

## ARTICLE

# Hegemony, Ideology, Governmentality: Theorizing State Power after Weber

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Max Weber once claimed that the growth of bureaucratic power in late modernity may henceforth render political revolutions impossible. In this article, I stage a conversation between Weber and several of his later interlocutors on the Left. I suggest that the concepts of hegemony (Gramsci), ideology (Althusser), and governmentality (Foucault) can be read, in part, as responses to Weber. These theorists each develop distinct versions of what I call a nominalist theory of power: by starting from the ground up and showing how the state is supported by granular relationships of power that circulate outside its grasp, they hope to discover new modes of resistance and social change. I explore these distinct theories and trace their interconnections. In the end, however, I suggest that nominalist theories of power have inherent limitations and that Weber's initial diagnosis retains important insights.

**Keywords:** Power; Western Marxism; Foucault; Max Weber; Gramsci; Machiavelli

*"I am wont to cross over even into the enemy's camp – not as a deserter, but as a scout."*

– Seneca

## Introduction: Weber's Challenge

At a key moment in *Economy and Society*, Max Weber ponders the future of revolutions in late modernity and points to a major historical shift: the emergence of a new state form that combines a rationalized bureaucratic apparatus with a vast technological infrastructure. Weber speculates that:

Such an apparatus makes "revolution," in the sense of the forceful creation of entirely new formations of authority, more and more impossible...The place of "revolutions" is under this process taken by *coups d'état*...<sup>2</sup>

Modern politics is like a macabre game of musical chairs: different cliques of elites circulate through positions of authority, but, throughout it all, the fundamental social order persists more or less unchanged. Needless to say, Weber's view has long been contested by thinkers for whom radical social change is the primary desideratum of political action. V.I. Lenin himself, for example, took a moment during the abortive revolution of 1905 to critique Weber's theories.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, when Lenin's revolutionary activity bore fruit in 1917, Weber returned to print to insist that the result-

ing state would spawn an overgrown bureaucracy, perhaps more oppressive than the tsar's and run for the benefit of an equally narrow class of elites.<sup>4</sup>

This article explores the ways that three later thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Left – namely, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault – respond to Weber's bleak diagnosis of modern politics.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I make three major claims. First, I argue that the concepts of hegemony, ideology, and governmentality are aspects of a common project. Each notion moves towards an increasingly radical "nominalist" view of power, which I define as a concept of power that operates with no institutional center or sovereign head, serves no single purpose or social function, and that works from "below" as well as from "above." In essence, these nominalist theories all wager that the very ubiquity of power also multiplies the potential avenues of resistance, thereby making radical political transformations possible in ways that Weber's state-centric theories failed to anticipate.

Along the way, I show how these distinct theories of power call forth unique reinterpretations of Machiavelli, the early modern theorist of power *par excellence*. Many other commentators have pointed to the importance of Machiavelli for the 20<sup>th</sup> century Left.<sup>6</sup> However, scholarship on this topic often focuses on broad similarities and overlooks crucial differences across these various rereadings of Machiavelli. Conversely, I try to accentuate those moments where interpretations diverge.

In the conclusion, I attempt to sum up where we are at with regard to power nominalism as a theoretical enterprise. I suggest that despite the vital innovations this project has made possible, it also gives rise to unsolved – and perhaps unsolvable – dilemmas. Yet, we need to revisit these debates today because hegemony, ideology, and governmentality are concepts that continue to shape the frameworks within which we think, write, teach, and act. As Lucian Goldman once said, “The problem of history is the history of problems.”<sup>7</sup>

### The Outer Ditch of State Power: Gramsci’s Hegemony

The concept of hegemony has a tangled genealogy, masterfully delineated in Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It first emerges, as they put it, to “fill a hiatus that had opened in the chain of historical necessity” after the generalized depression of the 1890s came to an end and capitalist expansion returned in full force.<sup>8</sup> Around this time the word “hegemony” begins to crop up among Russian Social Democrats, who needed a way to theorize revolution in a country with a miniscule bourgeoisie and little class consciousness among the proletariat.<sup>9</sup> Hegemony, then, was intended to denote and explore the cultural and ideational factors that could accelerate or impede the formation of class consciousness.

