosopher, but also different from psychologists, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, sexologists, or literary critics, though his influence can be easily spotted in all these fields. This explains that the French Academy only gave him a special title - “Professor of History of Systems of Thought”. However, there is no doubt that Foucault was one of the prominent representatives and founders of poststructuralism. Moreover, we believe that it is the complexity of Foucault’s scholarship and his disregard for conventional research ideas that have contributed to his “postmodernity”. In other words, Foucault’s multifarious theoretical background, changeable academic themes and informal style of writing are precisely the origin and embodiment of his poststructural approaches.

Foucault is different from the scholars keen on establishing “theories”. He once directly denied that he was providing theory for sociological research, and insisted that the purpose of academic researchers should be to provide others with tools to understand and recognize the world, rather than spread the “truth”. Foucault calls his academic research a “toolbox” and welcomes scholars from different fields to apply, modify and even criticize these theoretical tools. To

some extent, Foucault’s open, inclusive and critical attitude towards academic research is inseparable from his identity as a master of poststructuralism [3]. Accordingly, many academic research “tools” developed by Foucault also have an intense color of poststructuralism. From Foucault’s conceptualization of micropower relations and his interpretation of “subject” and “subjectivity” to his genealogical research methods and their application in different fields, all these research tools and the use of tools reflect the unique critical perspective of poststructuralism.

After Foucault passed away, the research on Foucault and his scholarship entered the era of “post-Foucauldian”. Many scholars began to adopt, improve or even criticize Foucault’s system of thoughts and research methods, and applied them to various fields such as medicine, politics, economics, management and culture, which brought about wide impact and provided people new perspectives for understanding the world and the self. This paper focuses on the concept of *governmentality* put forward by Foucault as well as its development and application in the “post-Foucault” era. As a poststructuralist research method, governmentality bears with itself a unique critical perspective. When we apply the perspective into the analysis of the world today, it may not only enable us to understand the political rationale and means of governance in the Western countries, but also help us reflect and explore the governance in contemporary China.

2. Foucault and Governmentality

“Governmentality” is a concept put forward by Foucault when he was teaching the course of Knowledge/Power Relations at the French Academy. To understand this concept, we must first understand the concept of “government” or “governance”. In Foucault’s view, the concept of “govern” does not exist only in political discourse; on the contrary, it exists in various discourse systems such as religion, philosophy, medicine, education and so on [2]. Therefore, Foucault used a pun “conduct of conduct” to explain the concept of governance. Foucault believes that governance is a planned way to guide and manipulate people’s behavior. Governing is the activity of putting individuals under the guidance of an authority who will be responsible for their actions and their experiences, so as to control the lives of these individuals in an all-around way [5]. In short, in Foucault’s view, governance refers to the guidance and manipulation of the individuals or groups based on particular rationales. At the same time, Foucault believes that such governance is an art to some extent, and this “art of government” is based on the organic combination of the practice of government and the rationale behind the practices. Thus, Foucault combined the words “government” and “rationality” to create a new term and concept of governmentality.

Foucault explained the concept of governmentality from three perspectives. First of all, Foucault pointed out that the governmentality is entirely composed of different procedures, analysis methods, reflection systems, calculation methods and relevant strategies, which renders the different kinds of

complex power relations operable. Secondly, Foucault interprets governmentality as a long-term development trend in western history, which gradually makes some forms power-relations superior than other forms. Such development trend has established a series of government departments with special functions; moreover, it provides relevant "knowledge" to underpin the governance. The "knowledge" by Foucault refers to the discourse system that underpins the conscious, normal and rational thoughts in particular periods of particular societies. Finally, Foucault pointed out that governmentality is also a process itself; it is a process of the transformation of the judicial system in the Middle Ages to the contemporary management system during the 15th and 16th Centuries. This process witnessed the formation of relevant purposes, approaches and theories of governance [6]. In fact, Foucault did not provide any systematic exposition of the concept of governmentality; he just used it on different occasions as explanation or solution to different problems and issues. Foucault first proposed the concept of governmentality when he was teaching the course of Security, Territory and Population at the French Academy. While teaching the course of The Birth of Biopolitics, Foucault gave a more in-depth discussion on governmentality. Later, Foucault referred to governmentality when exploring topics such as correctional institutions, liberalism, neoliberalism, micro power, the relationship between subject and power and so on. Even in his *History of Sexuality*, we can also find the reference to the concept of governmentality.

