Book Review

Foucault and Governmentality: Living to Work in the Age of Control

Reviews can be tricky because one needs to bring together a whole book in a nutshell or, in this case, a few thousand words. I therefore think it best to give an account of the experience of reading the book and point out what jumped at me from its pages as I read it in the wake of weird times. A good idea would therefore be to frame the review with a short contextualisation of my own position and entry point into reading the book. This would help to demonstrate how the book is an experience due to the self-reflection that goes with reading a book that provides such an extensive critique of contemporary society's addiction to work and technology.

I have been a Foucault scholar for two decades, having been immersed in his work since my early years as a postgraduate student. He is a philosophical hero of sorts to me and although I do not hero worship him, I do think that his work is mostly on the ball at it concerns the way in which our subjective selves are formed and moulded by modern society. His work has seen various waves of rediscovery and rethinking after his death in 1984, to a large extent because the trajectories and developments that he identified in the mid to late twentieth century have continued unabated.

In fact, many of the problems and malaises that he identified and analysed in modern society and its state institutions in general have intensified and become even more far-reaching than he might have anticipated. Or perhaps he did anticipate this, and we are only getting to realise how far-reaching his findings were regarding power (and knowledge) as a constant and dominant factor in modern society. We are certainly seeing how intimately it encroaches on our embodied existence as we wade into the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution. Whereas his earlier works mostly focused on the way state institutions form our identities and set out the knowledge that counts in society (through, for instance, educational and health facilities), his eye later turned to developments that were to become influential for the ascendance of the corporate world in especially Western democracies, but also any place where capitalism is the dominant mode of economic life (in other words, almost everywhere).

It is with this in mind that Benda Hofmeyr's book *Foucault and Governmentality* takes the work of the French philosopher to rethink both his theory and how it applies to our current context in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has hastened a process that has already been ongoing for some time now, namely the development of remote work and our virtual lives in the online world. Governmentality in both its corporate and state guises has entered our homes with the pandemic lockdowns that saw home office and home schooling being implemented globally in the attempt to curb the spread of the virus. This has blurred the line at home between the public and the private, and this is one of Foucault's great concerns, namely how various public institutions come to inform and imprint themselves on our subjective selves. The pandemic has given us a taste of the nature of work and life that the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) might give us, and it comes at the cost of various norms and values that underpinned our domestic lives at home, but also simply with the loss of the time and space that we call our own.

Hofmeyr's book provides some fascinating reading in the aftermath of the pandemic, and it has informed my own research on notions of social surveillance as it relates to social media platforms. Her book brings together a collection of published articles, several of which had been published during the pandemic. She expertly brings them together into a coherent and sensible whole as she puts into perspective the historical juncture where we find ourselves. Hofmeyr's main concern is with something that preceded but also anticipated the pandemic, namely knowledge workers and their compulsion to work. She traces the development of the persistent and "around the clock" place that work has taken in the lives of a new class of workers that embrace work as the essence of their lives.

She begins in Chapter 1 with an outline of the important aspects of the knowledge work compulsion. Chapter 2 then sets out to look at the basis of the compulsive worker's life, namely neoliberalism and its brand of governmentality (and self-control). Chapter 3 takes this further in bringing together the connections between control and knowledge work as it centres in the individual self. Chapter 4 investigates why it is that the compulsive worker so fervently pursues work by going back to Plato's idea of Thumos, i.e. the sometimes irrational and passionate driving force behind our actions that aims at recognition and self-esteem. Chapter 5 then provides a critique of this neoliberal formation of the compulsive worker (as a construction of human capital). Chapter 6 asks crucially if resistance is possible in the workplace given the compulsive worker's own participation in their addiction to work.

The compulsive worker is not necessarily a new phenomenon. The worker that works all the time and who is defined by what they do (portrayed in films such as *Fight Club*) has been around for decades during the latter stages of capitalism. In the case of knowledge workers, they choose to take on the compulsion to work and embrace the lifestyle that comes with constant work. This fits in well with the Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity according to which the identity of individuals is both imprinted by society via institutions, but at the same

time, there is also space for the individual to take hold of their own identity within certain limits as imposed by society. The compulsive knowledge worker is a fascinating, but also peculiar, case study that shows how this formation of identity takes place in the tension between individual and society (which gives us a picture of one sense of governmentality highlighted by Hofmeyr in Chapter 2).

Why peculiar? Because in the compulsive knowledge worker, one finds society and the self working together hand-in-hand on the identity formation of the subject. The reason for this is of course that the knowledge worker, *pace* Hofmeyr, chooses to pursue work in such a compulsive manner and hence they become what the corporate institution wants them to be in a voluntary way. Enslavement by consent, if there is such a thing (the mention below of the Hegelian reading of the compulsive worker seems to affirm such a view). The compulsive worker comes to embody the so-called Foucauldian panopticon in their own lives according to which they govern (and police) their own behaviour and habits for the sake of the corporation for whom they perform labour (or in line with certain neoliberal principles if they work for themselves, in other words "not for a boss"). The voice of the corporation (or thus "inner boss") starts to speak from within and becomes part of the individual's conscience. In this way, the compulsive worker fits into the picture of neoliberal governmentality as the minutiae of their daily lives both public and private are framed by the tasks that they perform for corporations (or otherwise some overarching institution for whom work is performed).