This is the context from which Gramsci’s work on hegemony emerges.<sup>10</sup> For him, a similar “hiatus” appeared once it became clear that the 1917 Revolution would not spread to the West. What enabled regimes in Western Europe to retain power *without any consistent resort to mass coercion*? Why did the modern age witness so many of what Gramsci calls “passive revolutions” which, as Weber had already indicated, allowed relatively small elite groups to seize state power and reap the benefits without relying on popular mass participation? On the other hand, how to explain the sudden rise of fascism, a passionate mass movement of the Right?

Many thinkers (both on the Left and on the budding fascist Right) would seek to answer these questions by supplementing Marx with a rereading of Hegel.<sup>11</sup> Compared to the deterministic economism of the period surrounding the Second International, Hegel seemed to offer a more sophisticated conception of history as a complex, dialectical process, replete with false starts and repetitions.<sup>12</sup> The dynamic view of the evolution of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* also provided new resources for theorizing the formation (or lack thereof) of class identity.

However, in the present context what is perhaps most important is the way Hegel resists the idea that brute force – the monopoly of violence in Weber’s idiom – is responsible for the stability of state power. Instead, he highlights the role that different intersubjective self-understandings play in the maintenance of public order. Like Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws*, Hegel argues that the state depends on an ambient culture, a stabilizing ethos that he describes simply as “the basic sense of order which everyone possesses.”<sup>13</sup> The

formal institutions of state power are always intertwined with the broader ethical and religious life of a community, and it is when this unarticulated normative background breaks down that political change is in the offing.<sup>14</sup>

Like Hegel, Gramsci views society as an organic whole or totality, in the sense that we cannot fully understand one aspect (religion, politics, etc.) without asking how it simultaneously shapes and is shaped by all the rest.<sup>15</sup> Again, this implies that state power can be either reinforced or eroded by the broader ideological milieu that functions outside its official boundaries. However, Gramsci prefers to stress the other side of this equation: dominant cultural forms cannot be separated from their relationship to coercive political power. Hegemony, then, refers to this shifting blend of coercion and consent that allows a dominant class to stabilize its rule.

Such hegemonic ideologies should not be mistaken for “false consciousness,” as if people could simply “awaken” into a better world. Gramsci emphasizes that hegemonies are constituted through a material matrix of social practices that are sustained by a wide-ranging apparatus that includes schools, churches, public institutions and cultural traditions.<sup>16</sup> The school habituates students to respect hierarchy. At church worshippers learn of the unchangeable fallenness of human nature. Citizens eventually acquire habits of thought that predispose them to view existing inequalities as natural and legitimate. Indeed, the young Hegel had already said as much.<sup>17</sup>

Gramsci’s key historical argument is that the bourgeois state evolved a new institutional structure to avert the cycles of mass resistance that Europe had witnessed time and again, first during the 14<sup>th</sup> century peasants’ revolts, then during the French Revolution, and once more in 1848. Yet, by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he writes, “all the germs of 1789 were finally historically exhausted.”<sup>18</sup> What had changed? For one thing, the bourgeoisie had come to realize that extending suffrage did not pose a threat to their hold on power. Quite the contrary: by integrating the population into the political system, mass suffrage offered new methods of legitimation, allowing the state to co-opt resistance by channeling dissident impulses into moderate parties of loyal opposition.<sup>19</sup> (Weber also had a clearheaded understanding of this process. He was an early advocate of liberalization in Germany, for example, but his primary justification was that this would bring the domestic legitimacy required to maintain an assertive foreign policy.)<sup>20</sup>

Beyond the sphere of formal politics, the night watchman state of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had become intertwined, through networks of patronage and regulation, with a whole group of ostensibly private institutions in civil society, giving it new methods of control over the habitus of everyday life.<sup>21</sup> One effect of this was to limit the space “outside” of the state’s influence where movements could emerge before moving on to confront the regime directly. For Gramsci, the implication was clear: resistance must begin “inside” the state, beginning with the hard work of deconstructing the hegemonic apparatus and then building a new society from

the inside out by working in schools, the media, and other institutions of civil society.