Four points can be summarized from Foucault's discussions and applications of governmentality. Firstly, within the scope of Foucault's research, governmentality is a special system of governance for specific groups, and it is produced with the emergence of political and economic theories, which evolved into Economics later. Second, the concept of governmentality put forward by Foucault expounds the relationship between political power and other forms of power relations, especially the power of ruling and punishment. Third, with governmentality, Foucault tried to reveal the restrictions exerted on people by various "security institutions" which include military, police, espionage, medical and educational organizations. Finally, Foucault's research on governmentality explains the integration process of judicial and administrative departments with the institutions related to them in different fields. These four points show that Foucault's concept of governmentality is derived from his study of European history because the specific groups, the relationship between powers, the integration process of different "security institutions" and their power relations, are all products of the historical development of Europe. Therefore, Dean [7] states that Foucault's conceptualization of governmentality has limitations because he focused on the formation process of ideologies and the emergence process of relevant discourse in a specific historical period, which may not be applicable in other periods. Gillies and Rose also believe that Foucault actually uses the concept of governmentality to explain the development process of governance and the rationalization process of governance in western history. Foucault's research

on governance is essentially historical research [8, 9].

However, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, one of key features of poststructuralism is the continuous interpretation and critique of the various theories and concepts. With the spread of Foucault's thoughts from France to other Western countries, his theory brought about great impact on the research in many fields. At the same time, many of Foucault's theories have been interpreted and positioned in various ways. Foucault's concepts entered the post-Foucauldian era in which governmentality as one of the main concepts put forward by Foucault, has also been widely discussed, interpreted and applied. All these constitute the research framework of governmentality in the post-Foucauldian era.

3. Governmentality Research in Post-Foucauldian Era

While Foucault's interpretation and application of governmentality are mainly limited to the category of historical research, the research of governmentality in the post-Foucauldian era has reached far beyond this category. Although some researchers in the 1980s and 1990s were still greatly influenced by Foucault's historical research, they have already begun to look at the issue of governmentality in a broader sense to further explore the essence and practice of governmentality. Since the late 1990s, the research of governmentality gradually extended beyond the field of historical studies in Foucault's research. Most scholars, including Mitchell Dean, Nicolas rose and Thomas Lemke, began to conceptualize governmentality as a form of governmental practice in a broad sense. They believe that governmentality incorporates a practical form of rationalization and has specific purposes. At the same time, such a practical form not only determines the form of governing, but also develops the governing measures and approaches so as to rationalize the operation of power relations. In addition, based on such rationalization process, some interventional means can be applied in specific projects and technologies, so as to realize the governing of individuals or groups [10]. In other words, after entering the post-Foucauldian era, the conceptualization of governmentality has gone beyond the scope of historical research, and a new consensus has been reached, that is, the development of governmentality consists of the development of governing rationalities and the application of governing technologies; the research on governmentality is to investigate the relationship between them so as to reveal the governing purpose, objects, and methods of the ruling class [11]. After years of development, such conceptualization of governmentality research in the post-Foucauldian era has been developed with a comprehensive research framework with its specific research purpose, research scope and research perspectives.

Firstly, the research framework of governmentality does not take any hypothesis or specific ideology as the premise, and its

research purpose is not to judge the validity of governmental rationality or technology, or evaluate them based on particular ideologies. On the contrary, the main purpose of governmentality research is to reveal the generation process of governing rationalities and technologies, that is, the rationalization process and implementation process of governing practices. Governmentality researchers believe that rationalities of government are heterogeneous and historically attributed, rather than universal or fixed. Governing rationalities are actually specific responses to specific problems during particular historical periods [12]. The governing rationalities developed for different problems usually are usually publicized as “truth”, which are used to interpret or judge the conduct of the governed objects so as to implement the governance through corresponding strategies and measures. In the framework of governmentality, the world is not only the result of governance, but also a process of continuous governance. The purpose of governmentality research includes identifying various governing rationalities, analyzing the conditions and knowledge background for the formation of these rationalities, revealing the governing technologies and the operation process of these technologies to realize these rationalities, and discovering the similarities and differences between different governing rationalities. In short, the purpose of governmentality research is to answer questions like: who is conducting governance? What is the object of governance? What is the logic behind this governance? What governance techniques and means have been adopted? What is the purpose of governance?

