



Liberal Democracy Through the Lens of Hegemonial Governmentality

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Description:

This article explores the intricate layers of governmentality, examining its tripartite framework of rationalities, techniques of power, and internalization mechanisms. By delving into Michel Foucault's profound insights and incorporating Gramsci's concept of hegemony, it investigates how power shapes societal structures and the practical implications for modern democracies, particularly within the evolving paradigm of network governance.

Introduction

In this article, I embark on a quest to unravel the layers of governmentality, peering into its tripartite framework of rationalities, techniques of power, and internalization mechanisms. I delve into Michel Foucault's profound insights, dissecting how power permeates societal structures, shaping desires, and questioning the authenticity of freedom itself.

Foucault's intricate tapestry of power dynamics, which extends beyond overt control into the realms of societal norms, ideologies, and the subtle mechanisms shaping human behavior. Through his lens, we perceive power not as a singular force wielded by authorities but as an omnipresent, pervasive entity woven intricately into the very fabric of our existence.

Alongside Foucault's profound insights, I embrace Gramsci's concept of hegemony, where dominant ideologies shape societal paradigms, often subtly and imperceptibly. This exploration allows us to discern the complexities of governance, where power manifests not only through coercion but through consensus-building mechanisms ingrained within societal structures.

But this article doesn't conclude within the realms of theoretical discourse. I pivot to the practical implications of these theories, scrutinizing the landscapes of modern democracies. I delve into the complexities of representation, accountability, and decision-making, particularly within the evolving paradigm of network governance.

This isn't merely an academic pursuit; it's an invitation to challenge assumptions, spark discussions, and question established norms.

What is Hegemonial Governmentality?

Understanding Foucault's concept of governmentality is not straightforward or easy. This complexity does not stem from Foucault's inability to articulate it clearly, but rather from the intricate nature of the phenomenon itself. Foucault observed and realized that governmentality is a

highly multifaceted and abstract concept, making it challenging to explain and comprehend. In this article, by using the concept of governmentality and some others which I will discuss further, I aim to explore a simple yet unanswered question: Are we truly free?

What do I mean by this question? Consider the example of purchasing a desired item from a store. If the answer to whether we are free to do so is a simple “yes,” does it imply genuine freedom? Conversely, if the answer is “no,” isn’t it concerning that even at this fundamental level, our freedom might be constrained? If we are not free at this basic level, how can we trust that we have the freedom to choose our government, express ourselves openly, or even attempt to replace the government when desired?

While Foucault’s concept of governmentality is pivotal in this discussion (as I’ll delve into further), I’ll also incorporate Gramsci’s notion of Hegemony, democratic network governance, and conduct a critical comparison between authoritarianism and democracy. Nevertheless, the protagonist of this essay is none of the above concepts, it is the government itself. (In this essay terms government, system or state are used as synonyms) The focus on government doesn’t solely arise from Foucault’s concept of governmentality but because it represents the only legitimate entity—whether democratic or otherwise—that possesses the legal authority to employ violence. As Max Weber outlined, legitimacy can stem from various sources (traditional, charismatic, or democratic), meaning a government can hold legitimacy even without being democratic.

Consequently, the government stands as the solitary entity legally sanctioned to wield violence. Its monopoly on the use of force positions it as the sole actor capable of potentially infringing upon our freedoms while operating within the bounds of legitimacy.

But then again what is the governmentality? Governmentality, a concept that unravels the intricate mechanisms through which power operates within modern societies. It transcends conventional notions of power vested solely in authoritative institutions and delves into the pervasive and subtle ways in which individuals and populations are governed, regulated, and guided. (Foucault 1982)

At its essence, governmentality signifies a shift in understanding power, emphasizing its omnipresence in societal structures and its role in shaping not only behavior but also thoughts and perceptions. Unlike traditional views centered on overt control, Foucault’s concept encompasses a tripartite framework:

Firstly, governmentality emphasizes the rationalities and logics employed in governance. It transcends the simple exercise of authority and instead focuses on the various strategies and techniques used by both formal institutions and informal practices to manage and regulate populations. This rationality involves the utilization of knowledge, expertise, and methodologies to control and direct individuals in ways that often appear as guidance or management rather than coercion.