In an evocative passage of *The Prison Notebooks* that contrasts the fate of Russia with the stillborn revolutions of the West, Gramsci remarks that:

In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks.<sup>22</sup>

Intriguingly, Gramsci's comment closely parallels an observation in book IV of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Here Machiavelli compares the rapid ease of Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire, accomplished in just a few decisive battles, with the difficulty of taking and holding territory on the fragmented political geography of the European peninsula. The key difference lies in the social structure that underpins state power. Persia was an autocratic state with a single locus of power, a place where most subjects did not "feel any particular loyalty."<sup>23</sup> "Once you had got control of it," Machiavelli declares, "it would be very easy to hold onto it."<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, a European state like France, because of its semi-feudal structure, has multiple, overlapping, centers of power: numerous noble lords are fiercely jealous of their traditional privileges and rights, and many can mobilize a loyal retinue of retainers. The consequence of this variegated social structure is that the French state is actually far more resilient than it appears at first glance.

Gramsci clearly sees a homology between Machiavelli's project – the creation of a unified Italian state in dire historical circumstances – and his own drive toward revolution. As Miguel Vatter has argued, Gramsci sees Machiavelli as among the first modern thinkers to shift conceptions of human agency away from a necessary "correspondence with the times" toward a vision of "history as an effect of free action."<sup>25</sup> Thus the message of *The Prince* is that a leader endowed with *virtú* can succeed in achieving a totally new state of affairs through concerted political action. However, Machiavelli's own activity as an author also suggests that, before this can happen, a philosophical intervention is needed to expose the mechanisms of power and reveal a new space of political possibilities. Philosophy, then, must minister to the revolution, exposing the terrain on which it is to take place.

In light of this insight into the role of the philosopher, Gramsci also praises Machiavelli for understanding that philosophy's task extends beyond critique of the existing order to the "creation of a concrete fantasy," an evocative image of the world to come that can serve as a lure for revolutionary activity.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the famous critique of imagined republics in Book XV of *The Prince* is only the prelude to Machiavelli's real task of constructing a new political

imaginary in the last half of the text, one that he intimates by deploying an enormous variety of rhetorical techniques, including exhortation (unite Italy!), the introduction of a new friend/enemy distinction (Italy against the barbarians), seduction (Fortuna is a woman), and use of a novel political iconography (the lion and the fox, etc).<sup>27</sup> Machiavelli's text works on multiple registers to shift the reader's sense of what is possible and desirable.

*The Prince* shows that the veneer of unassailable state is power misleading. Revolutionary change can take place through the slow, steady proliferation of a counter-hegemonic ideology ("concrete fantasy") throughout civil society, so that a new order gestates from within. Or, as Laclau and Mouffe put it, "For Gramsci, a class does *not take State power*, rather it *becomes* [the] State."<sup>28</sup> In this sense, even writing from the depths of a fascist prison, Gramsci was comparatively optimistic about the prospects for revolution.

However, even sympathetic readers like Laclau and Mouffe recognize that Gramsci does not quite carry his project of tracing the ways that hegemonic power operates in contingent historical circumstances (a key aspect of what I call power nominalism) to its logical conclusion. For example, at times he seems to assume that identity formation is functional for the capitalist system (or, conversely, for revolution), a move that introduces a kind of subterranean teleology into his work. "As soon as the dominant social group has exhausted its function, the ideological bloc tends to crumble away," he declares.<sup>29</sup> Yet, insofar as this is not the case, hegemony may be "stickier" and more difficult to overturn than Gramsci realizes. Another consequence of this latent functionalism is that Gramsci appears to conceive of just a few key nodes of ideological transmission (schools, churches, etc.) and a relatively small set of relevant identities. As Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge, Gramsci often treats "political subjects" as "complex collective wills."<sup>30</sup> He thereby underestimates the radical contingency involved in the formation of hegemonic blocs and the way that political identities are overdetermined by social practices. In the next section, I show how Louis Althusser attempts to respond to these very dilemmas.

### **Althusser: Ideology and the Subject**

Althusser has a conflicted relationship with Gramsci's thought. On the one hand, he insists that "Gramsci is the only one who went any distance" toward an adequate exploration of ideology.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, he remains adamant that Gramsci's Hegelianism – in some ways the very core of his understanding of hegemony – prevented him from fully appreciating the operation of ideological power in late capitalism.<sup>32</sup> The crux of the matter, according to Althusser, is that Hegelian Marxists unconsciously accept an "individualist-humanist" conception of the subject that remains essentially bourgeois in origin.<sup>33</sup> Put simply, they speak as if there exists an ahistorical individual subject that acquires identities (serf, proletariat, etc.) that it can take on or off, almost like pieces of clothing, but they fail to raise the prop-

erly Marxist question: how is this subject itself constituted? How is it that we take punctual, individual selves for granted as an irreducible feature of reality and the foundation of politics?

