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Governmentality and the maternal body: infant mortality in early twentieth-century Lancashire

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Abstract

In an empirical extension of and theoretical commentary on Foucault's work on governmentality, this paper takes the liberal governance of women, specifically mothers, as its focus. In Britain at the turn of the twentieth century, high infant mortality rates sparked widespread concern. Working-class mothers were blamed for infant deaths and became the target of social intervention. Analysing the knowledge which shaped the understanding of infant death, the paper highlights the geography of the problem and traces the creation of a particular subjectivity: the bad mother. Using the case study of the Bolton School for Mothers in Lancashire, the paper excavates the political rationalities informing infant welfare work. Finding a biopolitical concern for the quality and quantity of the British race at the heart of the work of the Bolton School, the article demonstrates the ways in which the working-class maternal body was appropriated as a tool of population revitalisation. The study also interrogates the practices of control used in infant welfare work and suggests the entanglement of different types of power as characteristic of infant welfare as a regime of biopolitical governance.

Keywords: Governmentality; Biopolitics; School for Mothers; Infant mortality; Motherhood; Lancashire

Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality has been increasingly influential in academic scholarship both within and beyond historical geography.[1] The bodies in Foucault's accounts of power are paradigmatically male. Foucault's oeuvre has, therefore, received sustained critique from feminist scholars who assert that his apparent indifference to some of the issues raised by gender is, as McNay puts it, a pronounced blindspot.[2] Accusations of androcentricity relate to Foucault's failure to explicate either the differential impact on the lives of men and women of the forms of governance he investigates, or the highly gender-specific configurations of power operating in a sexually hierarchical society.[3] In response to the scholarly neglect of gender in governmentality studies, this paper takes the liberal governance of women as its primary focus.

Scholars have addressed the gender-blindness in Foucault's work through individual empirical projects. For instance, Robinson's Foucauldian analysis of the projects of Octavia Hill and her female housing managers uses the lens of gender to bring into focus some unexplored aspects of the exercise of power, such as the way in which surveillance tactics were carried out by women through social interaction, conversations and friendship in the space of the home.[4] Meanwhile, Crowley and Kitchin's investigation of the moral regulation of women in 1920s Ireland revealed that the kind of regulated, civilised subject that governmental strategies attempted

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[1] M. Foucault, Governmentality, in: G. Burchell, C. Gordon, P. Miller (Eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, London, 1991, 73–86. See also M. Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Life*, London, 1999; M. Hannah, *Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory in Nineteenth-Century America*, Cambridge, 2000; N. Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge, 1999.

[2] L. McNay, *Foucault: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge, 1994, 10.

[3] K. Soper, Productive contradictions, in: C. Ramazanoglu (Ed.), *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*, London, 1993, 29–50. See also: I. Diamond, L. Quinby (Eds), *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, Boston, 1988; L. Ruhl, Liberal governance and prenatal care, *Economy and Society* 8 (1999) 95–117.

[4] J. Robinson, Power as friendship: spatiality, femininity and noisy surveillance, in: J. Sharp, P. Routledge, C. Philo, R. Paddison (Eds), *Entanglements of Power: Geographies of Domination and Resistance*, London, 2000, 67–92.

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to produce – the decent girl – was part of a clearly gendered sexual morality.[5] Similarly, Smith and Valiulis, in two studies on Ireland, analyse the ways in which governmental practices targeted women in order to make them to conform to a prescribed national paradigm, or a particular subjectivity.[6] This paper also examines a particular gendered subjectivity – that of the 'good mother.' This empirical extension of Foucauldian theory analyses infant welfare work as a regime of governance that takes women – specifically, mothers – as its target. In addition to this, the paper explores the ways in which the regulation of women was heavily racialised.

In Britain at the turn of the twentieth century, there was widespread concern about the quality and quantity of the population. The 1901 Census findings confirmed that not only was the national birth rate falling, but rates of infant mortality (that is, deaths of infants from birth to one year of age) were rising. Scientific understandings of infant death at this time favoured explanations that were increasingly social and behavioural, as opposed to biological or environmental. It was, in short, the poor mothering skills of working-class women, rather than problems of disease or sanitation that were widely believed to be the major cause of infant death.

Scholars agree that a growing demographic consciousness developed within the liberal state in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it is in this context that we must appraise the concern for infant mortality. Rapid industrialisation of other European powers such as Germany and France and the poor quality of recruits for the Boer War (1889–1902) famously led to anguished concern over the quality and quantity of the British 'race'.[7] This crisis brought about a change in political rationality such that problems such as infant mortality were increasingly targeted as appropriate objects of state intervention.[8] Foucault observed that modern states rest their legitimacy on their power to guarantee 'the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life' (as opposed to their power to inflict death).[9] In practice, this led to the identification and classification not only of problem individuals, but also of 'problem populations' which posed a threat to the social body. The eugenics movement provided scientific data on the problem of the population and argued for the use of measures, both social and biological, to improve the nation's health.[10] By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, virtually all European states had moved to regulate family life and problematic behaviour such as prostitution, adultery and 'deviant' sexual practices.[11] This unprecedented state interest in the private sphere of home and family has been widely documented and read primarily as increased interference in the lives of working-class women, especially mothers.[12] Demographic panic turned the focus towards mothers, making them a crucial asset in processes of nation-building and middle-class creation.[13] Motherhood developed into a 'cult' which involved the reification of white, middle-class maternity as a civic social need. As Davin has shown, the imperative to produce children for the nation and for the empire meant childbearing women became a national resource.[14] This study takes Davin's classic paper, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', which presents a feminist historical perspective on notions of maternal welfare, as a key point of departure. This paper, interestingly, shares many reference points with more recent work on government, such as the link between individual behaviour and wider questions of race and population. This article, given its Foucauldian mandate, presents a different historiographical approach to the topic of motherhood.