Secondly, governmentality encompasses the array of techniques or technologies through which power operates. (Lorenzini 2023, 29) These techniques manifest in diverse forms, ranging from surveillance mechanisms, bureaucratic procedures, disciplinary tactics, to societal norms and ideologies. Foucault highlighted how these techniques are embedded within societal institutions, seeping into everyday life and influencing behaviors and thoughts in imperceptible ways.

Lastly, governmentality extends beyond the external regulation of individuals and extends into the internalization of power mechanisms within the psyche. It addresses how individuals internalize societal norms, ideologies, and expectations, shaping their self-perception and identity by submitting to the “regime of truth”. The “regime of truth” fosters a sense of self-governance, wherein individuals conform to established norms and standards without explicit coercion, contributing to the perpetuation of power structures. (Rinaldi 2016, 100)

The concept of governmentality challenges the conventional binary of ruler and ruled, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of power. It unveils how power operates not merely as a tool of control but as a pervasive force shaping the very fabric of society. Furthermore, it emphasizes that power isn't confined to traditional authorities but is dispersed throughout society, embedded in institutions, discourses, and practices. (Foucault 2008, 6)

Returning to our example, are we free to buy our desired item from the store? It seems I might not have the correct question. Do we truly desire the item, or are we led to believe that we desire it? If the phenomenon of governmentality indeed affects us indirectly without our direct awareness, how can we be certain that what we desire isn't a result of techniques and technologies employed to create that desire? Marketing, though not as complex as governmentality, is real. Some of its techniques can be considered part of governmentality.

This is the juncture where I wish to shift the conceptual lens through which I discuss the notion of Freedom, transitioning from Governmentality to Gramsci's Ideology and Hegemony. Gramsci introduced the concept of "organic ideology," a system reflecting class rule or hegemony. (Gramsci 2000, 190–200) This organic ideology unified ideological elements into a cohesive system, diffused across civil society's institutions. It was crafted by "organic intellectuals," agents aligned with a hegemonic or potentially hegemonic class, who articulated "principles" to absorb diverse ideological elements into a hegemonic ideology. (Gramsci 2000, 218–22)

Gramsci's observation reflects the realities of our modern world. Through the media, public experts, and NGOs (GONGOs), certain ideological principles and perspectives are consistently propagated within society. This process of social engineering begins at an early age and persists until individuals manage to break out of their ideological bubble. Often in international relations, we encounter conflicting ideological narratives, prompting the realization that the principles taught to us are not uncontested. We can only break through this paradigm when we expose ourselves to contradicting ideologies.

The reason I am utilizing the concepts of hegemony and governmentality in this essay is because they share similar characteristics. Just like Foucault, Gramsci similarly argues that power operates through coercion and consensus, with hegemonic rule striving for consensus predominantly in civil society. This rule maintains a balance between political and civil society, utilizing institutions like the state, church, schools, and others. The idea evolved in his later works, emphasizing that hegemony involves a dominant class considering the interests of other classes, maintaining a balance between its own interests and sacrifices for broader consensus. It also involves economic, political, moral, and intellectual leadership. (Valeriano 1982)

Foucault and Gramsci diverge in their starting points. Gramsci's concept of hegemony stems from his critique of Marxism's superstructure, a key element in the classical Marxist approach. In traditional Marxism, the superstructure is viewed as almost mechanically stemming from the economic base. (Gramsci 2000, 190–93) Gramsci challenges this idea, placing greater emphasis on the superstructure itself, which encompasses various societal facets like education, media, and social norms. These elements are organized to absorb conflicting ideological principles into a dominant, or hegemonic, ideology.

One crucial aspect of hegemony is its capacity to shape perceptions and construct reality. The dominant group, through its control of cultural production and dissemination, defines what is deemed acceptable, desirable, and legitimate. This process not only sustains existing power structures but also molds individuals' perceptions of their identities, societal roles, and relationships with others.