I argue that Althusser attempts to address these questions by radicalizing the nominalist conception of power, bringing it down to a microscopic level and showing how it fashions subjects from the ground up. While hegemony as Gramsci usually describes it is a kind of class power that individuals live *with* but can choose to openly confront, Althusser suggests that ideology makes us what we *are*. He therefore raises (perhaps inadvertently) the old question posed by Weber: what kind of social change remains possible when power becomes truly pervasive?

At the risk of a reductionist reading, one can perhaps point to historical causes behind Althusser's stance. Gramsci's thinking was largely defined by the failure of the revolution to spread after 1917, but he never lived to see the Soviet Union become a sclerotic, bureaucratic dictatorship. Althusser, by contrast, produced his major works in the 1960s, at which point the horrors of Stalinism were plain for all to see. In this context, older questions about the uncanny resilience of capitalism merged with new ones concerning the resurgence of despotism following a successful revolution.<sup>34</sup> It is perhaps owing to the very nature of such questions that Althusser was increasingly attentive to the ubiquity of power and the uncertainty surrounding efforts to overcome it.

Althusser addresses all of these issues in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."<sup>35</sup> Revolutionary philosophy, he explains, has repeatedly misunderstood ideology. 18<sup>th</sup> century radicals believed that ideology was little more than an instrumental tactic, deliberately deployed by a small number of elites. According to this line of thought, deceitful priests and tyrants circulated myths about religion and authority in order to buttress their rule, and this reign of imagination would be broken when the last king was strangled with the entrails of the last priest.<sup>36</sup>

The aftermath of 1789 and the restoration, however, suggested to many that the instrumental account was unable to explain the enduring power of the traditional political myths. In response to this problem, both Feuerbach and the young Marx drew on Hegel to develop an alternative account of ideology as alienation. According to this more complex view, ideology stems not from a few corrupt elites, but rather from the entire network of social conditions through which individuals are separated from their real human essence or potential as free beings, causing them to project idealized representations of existence into the realms of religion, morality, etc.<sup>37</sup> Restructuring the material basis of society would allow humanity to recapture its self-fashioning autonomy, and thus to escape the prison house of ideology.

For Althusser, both interpretations – ideology as instrumental tactic of the elite and ideology as social alienation – are unsatisfactory because they "take literally" the idea that ideology is the "imaginary representation of the...

real world."<sup>38</sup> More to the point, such "projection" or "de-mythification" theories accept a whole network of problematic claims: a) there is a transparent "real" world that b) ideology causes us to misperceive but which c) we as individual subjects can choose to resist by d) bringing to bear a radical critique that will return the subject's gaze to the world of truth. However, Althusser argues, these assumptions remain situated within the intellectual world of bourgeois humanism and its essentialist notions of human agency and individual rationality. As such, earlier accounts of ideology, including those penned by the young Marx, *remain ideological* to the extent that they are wrapped up with the political commitments of bourgeois society in ways that are not fully transparent.<sup>39</sup>

By contrast, Althusser believes that a more satisfactory theory of ideology would be fully constitutive: it would explain how we come to misrecognize ourselves as subjects in the first place and how the very stabilization of political "reality" always already depends on this primordial misrecognition.<sup>40</sup>

To undertake this reconstruction, Althusser supplements Marx with Lacanian psychoanalysis. Crucial here is Lacan's account of the way that infants in the "mirror stage" come to see, through their experience of the mother's gaze, that they bear an identity beyond the flux of passing physical sensations. This recognition – that I am a self for the other – then becomes the foundation for the infant's projection of an "ideal ego," the "imaginary" facet of identity that exists "out there," and which endures through the passage of time and the changes of the body.<sup>41</sup> The upshot is that what looks to us like transparent "reality" is always sutured together by imaginary constructions, including our notions about the self. This account of the mirror stage is indispensable for Althusser, since, as Gregory Elliot correctly observes, he effectively attempts "to articulate the Marxist theory of ideology [within] the Lacanian theory of the imaginary."<sup>42</sup>