Hofmeyr correctly points out how this leads to a situation where "constant surveillance has become vital because it is the source of social 'bonds', but also of safety, security, well-being, and health" (p. 69). What she has in mind here is the rise of social media and the way in which it engenders surveillance in the social sphere via forms of technology that bring the panopticon into our homes and onto our bodies (think here simply of the smart phones in our pockets that seek to hijack our attention with Pavlovian bells and pings). What is significant in this technocratic mapping of social life is the manner in which *play has become work* and vice versa. The overlap between work and play (in other words, home life) has become ever larger to such an extent that it has technocratically become enmeshed and is part of the same lifestyle, so that constant surveillance is part of our social and work lives. We are always potentially watching ourselves on behalf of corporations (or otherwise on behalf of the network watching us), who have become adept at getting our consent for access to our lives in ways that most governments do not. This constant surveillance in the workplace becomes a voluntary pursuit because it seems to be what the worker wants, as Hofmeyr (ibid.) says, "[c]omplex control that appears open, informal, and non-linear operates to turn compliance into wholehearted conviction. Neoliberal working subjects do more than is required of them, and it feels good and right".

This process of neoliberal working with its built-in constant surveillance (performed by the self) has deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdowns brought home a combination of office and school that saw both corporations and the state infiltrate home life with various forms of control and surveillance. The normalisation of especially the home office, or at least its place in hybrid forms of work and the so-called gig economy, has given corporations the perfect entry point

to dominate the lives of compulsive workers on an even more intimate level than before. Hofmeyr (p. 66) brings this point home in a key passage that appears in Chapter 3:

> This transposition of work into non-work timeframes and zones has been vastly accelerated by the "COVID-19 rapid" and is probably here to stay in the post-pandemic world of knowledge work, in which flexible hybrid models will become the norm rather than the exception or supplement to traditional models. Moreover, for all the freedom and flexibility neoliberal workers enjoy, they remain subject to an economic rationality in which efficiency dictates that the employer gets more for offering less. As a result, these workers work all the time.

In short, life becomes the theatre of work, and every aspect of life is dominated by work or by the guilt that work is not being performed even when it is not time to work (for instance, at home, or when at leisure). The worker can work regardless of whether they are at the office or at home, healthy or sick, and this means that time becomes work (this also applies to others such as school children, who can do schoolwork at home even when they are down with a virus). The compulsive worker becomes the embodiment of the Hegelian bondsman who lives according to the paradox of labour that both enslaves and sets them free. This situation is quite radical and the compulsive worker, who can be seen to be in a relation to the corporation as the bondsman to the lord, "is not merely someone who happens to work for the sake of the lord; his labour is his being" (p. 87). The compulsive worker is defined by their work and therefore the more they work, the more they are themselves and living up to who they aspire to be. At least, this is what their corporatised conscience would tell them.

This neoliberal and technocratic sense of self that emerges brings us back to the conflation in our times between the way individual identity is shaped by institutions on the one hand and the self on the other (as the tension that exists within the Foucauldian sense of subjectivity). Hofmeyr (p. 153) says pertinently "that in the era of complex control [which can also be read as complex *self-control*]...creation and normalization [as aspects of Foucault's notion of resistance] have been rolled into one". The entrepreneurial knowledge worker becomes a project to themselves, according to which they create themselves, but crucially in such a way that they live up to the neoliberal norms of corporations and other institutions. The individual thus feels that they are free to create themselves, although this happens within the confines set out by the place and space within which they work. Hence, the bondsman who is both free and enslaved by their work. Being yourself in this setting only makes sense if the self is a technocratic creation, which is facilitated by the technological mechanics of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in the twenty-first century. This self-creation is, however, not only limited to the workplace, but permeates all facets of life (p. 49):

> Human subjectivity – our every action and mode of being in networked societies [of the Fourth Industrial Revolution] – has therefore become chained to the technology that opens new frontiers of human capability, transcending previously immutable limits, but also insinuating control into the more intimate recesses of human action and being by means of digital surveillance and algorithmic management.

This certainly is a bleak assessment, and one wonders whether it would be possible to resist 4IR and the way that it infiltrates our homes, lifeworlds and our mental spaces in the more radical forms of biocontrol. Hofmeyr (p. 153) concludes in the final chapter with a call for "pessimistic activism", but qualifies this in the strongest terms possible when she says "that resistance in this context is not impossible but improbable. In a context of constantly changing, flexible flows of complex control, the odds seem to be stacked against the working subject's ability to keep track of the governmentally imposed limits that have become increasingly imperceptible and elusive". What her book shows is that these limits have come to transgress the boundaries between the public pursuit of work and the private sphere of home, and that it is seeking an ever-closer relation to the most intimate details of our lives. Digital governmentality is becoming an essential part of our lives in modern society and that is why resistance seems so improbable, if not futile (to quote the Borg from *Star Trek*, a science-fiction instance of the intimate fusion between flesh and machine).

I have here only sketched in broad strokes what Benda Hofmeyr has to offer in this fascinating Foucauldian study of the current context of work and life in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am not sure if my reading (or rather creative summary) here does justice to the breath and scope of Hofmeyr's book, but I attempted to write it in the same critical spirit as her book. Hofmeyr provides a master class in Foucauldian thought and her book demonstrates how effective the toolkit is that Foucault provides to analyse modern society. Her book provides the basis for more studies about the dominance of neoliberalism in democratic societies, but also any place where capitalism has a foothold, and about the rise of networked societies that aim at the control of all aspects of life in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Such work will live up to the Foucauldian notion of resistance, providing modes of critique and ways of thinking that could carefully attempt to critique and transgress the encroachment of digital and algorithmic governmentality.

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