Additionally, hegemony involves a complex interplay between consent and coercion. While coercion may be employed when necessary, the real strength of hegemony lies in securing the voluntary compliance of the majority. (Valeriano 1982) People, whether willingly or unknowingly,

conform to the norms and values promoted by the ruling class, often internalizing these beliefs. This voluntary acceptance of the dominant ideology solidifies the ruling group's power by reducing the likelihood of widespread resistance or rebellion.

Contrary to the Marxist assertion that begins with class antagonism, Foucault's approach diverges significantly. He doesn't initiate his analysis from the standpoint of class conflict. Instead, he traces the concept of governmentality, which he views as an evolution from the church's pastoral power to a secular form. (Foucault 1982)

Foucault's argument revolves around the gradual transformation of pastoral power wielded by the church into a secular framework. He contends that what we now recognize as aspects of modern governance—such as economic standards of living, health insurance, and social benefits—represent the secularization of powers historically associated with the church. For instance, he draws parallels between the church's role in offering salvation, guiding religious lives, and caring for people's afterlife well-being with contemporary structures focusing on economic welfare, health provisions, and social support. (Foucault 1982)

According to Foucault, this transition from religious to secular mechanisms mirrors a shift in how power operates within society. The traditional functions of the church, geared towards spiritual guidance and moral governance, have been gradually absorbed into governmental structures that manage and regulate various aspects of societal welfare and well-being.

In essence, Foucault's analysis posits that the functions once exclusively within the domain of religious authority have been secularized and integrated into the mechanisms of governance. This evolution marks a shift in the locus of power, from ecclesiastical institutions guiding spiritual lives to modern systems of governance overseeing the socio-economic aspects of individuals' lives.

Although these concepts have different starting points, they fundamentally describe the same phenomena. I don't believe this poses an issue for my article; in fact, hegemony and governmentality complement each other. One could even coin the term "Hegemonial Governmentality." The truth is, as humans, our understanding of the universe is limited. Our arguments may begin from different perspectives and may either contradict or complement each other while still being rational. Our rational deductions, limited by our knowledge, always fall short of encompassing the entirety of reality. This presents a challenge beyond our current capacity to solve.

However, despite these limitations, we can still make logical inferences that reflect reality to the best of our ability. In my view, whether it's the evolution of pastoral power or the endeavor of dominant groups to establish hegemony over the populace, the specifics of the starting point aren't crucial. What holds significance is the existence of this phenomenon, which, in an abstract manner, exerts control over human lives. Whether intellectually realized or sensed, this phenomenon remains a tangible reality that influences us in various ways.

Is Freedom Free or Allowed in Liberal Democracies?

We have extensively delved into the abstract theoretical aspects of the essay. Now, it's time to explore its practical implications—how Hegemonial Governmentality manifests itself in real life. I will commence by analyzing the liberal democratic system, renowned for cherishing freedom and liberty. The query arises: is this freedom genuinely cherished or merely permitted within predefined acceptable frameworks?

To comprehend the existence of freedom in liberal democracies, I find it necessary to first define my perception of freedom. I unequivocally advocate for negative freedom—a liberation from external restraints, from government interference, a freedom in spite of the government. However, within Hegemonial Governmentality, even negative freedom becomes absorbed by the dominant

ideology. Therefore, I propose the notion of Transcendental Negative Freedom. It should not be conflated with Kant's concept of Transcendental Freedom, although there's a similarity. Kant understood transcendental freedom as liberation from the influence of the empirical world, the ability to act based on the principles of pure reason—freedom from, freedom despite the empirical world. (Pereboom 2006)

Similarly, Transcendental Negative Freedom is freedom from discourse, liberation from hegemony or the dominant ideology. 'Negative Freedom' falls short in meeting this requirement, constrained within the premises of liberal ideology as derived from classical liberalism. Herein lies the issue: Hegemonial Governmentality asserts that the dominant ideology, whether liberalism or any other, already permeates the psyche of the population, directing and managing them. Transcendental negative freedom, however, signifies freedom from internalized institutions and practices—essentially, freedom from Hegemonial Governmentality.