Questions of population and life, of mortality, longevity and their relationship to individual conduct, readily lend themselves to a Foucauldian approach. This paper therefore draws on and seeks to add to the existing corpus of Foucault-inspired and Foucault-related analyses of the increased attention to population problems and mothers at the turn of the twentieth century.[15] The article makes the argument that increased political concern over infant mortality – and thus attention to mothers – can usefully be seen as the effect of a biopolitical regime of governance aiming to administer and optimise life chances. The regulation of motherhood played as significant a role as the regulation of sexuality in tying together the different levels of biopolitical governance.[16]

The theoretical mandate of this paper reflects the long-standing fascination with Foucault in geography. There have been many significant developments of Foucault's studies of the problematisation of bodies and behaviours and the spaces activated in response to these issues.[17] Alongside these, as Hannah has argued, biopower has been interrogated from a variety of angles by geographers (and others) with the intention of understanding the array of historical and geographical circumstances within which biopolitical techniques have been deployed and resisted.[18] The intention is not to rehearse this broad corpus of research here. However,

[5] U. Crowley and R. Kitchin, Producing decent girls: governmentality and the moral geographies of sexual conduct in Ireland 1922–1937, *Gender, Place and Culture* 15 (2008) 355–372.

[6] J. Smith, The politics of sexual knowledge: the origins of Ireland's containment culture and the Carrigan Report 1931, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13 (2004) 208–233; M. Valiulis, Power, gender and identity in the Irish Free State, *Journal of Women's History* 6 (1995) 117–136.

[7] A. Davin, Imperialism and motherhood, *History Workshop Journal* 5 (1978) 9–65 (15).

[8] E. Higgs, *The Information State in England: The Central Collection of Information on Citizens since 1500*, Basingstoke, 2004, 99.

[9] M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I, New York, 1978.

[10] On eugenics see in particular, R. Soloway, Counting the degenerates: the statistics of race deterioration in Edwardian England, *Journal of Contemporary History* 17 (1982) 137–164; R. Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England, 1877–1930*, London, 1982.

[11] K. Luker, Sex, social hygiene and the state: the double-edged sword of social reform, *Theory and Society* 27 (1998) 601–634 (602).

[12] L. Bland, 'Guardians of the race' or 'Vampires upon the nation's health'? Female sexuality and its regulation in early twentieth-century Britain, in: E. Whitelegg, M. Arnot, E. Bartels, V. Beechey, L. Birke, S. Himmelweit, D. Leonard, S. Ruehl, M. Speakman (Eds), *The Changing Experience of Women*, Oxford, 1982, 373–388 (378).

[13] For a Foucauldian approach to similar topics in India see S. Hodges, Governmentality, population and the reproductive family in modern India, *Economic and Political Weekly* (20 March 2004) 1157–1163; S. Hodges, Towards a history of reproduction in modern India, in: S. Hodges (Ed.), *Reproductive Health in India: History, Politics, Controversies*, New Delhi, 2006, 1–22; S. Hodges, *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce: Birth Control in South India, 1920–40*, Aldershot, 2008.

[14] Davin, Imperialism and motherhood (note 7), 12–13.

[15] See in particular: R. Cooter (Ed.), *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare, 1880–1940*, London, 1992; S. Nettleton, Wisdom, diligence and teeth: discursive practices and the creation of mothers, *Sociology of Health and Illness* 31 (1991) 98–111; R. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birth Rate in Twentieth-Century Britain*, North Carolina, 1990, especially chapter 6; E. Wainwright, Constant medical supervision: locating reproductive bodies in Victorian and Edwardian Dundee, *Health and Place* 9 (2003) 163–174.

[16] C. Philo, Sex, life, death, geography: fragmentary remarks inspired by 'Foucault's population geographies', *Population, Space and Place* 11 (2005) 325–333.

[17] See in particular: F. Driver, Power, space and the body: a critical assessment of Foucault's Discipline and Punish, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 3 (1985) 425–446; F. Driver, Discipline without frontiers? Representations of the Mettray reformatory colony in Britain, 1840–1880, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3 (1990) 272–293; C. Philo, 'Enough to drive one mad': the organisation of space in the nineteenth-century lunatic asylum, in: J. Wolch, M. Dear (Eds), *The Power of Geography: How Territory Shapes Social Life*, London, 1989, 258–290; M. Huxley, Space and government: governmentality and geography, *Geography Compass* 2 (2008) 1635–1658 (1648).

[18] M. Hannah, Biopower, life and left politics, *Antipode* 43 (2011) 1–21 (4); see also, K. Schlosser, Bio-political geographies, *Geography Compass* 2 (2008) 1621–1634.