Althusser gives the mirror stage a political vector in his well-known example of "hailing." Imagine, he says, that a police officer calls out "Hey, you there!" while walking his beat.<sup>43</sup> When, upon hearing the call, the addressee instinctively turns around, this person suddenly becomes entangled in social practices that call a new identity into being. Guilty or not, he suddenly "sticks out" as a knowable individual with unique characteristics to whom questions can be posed. Like the child in the mother's gaze, he becomes a subject for the Other and must ask himself: what is the meaning of this call, what am I for the Other? In the process of negotiating this question, the addressee is interpellated: he becomes a potential suspect, informant, or perhaps just a case of mistaken identity. At the same time, the encounter is a kind of ritual in which the addressee/subject/suspect is already presumed to know the "rules of the game," e.g. the officer is to be addressed in a particular way, accorded a certain deference, allowed to make a range of demands or threats, and so on. The consequence is that the addressee is faced with the kind of Catch-22 that Lacan calls a "forced choice."<sup>44</sup> To accept the rules of the game is to become subject to the Law,

but to fail to observe the ritual is to become guilty – and thus subject – to the very same Law.

There are two key points to consider here. First, on this new account ideology is no longer located in beliefs or in a misperception of social reality but is rather “out there” in the social ritual itself. “The ‘ideas’ of a human subject,” Althusser writes, “exist in his action.”<sup>45</sup> However, this makes ideology intractable and “sticky,” since critical thought no longer has recourse to a separate, uncontaminated realm of the intellect. Our real ideology is revealed in the very turning around to face the officer, not our individual conceptions about legitimate authority. Second, Althusser is explicit that “there are no subjects except by and for their subjection,” which implies that no aspect of subjectivity is left untouched by ideology.<sup>46</sup>

Far from being arcane theoretical arguments, these questions are decisive for any conception of political change. For Althusser, it is as if power relations are sustained by an invisible field that can never be directly engaged, resulting in what one commentator has called a “quasi-paranoid discourse about the seamlessness of human disempowerment and lack of agency” that vacillates between “abject hopelessness” and “uncompromising defiance.”<sup>47</sup> It is no coincidence that during the upheavals of May ’68, Althusser became a tragic figure, a kind of Marxist Hamlet, uncertain and vacillating about the proper response to spontaneous mass resistance.<sup>48</sup>

Contemporary theorists who continue to do work that can be broadly described as Althusserian have suggested that most of these problems stem from Althusser’s incomplete reading of Lacan. As Slavoj Žižek points out, Althusser’s account of interpellation focuses on the interplay between the Symbolic (language/Law) and the Imaginary (ideal ego) as depicted in Lacan’s early paper on the mirror stage (first presented at a conference of the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1936). Missing in his conception is Lacan’s later notion of the Real as the register that eludes any attempt at symbolization and which therefore constitutes what Žižek calls a “dimension ‘beyond interpellation.’”<sup>49</sup> This Real “beyond interpellation” makes ideology necessary (to provide consistency to the subject) but also incomplete (since it is never seamless), thereby opening a space for resistance.<sup>50</sup> Along similar lines, Alain Badiou has written that “the point to which Althusser leads us...is the following: is it possible to think *subjectivity without a subject?*”<sup>51</sup> Once again, the hope is that the presence of a gap between an original subjectivity and (incomplete) empirical subjectivation opens the space for radical politics.

Žižek and Badiou make a good point. However, I would like to suggest that a similar ambiguity about political change is also present in Althusser’s lectures on Machiavelli, which suggests to me that it may have deeper sources in his thought than his reading of Lacan.

For example, although Miguel Vatter correctly points out that Gramsci and Althusser are “the two significant interpreters of Machiavelli to read his discourse as a revolutionary one,”<sup>52</sup> he overlooks a key difference: whereas Gramsci reads *The Prince* directly as a strategic document, that is, as a manifesto that clarifies the techniques of radical politics,

Althusser extracts from Machiavelli a far more ambivalent lesson about what we might call, for lack of a better term, political ontology. To put it more simply, while Gramsci typically reads *The Prince* as a statement about *politics*, Althusser also reads it as a text that says important things about the ontological composition of the *world*.