One might argue that I have set the standards too high, making it impossible for even the most democratic system to meet the requirements. To counter this argument, I'll use a simple yet renowned quote, the source of which I'm uncertain about, but its significance is crucial in justifying my position: "Freedom of speech matters if only the expressed opinion is not widely accepted." As long as we all express ideas within the boundaries of our accepted principles, there exists no true freedom of speech. Freedom of speech holds meaning only when it opposes the dominant notion yet remains tolerated. Consequently, freedom, in its broader sense, gains significance only when it can exist, organize itself, and even challenge the dominant ideology. If we recognize that we're not permitted to engage in such actions, then I believe we're in an ideal position to question the existence of freedom altogether.

Network Governance

If we want to ground ourselves in practical observations rather than abstract theoretical discussions, how can we observe the consequences of Hegemonic Governmentality in life? I argue that Network Governance is the practical manifestation of the abstract concepts of Hegemony and Governmentality. How can we define network governance? First of all, we should start by defining the structure of traditionally understood liberal democratic government, where people—citizens of a nation-state—cast votes to elect their governments for fixed terms. In such a simple structure, government institutions are hierarchically organized, and the people remain the ultimate sovereign. (Sorensen 2002)

Network governance changes this structure from hierarchy to a horizontal one. The government is no longer a centralized organization elected by the people; instead, it becomes a decentralized and horizontal network of various interest groups. These interest groups can be economical, ideological, ethnic, or policy-oriented, among others. In such systems, the role and importance of elections are significantly reduced. Even though the official government is elected via elections, the interest group is not formed by the ultimate sovereign. The people have almost no control over the interest groups. Thus, even though elections might change the government, interest groups are long-lived and remain regardless of the election results.

The interest groups operate within the network; they might cooperate or compete; nevertheless, they do so within accepted and unwritten rules, often known only by the participants of the network. This suggests that within the network, the participants have their own hierarchy, free from the influence of elections.

The nature of network governance raises crucial questions about representation, a cornerstone of democracy. Elected officials are meant to represent the interests of their constituents or local communities, guiding their actions primarily by these interests. Such accountability is achievable within a hierarchical system. However, within a network framework, the accountability of elected officials to their constituents becomes questionable. It becomes unclear whether these officials are

answerable to their electorates or the interest groups they represent or were supported by. While this system may be less evident in the EU, American politics already operate in such a manner, a widely known reality.

In their analysis on the influence of the US Presidents in political economy Hacker and Pierson challenges the traditional emphasis on elections and politicians in American politics and instead underscores the pivotal role of organized groups in shaping long-term policy developments. They acknowledge that policy results are the consequence of coordinated efforts over time. (Hacker and Pierson 2012)

The article contends that most American politics scholarship tends to depict politics as a continuous cycle of winners and losers due to the emphasis on elections. However, when viewing politics as a competition among influential policy advocates, the focus shifts towards achieving enduring policy successes rather than mere electoral victories. In this context, politics is about exerting influence over policy outcomes with long-lasting repercussions rather than electoral victories.

Furthermore, network governance challenges the role of public administrators, bureaucrats who hold significant positions within the government but are appointed, not elected. These appointees are typically chosen by elected officials. Even without network governance, they aren't directly accountable to the people but rather to their appointers. However, with the emergence of network governance, this issue becomes more pronounced. There's no mechanism to prevent these administrators from serving the interests of specific groups within the network. Their loyalty and accountability lie more towards their particular group rather than the broader public, further distancing the government from the people.

If the fundamental principles of liberal democracy are bent and distorted by network governance, can we truly speak of genuine representation, authentic freedom, or a functioning democracy? When the potential for people to influence the government is significantly diminished by the mechanisms of network governance—aligning closely with the concept of hegemonic governmentality—what distinguishes democracies from authoritarian regimes? Could democracy, under these circumstances, be perceived as nothing more than a sophisticated, decentralized form of authoritarianism?

Democracy vs Authoritarianism

Throughout this essay I have been very critical of liberal democracies, but I feel a need to clarify that this essay does not question the fundamental principles of democracy, this essay rather questions how in practice systems which call itself democracy in line with those principles.

