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Foucault, governmentality, strategy: From the ear of the sovereign to the multitude

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ABSTRACT

The idea of 'strategy' has a peculiar place in Michel Foucault's work. On the one hand, he rarely discussed strategy directly, although it was an important element of his work, especially through the 1970s. We trace this development in Foucault's thinking, and the specific place his changing conception of strategy played. Machiavelli, represented a shift towards governmentality, an infinitely more complex and open-ended notion of power than he had used before. We then turn to Tom Peters as a key figure in the emergence of new management thinking in the last three decades. If Peters initially spoke strategy to strategists, then over the two decades, he spoke to a constituency of subaltern strategists of how to transform the experience of organised working lives, an objective far beyond competitive advantage.

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1. Introduction

The idea of 'strategy' has a peculiar place in Michel Foucault's work. On the one hand, he rarely discussed strategy directly, although it was an important element of his work, especially through the 1970s. On the other hand, Foucault's encounter with that arch political strategist, Machiavelli, represented a shift towards governmentality, an infinitely more complex and open-ended notion of power than he had used before. Foucault was far from the first to turn to Machiavelli as a founding father of strategic thinking, about power and action rather than ethical legitimacy. We trace this development in Foucault's thinking, and the specific place his changing conception of strategy played. Like Marx, Foucault was indifferent to the motivation or the moral or technical adequacy – or otherwise – of rulers, whether that be a class, a political party or profession. Foucault asked *how* power was exercised and what were its effects, not *why*. Foucault offered a series of cultural economies of rule rather than a political economy of capitalism. For Foucault, Marxist and liberal interpretations of historical processes already contained their answers before empirical analysis began. Each social domain or institution had its own specificity, dynamics and history, irreducible to a single root cause, whether economic or political. We then turn to Tom Peters as a key figure in the emergence of new management thinking in the last three decades. Peters represents someone who – initially – spoke to power directly but who increasingly aimed his message about leadership, organisational restructuring and empowerment to an ever-wider audience. If Peters initially spoke strategy to strategists, then over the two decades when his popularity was at its height, he spoke to a constituency of subaltern strategists. We examine the

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development of Peters' thinking and his presentation style not to understand his popularity but to consider what this meant in terms of power, population and strategy. Following Foucault, classic corporate strategy spoke – like Machiavelli – to elites and how to interpret and dominate their environment. Peters spoke to the multitude, not to the few; and of how to transform the experience of organised working lives, an objective far beyond competitive advantage.

2. Governmentality and strategy

'How to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor'.

(Foucault, 1991a: 4)

Foucault wrote little about strategy, at least directly. Yet strategy was central to Foucault's understanding of power, especially in the last decade of his life (Foucault, 1979: 102). Strategy remained a difficult concept for Foucault because it came loaded with assumptions of agency, motives and interests. Foucault was uninterested in who benefited or their motivation. Strategy could not be usefully read as derived from interests, economic or otherwise. To make strategy a central concern would be to invite humanist concerns into the very core of his research project. Power, then, is not organised by subjects, even abstract subjects such as 'the state' or 'class'. It is pointless to search for the organising logic of power – or rather specific forms of power – in the motivations or interests of particular subjects. Nonetheless, Foucault consistently writes of power as having a logic. That is, the logic and meaning of power is not something that is ascribed to it from outside but saturated with calculation about means and ends, objectives and mechanisms.

In one of his few extended comments on strategy, Foucault (2008b) draws upon common sense meanings: game theory, anticipating the next moves of an adversary, and gaining an advantage of some kind. The images he uses are no less familiar: of control, frontier, and insubordination. Foucault also discusses strategy in his tentative suggestion that politics should be regarded as a continuation of war by other means: a reversal of Clausewitz's more famous dictum. Now, if we discount Foucault's unusual lapse into a language that veers close to speaking of control, we can identify three principles of how Foucault thought about strategy. First, that strategy entails anticipatory rational calculation and those responses deemed consistent with initial premises. Strategy, like resistance, is a necessary element of any power relationship. Second, strategy is geared to expanding the reach of power towards some form of domination, the moment that strategy becomes unnecessary and, by definition, which power disappears since, without resistance, there can only be domination. Third, that strategy targets the relationships of power that pursue the maximisation of individual freedom compatible with the formation of different, improved, autonomous individuals. Despite the heterogeneity of power, there is a broad logic 'organised into a more-or-less coherent and unitary strategic form' (Foucault, 1980: 142). In spite of this, there is a deep and continuing ambivalence in Foucault's scattered comments about strategy.

2.1. Governmentality: the framing of strategies

For Foucault, strategy is not the preserve of the powerful nor confined to specific places and times. But this is a transitional position that harked back to *Discipline and Punish* and is insufficiently supple to accommodate the open-ended complexities of governmentality (Reid, 2006). Governmentality emphasised the oblique management of conduct at a distance: 'the conduct of conduct.' No less important, governmentality did not simply acknowledge the agency of individuals to shape themselves and their behaviours but also that this did not involve coercion or confinement. The 'arts of government' were not restricted to the state but found anywhere that power sought to manage conduct, however indirectly (Thompson, 2003: 121). Rather than talk of control and frontiers, strategy becomes almost universal, found everywhere in which there is a relationship in which specific forms of power and knowledge are used to 'direct, in a fairly constant manner and with reasonable certainty, the conduct of others' (Foucault, 1982: 225). Here, Foucault anticipates in the proliferation of strategy talk across all sorts of organisations, not just firms, not just executives, not just specific technical planning languages (McKinlay et al., 2010: 1013). Foucault intersects with one of the doyens of corporate strategy, Richard Rumelt (2012: 6–8), who also notes the late twentieth century explosion of strategy talk. But, where Foucault would regard this as unremarkable, Rumelt laments this development. Indeed, for Foucault, turning 'strategy' into an open-ended linguistic trope was necessary if the concept was to travel across entirely different types of institutions. For Rumelt, the ubiquity of strategy has devalued the term conceptually and diminished its practical utility. 'Good' strategy, Rumelt insists, requires analytical clarity, organisational coherence and clear practical routines. 'Good' strategy must be restricted to technical and managerial elites if it is to regain conceptual and practical value. The everyday working out of power entails a variety of interactions in which the individual makes choices and responds tactically. The active role required of the individual confirms the everyday experience of choice and agency as a lived reality (Dixon, 2007: 289).

Perhaps one of the main reasons for Foucault's relative silence about strategy was that he took it as axiomatic that all power relations entailed some form of strategic interplay. Power is intentional, normally associated with purposiveness and subjectivity. Here, Foucault is suggesting that subjects strategise but that power relations are far from being the result of such choices. Nor should we invest 'power' with a consciousness and strategic sensibility. Power, suggests Martin Kelly (2009: 48), 'is completely subjectless – we should not fall into the trap of reinstating the subject by making power *itself* a subject. ... Power's intentionality lies in its strategic nature, but its strategies have no strategist. It has rationality, but it is the rationality

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