In keeping with the attempt to develop a comprehensive philosophy of “aleatory” materialism in his later works, Althusser reads Machiavelli’s account of the battle between *virtú* and *fortuna* as an acknowledgement of the purely contingent nature of any political Event.<sup>53</sup> He writes:

[T]he Prince is a pure aleatory possibility-impossibility. No class membership predisposes him to assume his historical task. No social tie binds him to this people whom he must unify into a nation. Everything hangs on his *virtú*.<sup>54</sup>

On this reading, the prince inhabits a world that is contingent to its very core. Although the historical conditions are such that the task (unification/revolution) appears nearly impossible, revolution remains a virtual presence that haunts politics.

One consequence of Althusser’s ontological interpretation of *The Prince* is that the status of philosophy undergoes an important shift. For Gramsci, philosophy directly prepares the ground for revolution, but for Althusser its ability to fill this role is called into question. “Every [revolutionary] encounter,” Althusser writes, “is aleatory...in that nothing prefigures...before the actual encounter, the contours and determinations of [what] will emerge from it.”<sup>55</sup> If this is correct, then philosophical reflection can do relatively little to bring about a revolutionary situation, or to shape the new order that will emerge once the dust settles.

This stance also implies that only the retrospective legitimation that comes from a successful revolutionary Event can certify any action *as* truly revolutionary. All present acts of resistance must remain ambiguous: do they open a new path, or remain complicit in the reigning power relations? For Althusser, it is impossible to know for certain. Revolution therefore remains an open question, but, perhaps no more than a question. Adequately theorizing state power and the mechanisms of social change remains a problem to be addressed by his successors, among whom Michael Foucault is perhaps the most important.

### Foucault: Governmentality

At first glance, it might appear that Michel Foucault is something of an outlier in this discussion. After all, his work abandons the concept of ideology and, according to some commentators, in books like *The Order of Things* Foucault attempts to break with Marxist frameworks altogether.<sup>56</sup> To this extent, Foucault seems to depart from the terrain on which Gramsci and Althusser operate. Nevertheless, I argue that these three thinkers share a common theoretical project: Foucault in fact seeks to complete the nominalist model of power, tracing its political implications as consist-

ently as possible. His work, especially the later writings on governmentality, thus reveals the significance – and the limitations – of the entire enterprise.

Foucault's comments regarding the nominalist underpinnings of his work are unmistakable. "Let us assume," he says, "that universals don't exist."<sup>57</sup> He takes this to mean that we should avoid "turning the distinction between the state and civil society into an historical universal" and focus our attention on the way power is always related to mutating assemblages of practices or what Foucault calls "technologies of government."<sup>58</sup> This model, which Foucault also describes as "a physics of power,"<sup>59</sup> depicts power as akin to a play of natural forces, in which each deployment of power is a unique event that encounters counter-forces, produces friction, and leads to reactions and strategic adjustments by other actors.

Foucault's model can be understood by contrasting it with the typical functionalist model or part/whole view of social systems. The functionalist model assumes that any deployment of power is best characterized by the operation it preforms for some larger social whole, just as the significance of an organ is characterized by the task it preforms for the body (e.g. the purpose of the heart is to pump blood). By contrast, Foucault is remarkably lucid about his shift in perspective and its practical implications:

By de-institutionalizing and de-functionalizing relations of power we can grasp their genealogy, i.e. the way they are formed, connect up with each other, develop, multiply, and are transformed on the basis of something other than themselves...[in this way] we can see the respect in which and why they are unstable.<sup>60</sup>

The concept of governmentality is, he says, designed to achieve a "triple displacement" of the functionalist conception of power.<sup>61</sup> First, Foucault abandons what he calls the "institutional-centric" approach in order to explore the "general economy of power" that circulates beyond the walls of hospitals, schools, and prisons.<sup>62</sup> Second, Foucault argues that power is multivalent: its deployment always produces effects in excess of whatever function it may perform for the state or for capitalism. Lastly, Foucault jettisons any idea of a "ready-made object"<sup>63</sup> to trace instead the ways that power continually (re)constructs its own social objects. Whereas Althusser compares ideology to a "concert dominated by a single score"<sup>64</sup> (the concert being ideology and the score being the logic of capital), Foucault tends to embrace metaphors of evolutionary mutation. As we will see, this vantage point attunes him to the possibility of social change beyond (or perhaps "below") the level of a full-blown revolution.