In this section of the essay, I compare basic features of democracy and authoritarianism and try to understand if our democracy in practice is authoritarian or at least has some authoritarian tendencies. The fundamental contrasts between democracy and authoritarianism lie at the core of their governance structures, rule of law, citizen participation, freedoms, accountability, and political pluralism.

The question here is how much democracies adhere to these principles. Do citizens living in democracies truly participate in the government? Can they genuinely be elected or elect officials? Is there political pluralism where different opinions and ideologies can coexist and operate without interference from the central government? Does the rule of law indeed exist?

Comparing any democracy with any authoritarian system, the result will inevitably favor democracy. In democracies, ordinary citizens certainly have more rights and are not actively persecuted by the government. They can participate in elections, vote, and even run for office. In

authoritarian systems, it is more or less impossible for an ordinary citizen to be elected to official positions.

However, the issue lies in the practicality. Although theoretically possible in democracies, in practice, it is very difficult—especially considering factors such as hegemony, governmentality, and network governance. For an ordinary citizen to influence the overall direction of society is nearly impossible. It shouldn't be too easy for any ordinary citizen to simply become a President or Prime Minister. The real question isn't about an ordinary person becoming a leader; it's about how much influence an elected official truly holds.

In democracies, despite the existence of such possibilities, the elected officials often struggle to exert significant influence. This aligns with our discussions on network governance and the nature of hegemonic governance spread across all societal layers. In any government position, there's no choice but to become part of the system.

In authoritarian systems, however, the government is highly centralized, creating a clear distinction between the ruled and the ruler. Perhaps, in this scenario, it's clearer who the main antagonists are.

In modern democratic systems, if dissatisfaction arises with the government or the ideological discourse, there's practically no clear antagonist to challenge. Changing the system in democracies requires more than simple elections; it demands fighting against the system itself. However, there's no distinct entity to fight against because you are also part of the system. This notion embodies governmentality and hegemony.

This doesn't imply that changing the government or establishing a new system is easy in authoritarian regimes, but those living in such systems often have clearer ideas on how they could affect change—usually through revolutions. In democracies, such an option doesn't exist.

One might question: Why even consider changing a system in democracies? Are there better systems than democracy? At present, I firmly believe there's no better system than democracy. The issue arises when a system that labels itself as democratic doesn't practically adhere to democratic principles due to certain interest groups or ideological discourse being against these fundamental principles.

In the End

I've been endeavoring to explain, Authoritarian government isn't more authoritarian than any democratic counterpart; it simply applies its authority openly and directly. The primary distinction in a democratic state lies in the distribution and sharing of power. However, this power doesn't dissipate; it persists. Its impact, however, isn't immediately evident. The state still wields complete control over an individual's life. As long as one refrains from engaging in activities that challenge the system, there's no interference with thoughts or actions. Those individuals aren't seen as a threat. However, when masses organize in opposition to the system, the government either dismantles the movement or patiently waits for its momentum to wane and dissolve.

President Macron's indifferent stance toward the recent protests in France serves as an example. It seems they did nothing, merely waiting for people to calm down. Did anything change? No. It likely never will. Technological advancements have granted the state extensive power over society, making resistance and triumph against it nearly impossible. The only disparity between democratic and authoritarian states lies in their ability to create an illusion of freedom. This is achieved through two means: (1) minimizing the hardships individuals face in meeting basic needs—raising economic living standards, and (2) directing individuals toward "distraction" activities such as sports, education, arts, career, business, etc. With no fundamental issues and distractions in place, there's little interest in politics and a decreased likelihood of protest.

Technological advancement amplifies the power of the state/system rather than enhancing individual freedom. Each new technology deepens our dependency, control to those who manage the technology.

In this technology-dominated world, true freedom from government influence remains elusive. The authoritarian power of the state always lingers. Depending on the economic might of the state we reside in, we might sense this power to a greater or lesser extent. We no longer have the primary concern of survival or fulfilling our basic needs. Our relationship with the state hinges on how much it caters to our “distraction” needs.

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