Secondly, the research scope of governmentality is not limited to the political field, but includes all targeted and planned control of human behavior in various fields such as economy, medicine and education. More importantly, the research object of governmentality includes not only the governance of individuals or organizations over other individuals or groups, but also the governance of individuals over themselves. After entering the post-Foucauldian era, with the development of liberalism and neo-liberalism, many governmentality researchers even believe that individual governance over the self is the only approach to exercising governing practices. In fact, as early as the 1970s, many Western scholars proposed that the shaping of subjectivity is one of the main means of political rule. They believe that the development governmentality of capitalism requires individuals to imagine themselves as free, independent and active subjects, while the relationship between such imagination and the ruling practices should be studied through semiotics or psychological analysis. At the same time, based on the study of governmentality, Foucault proposed that the studies of subjectivity formation should focus on the ethics or ethical relations because In Foucault's view, ethics is actually a kind of “technologies of the self” [13]. Through the application of such technologies, human beings understand and influence themselves and their behaviors according to particular authorities or knowledge, and adopt corresponding means to achieve self-improvement. Foucault's argument has been recognized and expanded by many governmentality

researchers in the later stage, among which the most classic embodiment can be the book of *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* written by Nikolas Rose in 1999. In this book, Rose focuses on the role of that the professional knowledge proposed by the humanities and social sciences plays in the governing principles, practices and technologies of contemporary governments. Moreover, in Rose's research on governmentality, he did not regard freedom and self-expression as a positive and effective approach to resisting the governance. On the contrary, Rose argues that the core and key of “governing the soul” by the contemporary ruling class lies in the creation of freedom. Individuals are shaped as free subjects, so they must be responsible for themselves and their free life, free development and free changes. According to Rose's research, freedom is not a concept opposite to governance, but one of the most important ruling strategies of “advanced free government”. Freedom includes self-choice, autonomy, self-responsibility and an obligation to maximize entrepreneurship. Therefore, it can be said that in the research of governmentality, freedom is no longer the basis for critiquing social control, because freedom, as a type of ethics, is also a technology of control. Hence, the research scope of governmentality in the post-Foucauldian era covers all the macro to micro perspectives of governing rationalities and technologies.

Nevertheless, governmentality has not been developed into a general theory with its broad research scope. The study of governmentality in the post-Foucauldian era has its own characteristics which are mainly reflected in its interpretation and analysis of power relations. Theories on power fall in two categories in the contemporary era. One is to attribute the power relations to economic relations. Examples of this category include the economic model of Marxism and the legal model of jurisprudence. These theories regard power as the subordination of economy, regard serving the economy and realizing the function of economy as the purpose of the emergence and existence of power, and even regard power as a commodity that can be possessed, obtained, abandoned, transferred and circulated. The other category focuses on the analysis of power from a non-economic perspective. The most typical examples include the “Reich proposition” which equalizes power to suppression and the “Nietzsche proposition” which regards the hostile behavior of power as the basis of power relations. The core of these two propositions is the mode of domination-suppression of power. In Foucault's view, these theories did not provide clear interpretation of power relations. Foucault believes that the fundamental reason for the emergence, existence and operation of power lies in that power is not only a repressive mechanism, but also a mechanism that can circulate and have productive capacity. “(power) can bring happiness, form knowledge and create discourse. It should be regarded as a productive network running through the whole social systems, rather than a reaction force with repressive function” ([14], p. 303).

Therefore, in the study of governmentality, the individuals or groups being governed are all regarded as free subjects with behavioral ability and essentially antagonistic consciousness.

If the government intends to control their behavior, they can respond or resist. At the same time, power is essentially regarded as a productive, promoting and creative relationship, which plays a key role by shaping and mobilizing the subjectivity of these free individuals or groups. In other words, the starting point of governmentality research is to explore how power relations control their way of life by allowing individuals or groups to make free choices or conduct behaviors. In this process, power is not opposite to freedom. On the contrary, freedom is the prerequisite for the existence and operation of power. Power is not an entity that can be overthrown, destroyed or abandoned; it is more like a political strategy. Governmentality research studies the mechanism of power operation by analyzing such strategies, so as to reveal the process of shaping subjects and the practice of governance.

4. Governmentality Research in the Contemporary Era: From the West to China

At present, many scholars have begun to apply the research methods of governmentality to various social fields such as politics, economy and education, and then analyze the governing practice implemented by authoritative institutions in these fields. However, as the concept of governmentality was born and developed in the western world, the applied research of governance has been carried out mostly against the Western society for a long time. From the national security system studied by Foucault in the early stage to the Western liberalism system, neoliberalism system, welfare social system and education for all system in the later stage, a large number of social issues have been brought into the scope of governmentality research, and the results of these studies have been quite fruitful. However, with the spread of postmodernism and poststructuralism research methods in the world, some social problems in other countries have gradually entered the scope of governmentality as well. In the late 1990s, scholars including Hindess and Dean first began to explore the possibility of applying governmentality to other institutional environments from the perspective of theoretical feasibility [7, 15]. They proposed that although the concept of governmentality originated from Western social research, it does not mean that governmentality cannot be applied to other institutional environments. The difference of political and economic system and even ideology does not hinder the application of governmentality research. On the contrary, they believe that the application of governmentality research in different institutional environments cannot only reveal the similarities and differences of different types of governance practices, but also bring about more in-depth investigation of the essence of governance practices.