Because of its multiple connotations, governmentality can be a slippery concept. In his classic survey, *Power: A Radical View*, Steven Lukes nicely summarizes its meaning:

Governmentality is...an idea with a multiple reference. First, to "rationalities of rule" – styles of reasoning embodied in governing practices. Second, to concep-

tions of the person that they seek to inculcate – such as the active citizen, the consumer, the enterprising subject, the psychiatric outpatient, and so on.<sup>65</sup>

Governmentality, then, refers to the way that every regime operates with a specific rationality or self-understanding, simply because the practice of governing requires some perspective on the "content" of government (what the major goals and priorities are) but also on its proper "form" (the necessary day-to-day activities, how they should be executed, by whom, etc.). At the same time, any such self-understanding engenders a vision of the "good subject," that is, of the type of person who can be successfully ruled. Thus, on a separate level, governmentality refers to the material "technologies of power" through which subjects are molded, shaped, coerced, and otherwise incentivized to be good subjects.

Foucault's basic argument is that governance in Europe undergoes two seismic mutations during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, concomitant with the decline of Christianity, the emergence of the sovereign state system, and the rise of the market economy.<sup>66</sup> Prior to the Reformation, he observes, government took its rationality – the standards by which it judged success or failure – from "outside" the practice of government itself, especially from transcendent conceptions of justice and salvation.<sup>67</sup> However, this transcendent frame collapses when the Wars of Religion result in the creation of sovereign states nested within the modern state system.<sup>68</sup> The advent of the international system is, he insists, "undoubtedly one of the most fundamental mutations in... Western history."<sup>69</sup> Henceforth, competition between the major political units is better organized, more sustained, and more intense as compared with the sporadic, ad hoc, personalistic rivalries that characterized the previous epoch.<sup>70</sup>

The scale of the new interstate competition means that *raison d'Etat* increasingly becomes the dominant framework for thinking about government: success is now defined as whatever allows for the proper development of a state's power or "forces" (its number of inhabitants, wealth, etc.), because only a state that can defend itself is able to support the pursuit of other goals, including goals such as justice and salvation.<sup>71</sup> More and more aspects of life are brought under state supervision as *raison d'Etat* comes to the forefront, and Foucault is here providing the larger historical context for the rise of disciplinary practices inside institutions such as hospitals and militaries that he explores in earlier works such as *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*.

The second mutation of governmentality occurs in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the advent of statistics makes it possible for the state to conceive of its inhabitants not as a loose collection of persons, but rather as a "population," an abstract statistical "thing" that manifests its own natural patterns.<sup>72</sup> Almost immediately a host of social processes – birth and mortality rates, exchange rates, sexual regulations, and similar affairs of everyday life – suddenly become targets of state intervention. This new mode of governmentality seeks order with a light touch: its goal is to create an overlapping system of laws, regulations, and economic incentives such

that individuals naturally seek to become self-disciplined subjects who work and live in ways that are conducive to the “perfection of the state,” above all by generating continuous economic growth.<sup>73</sup>

Another way to understand how modern governmentality functions is to set aside this complicated historical genealogy and examine Foucault’s idiosyncratic interpretation of *The Prince*.<sup>74</sup> Unlike many contemporary readers, he does not see Machiavelli as signaling the dawn of modernity, but rather as the final chapter in medieval political thought, a point that Foucault illustrates by reading *The Prince* alongside Francis Bacon, that barometer of all things modern.<sup>75</sup> Machiavelli, he notes, is entirely concerned with traditional objects of power: the “transcendent” sovereign prince, his retinue, and his territory.<sup>76</sup> The basic question of *The Prince* surrounds the “acquisition or loss of the principality” in military conflict.<sup>77</sup> Yet, Machiavelli seems strangely unconcerned about “the possibility that the king may be driven out” by the people in “sedition or riot,” or the possibility that disobedience will harm the economy.<sup>78</sup> As a result, he does not make the connection between power and *governance* proper. That is, Machiavelli fails to address the problem of how to structure the social order so that popular obedience is continuously assured in ways that enhance the power of the state. Because of this, the techniques that Machiavelli recommends are theatrical and sporadic (such as the gruesome public execution of Ramiro d’Orco) and he elevates the personal *virtú* of the ruler over impersonal knowledge (science, economics).

