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Review

# Environmentality unbound: Multiple governmentalities in environmental politics

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews an emerging body of research applying a "multiple governmentalities" perspective derived from Michel Foucault to the study of environmental politics. Previous application of the popular governmentality concept to understand such politics had largely overlooked the multiple forms of governmentality, described in Foucault's later work, that may intersect in a given context. This paper outlines the evolution of Foucault's discussion of governmentality and its implications for the study of environmental politics. It then reviews recent research concerning environmental politics employing a multiple governmentalities perspective. It finishes by distilling overarching patterns from this literature and suggesting new directions for future research to explore.

## 1. Introduction: environmental politics today

The landscape of global environmental politics has become dazzlingly complex. Historically dominant state-centered command-and-control approaches to natural resource management, while still widespread, have been thoroughly critiqued for their top-down domination and neglect of local people's interests (e.g., Scott, 1998; Brockington, 2002; Igoe, 2004). At the same time, however, the community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) approach commonly advocated to replace command-and-control strategies has been questioned on a variety of grounds as well (see Dressler et al., 2011). Meanwhile, the global environmental governance architecture erected following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit has provoked growing disappointment for its widespread failure to achieve the vision of sustainable development championed there (Park et al., 2008). Compounding this, critics have recently pronounced several decades of global efforts to integrate conservation and development in support of CBNRM an overwhelming failure, asserting the presence of inherent tradeoffs between environmental and livelihood concerns that policymakers must acknowledge (McShane et al., 2011; Salafsky, 2011). Critique of this type has prompted a variety of responses. Some call for a return to command-and-control strategies (Oates, 1999; Terborgh, 1999). Others, conversely, advocate increased market integration and private sector partnership, arguing that natural resources should be subject to the dictates of neoliberal economic policies prescribing decentralization, de-(or re-) regulation, privatization, marketization, and commodification as a form of 'natural capital' (see UNEP, 2011; Büscher et al., 2014).

More radical critics call for a move away from growth-dependent economies altogether towards pursuit of 'steady-state' (Dietz and O'Neill, 2013) or even 'degrowth' (e.g., D'Alisa et al., 2014) strategies. Meanwhile, widespread advocacy of indigenous self-governance grounded in traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) (see esp. Berkes, 2008), including growing promotion of nondualistic ontologies (e.g., Descola, 2013), has been challenged by claims that such practices do not necessarily lead to sustainable resource management in practice (see Raymond, 2007). Others call for a new environmentalism based in an 'ethics of care' or sense of spiritual affinity between humans and nonhumans (Boff, 2008).

Making sense of this complex landscape, consequently, has become increasingly difficult. Diverse combinations of the various approaches outlined above jostle to define the policy agenda in different locations and fora, at times competing and at others combining in collaborative ways. One productive way to approach this complexity is via a novel conceptual framework derived from the "multiple governmentalities" perspective developed by Michel Foucault in his more recently published work. In this article, I offer a state-of-the-art review of the growing body of research and analysis concerning environmental politics that has recently arisen around this perspective.[1] I first introduce Foucault's early use of the governmentality concept and its subsequent uptake within a by-now-voluminous literature. I then discuss how the concept has been adopted to address environmental politics specifically. I describe how all of this has been complicated in light of Foucault's later publications in which he expands his discussion to

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[1] This article also serves as the Introduction to a virtual special issue on "Multiple Governmentalities in Environmental Politics."

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distinguish different forms of governmentality. I describe my own use of this perspective to outline a typology of "multiple environmentalities" at work in environmental politics (Fletcher, 2010). I then discuss how this typology has been employed by other researchers with respect to diverse forms of environmental governance in a variety of contexts. I finish by outlining several new directions in which this line of analysis might be further pursued in the future.

## 2. A Genealogy of Governmentality

First proposed in his Collège de France lecture series from 1977, since published as *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault, 2007), Foucault's governmentality concept gained widespread popularity following its dissemination via an essay excerpted from that lecture series and published (with another lecture from the previous year's series [Foucault, 2003]) as the chapter "Two Lectures" in the 1980 anthology *Power-Knowledge* (Foucault, 1980). This initial lecture then became the fulcrum of the 1991 collection *The Foucault Effect* in which the governmentality concept was discussed and applied by a variety of interlocutors (see Foucault, 1991; Burchell et al., 1991). From there the concept's rise to analytical stardom was nothing short of meteoric, adopted and expanded upon in myriad ways by countless researchers.[2]

Application of the concept to analyse processes of environmental governance was a "natural" next step, given that, as Salafsky (2001:185) points out, such processes "are primarily designed to modify human behaviors that affect biodiversity." This application was first pursued by Timothy Luke in his early characterization of the global environmental governance institutions established by the 1992 Rio Summit as a novel "environmentality" (Luke, 1999a,b). A similar framing was soon adopted by other researchers, some of whom instead employed the terminology of "green" governmentality (P. Rutherford, 1999; S. Rutherford, 2007, 2011; see also e.g., Oels, 2005; Hanson, 2007; Malette, 2009). Meanwhile, the "environmentality" terminology in particular was pursued by Agrawal (2005a, 2005b) to describe how local people could be enrolled in community conservation efforts in order to transform them into "environmental subjects – people who care about the environment" (2005b: 162). Agrawal's perspective was subsequently adopted by numerous others as well (e.g., Bose et al., 2012; Jepson et al., 2012).