Therefore, after entering the 21st Century, a large number of scholars began to focus on countries and societies with different political systems and ideologies from Western society. In these studies, attention to Chinese society has gradually increased. Among the existing research, the more

important investigations include Bray's [16] research on the governance of China's unit system, Sigley's [17] research on the governance of China's market economic system, Kipnis's [18] investigation of the governance practice in the education system of Zouping County, Shandong Province, Dutton's [19] research on the relationship between Mao Zedong's thoughts and China's contemporary governance practice, Harwood's [20] research on the regional policies of Nujiang Autonomous Region, and Jefferson et al.'s [21] studies on the urban construction, health and medical system, and management of migrant workers in China, Habich-Sobiegalla's [22] research on China's participatory dam resettlement processes, and Zhang's [23] investigation of China's social credit system. These studies illustrate two problems. First, although the research of governmentality originates from the West, it can also be applied to socialist societies, and has broad prospects and great significance for contemporary China. Second, the studies focus on the governance practice in contemporary China demonstrate that China has unique characteristics and cannot be simply attributed to the embodiment of neoliberalism or authoritarianism. From the reform of market economy system to the transformation of government functions, it is revealed that China's governance practice has its own characteristics, which is the result of the integration of Chinese traditional culture, contemporary economic development, socialist ideology, and the background of globalization. As Kipnis said, China has a long history of governance. Some of its traditional governing rationalities and technologies are closely related and similar to some contemporary western concepts, such as remote governance, subjectivity, sovereignty consciousness and law. However, these rationalities and technologies have not been introduced from the West; they are rooted in Chinese culture and history [24]. Therefore, the study of contemporary Chinese governmentality will not only help to further understand the practice of governance in Chinese society, but also help to promote the further development of all aspects of Chinese society.

5. Conclusion

Foucault believes that critical studies can be a tool for human beings to re-examine and study the world, and they do not necessarily mean to generate countermeasures for human beings to re-examine and solve problems. This tool can urge individuals to reflect on their position as social subjects, reflect on the reasons for the emergence and existence of their words and deeds, and reflect on the impact of these words and deeds. As a poststructuralist research method, governmentality research has no critical characteristics of empirical research, and will not make right and wrong judgments or provide opinions and suggestions based on specific ideologies. The study of governmentality provides a Foucauldian style of criticism. Therefore, the critical purpose of governmentality research is to separate individuals from various governing relationships, question the assumptions and premises of these relationships, or rethink about beliefs that

were originally taken for granted. Or, in Foucault's words, the criticality of governmentality is "an art that is being not governed, or better governed, an art that is no longer being governed at such a high price" [22].

Some scholars also argue that the study of governmentality in the post-Foucauldian era, as an analytical tool, has some limitations regarding the perspectives and methodologies. For example, some scholars believe that governmentality research relies too much on inferential research and ignores the basis of realistic conditions, so it cuts off the connection between social relations and governmental rationalities [23]. At the same time, the research perspective of contemporary governmentality also attempts to simplify the core of politics into an abstract concept of governance, so as to highlight the universality and integration of power [24]. However, if we only analyze the rationalities of government, it will not suffice to explain the essence and practice of governance, because the operation of power relations may not always achieve the expected effects. In addition, some scholars argue that the research method of governmentality ignores the differences between social strata to some extent, which has been criticized by feminist and racist scholars. They believe that governmentality research takes it for granted that power relations will play a fair role for everyone, but the fact is that different social strata and groups will be in different patterns of power relations due to social hierarchy, race and even gender differences. This difference is not only caused by different governmental technologies, but also determined by different rationalities for governing [25].

As a research perspective still in the development period, the research of governmentality surely has limitations in some research fields. However, we believe that these limitations are precisely the embodiment of the inheritance of poststructuralism. The concept and research method of governmentality is one of many research tools in Foucault's "toolbox". It has a unique critical perspective and its own limitations. But the most critical thing is that the research on governmentality has always adhered to the principles and characteristics of poststructuralism, and treated criticism with an open attitude, so as to continuously improve and develop. Therefore, in the face of the current complex and changeable international and domestic status, governmentality research provides us with a perspective to examine various power relations with its flexibility and inclusiveness, and provides a powerful tool for political, social and policy researchers.

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