This burgeoning discussion was complicated by publication of Foucault's 1978 lecture series in English translation as *The Birth of Biopolitics* in 2008 (Foucault, 2008). In these lectures, it became clear that after his initial formulation of the governmentality concept during the previous year, Foucault went on to expand and transform it in ways that were not reflected in most of the vast literature inspired by his first published fragment. Over the course of the two years' lectures, then, the term "progressively shifts from a precise, historically determinate sense, to a more general and abstract meaning" (Sennellart, 2007: 388). Hence, whereas in his first formulation Foucault had situated governmentality within his famous "sovereignty-discipline-government" triad[3] (1991: 102), he later collapses this distinction entirely, making governmentality instead a much more generic term to describe various strategies for directing the "conduct of conduct," of which sovereignty and discipline were now included as two such modalities (rather than constituting opposing forms of governance as before). In the end, then, Foucault outlines a four part typology, describing governmentality as embodying: (1) a *disciplinary* form, in which subjects are enjoined to internalize particular norms and values by means of which they become compelled to self-regulate (as in his famous Panopticon model of power; see Foucault, 1977); (2) a *sovereign* form, in which compliance is sought via top-down injunctions backed by threat of punishment; (3) a novel *neoliberal* form that "will act on the environment and systematically modify its variables" rather than demanding "the internal subjugation of individuals" (2008: 271, 260); and finally (4) what Foucault calls governmentality "according to *truth*," that is, 'the truth of religious texts, of revelation, and of the order of the world" (2008:311, emphasis added) (of which his main example is Marxism). In addition to these, Foucault proposes, but does not further develop, the prospect of yet another "strictly, intrinsically, and autonomously *socialist* governmentality," which, he claims, "is not hidden within socialism and its texts. It cannot be deduced from them. It must be invented" (2008:94, emphasis added). These various governmentalties, Foucault proposes, now "overlap, lean on each other, challenge each other, and struggle with each other" (2008: 313) – an ongoing contest that, he suggests, is in fact what we commonly call "politics."

This expanded understanding of governmentality as encompassing multiple overlapping forms has profound implications for analysis conducted in its name, something that was of course quickly recognized by some of Foucault's closest followers (see Elden, 2007). In point of fact, commentary on these implications had already begun some years before *The Birth of Biopolitics* appeared, based on the notes and recordings in French archived from the original lecture series (see Lemke, 2001). The implications for a more nuanced and multi-dimensional analysis was then quickly absorbed, resulting in a new wave of commentary both on Foucault's expanded framework and on its value for empirical analysis (see e.g., Ferguson, 2011; Lemke, 2012).

This expanded framework would, of course, have implications for understanding environmental politics as well. Long a fan of Foucault's work myself, I had encountered *The Birth of Biopolitics* soon after its publication and surmised its potential to help elucidate the increasingly complex contestation concerning appropriate strategies for environmental conservation that was then the principle focus of my research. In particular, I was intrigued by the framework's utility for understanding the rise of what had come to be labeled "neoliberal conservation" (Sullivan, 2006; Igoe and Brockington, 2007), entailing promotion of so-called "market-based mechanisms" by means of which natural resources could be commodified *in situ* as the basis of income generation strategies (ecotourism, payment for environmental services, etc.) intended to incentivize their sustainable utilization (see also Büscher et al., 2012, 2014). I realized that, in Foucault's expanded terms, Agrawal's identification of efforts to create "people who care about the environment" could be considered merely one, *disciplinary* mode of "environmentality," while other forms of environmental governance could be equated with the other governmentalities Foucault later distinguished. In this way, this trend towards neoliberalization within conservation and other forms of natural resource management (see Heynen et al., 2007; Castree, 2008) could be understood as a particularly *neoliberal* environmentality seeking to govern via external incentives rather than internalized norms and values (see Fletcher, 2010). Likewise, so-called "command-and-control" governance, such as the classic "fortress conservation" approach (Brockington, 2002; Igoe, 2004), could be considered a *sovereign* environmentality, while even Foucault's governmentality "according to *truth*" could be identified in efforts to ground environmentalism in TEK (Berkes, 2008) or various forms of spirituality (Sponsel, 2012).

Inspired by Foucault's speculation concerning the prospects of inventing a novel *socialist* governmentality, I also raised the possibility of building on discussion of "liberation ecology" (Peet and Watts, 1996) to pursue a novel "liberation environmentality" concerned "to champion democratic, egalitarian, and non-hierarchical forms of natural resource management in which local people enjoy a genuinely participatory (if not self-mobilising) role" (Fletcher, 2010: 178) – as in the ideal common property regimes (CPRs) championed by Elinor Ostrom and her followers (see esp. Ostrom, 1990; Agrawal, 2003). This resonated with growing critique of Agrawal's use of the environmentality concept for overemphasizing processes of top-down manipulation in his concern

[2] See Rose et al., 2006 for a useful if by now somewhat outdated review of this research.

[3] This triad was intended to describe an historical process whereby each new form of governance overlay but did not entirely replace the preceding as the modern state developed.

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