By contrast, Francis Bacon fully exemplifies modern governmentality. He is fundamentally concerned with the problem of popular disobedience and the ways it corrodes state power. Sedition, Bacon says, is mostly caused by poverty and radical ideology (what he refers to as rebellions of “the belly” and those of “the head”).<sup>79</sup> These are problems that cannot be adequately addressed by occasional, symbolic displays of sovereignty. Rather, the state must, as much as possible, preempt sedition altogether by continual, minute intervention in social processes at the granular level, and this, in turn, requires expert knowledge and a professionalized state apparatus. Specifically, Bacon recommends the supervision of popular opinion, the repression of begging and idleness, and techniques that boost economic efficiency such as “increasing the circulation of money by reducing the rate of interest” and reducing barriers to trade.<sup>80</sup>

Notice how this form of power operates: the key factor is not what individuals think about their class situation (Gramsci), or how they come to acquire subjectivity (Althusser), but how they respond as natural beings to a social environment that has been minutely structured with specific incentives and stimuli. What Bacon advocates, and what modern governmentality attempts to institutionalize, is a form of behaviorism *avant la lettre* in which subjects respond “naturally” to social incentives as if they were a kind of natural stimulus.

How does Foucault’s work compare to the related reconceptualizations of power that we find in Gramsci and Althusser? Some critics have argued that governmentality

is simply a reversion to the old (essentially Weberian) theory of the all-powerful autonomous state that intervenes in society.<sup>81</sup> But this criticism misses the mark because, in Foucault’s ontology, the state is not an independent “thing,” but merely one moment in the flux of social practices, or, as he puts it, “the state is inseparable from the set of practices by which the state actually became a way of doing things.”<sup>82</sup> The state coalesces out of a series of heterogeneous practices in everyday life such as interacting with the police, paying taxes, going to the DMV, or reacting to changes in interest rates. Thus conceived, the state is a virtual presence, something that appears transcendent because it is sustained as the necessary background for these everyday encounters with power.

Other critics charge that, like Althusser, Foucault ignores the scope of human agency by assuming that people are mostly passive subjects of power. According to Michel de Certeau, whose version of this critique is better than most, Foucault fails to appreciate those everyday moments of creativity – acts like choosing where to walk, how to cook, and what to say – that compose a veritable “network of anti-discipline” inside any system of order.<sup>83</sup> There are always, insists Certeau, spaces “outside the reach of panoptic power.”<sup>84</sup> Yet, this assessment also falls short, at least where it is applied to Foucault’s later work on governmentality. To see why, we only need to reconsider Althusser’s account of “hailing,” this time from a more Foucauldian perspective, in which a model of social practices as a play of forces replaces Althusser’s psychoanalytic model of subjectivization.

Imagine again that a police officer suddenly stops a young man on the streets of Paris by calling out “Hey you there!” This action might have relatively little to do with official policing duties; perhaps the officer is motivated by racism, or trying to earn a promotion, or maybe he is just having a bad day. Whatever its cause, Foucault agrees with Althusser that the encounter immediately calls into play relations of authority, subordination, risk, etc. that maintain order and reinforce the virtual presence of the state by conjuring a momentary island of power. However – and this is Foucault’s major claim – these encounters have a variety of unpredictable effects because *fluid material practices are not fully governed by a larger logic*, including the Marxian logic of capital, Weberian bureaucratic rationalization, or Lacanian theories about the structure of subjectivity. As a radical nominalist, Foucault treats these larger structures as abstractions built up from nothing but particular acts. What results from the encounter between the officer and the young man is, to an indeterminate degree, contingent upon what takes place between them on that day. Perhaps nothing much will happen. Or perhaps a popular demonstration will coalesce, eventually setting fire to hundreds of vehicles throughout Paris, maybe even resulting in a change in policing tactics. The stage is not set beforehand.

In essence, Foucault short-circuits the question about revolutionary change that preoccupied Weber, Gramsci, and Althusser by shifting the ontological context in which the question of political resistance makes sense.<sup>85</sup> He does this

by moving to a model of power as a milieu of forces that are constantly evolving and running up against friction. For him, there is always some kind of non-localizable resistance underway. In this case, the really important question is not the philosophical one (Is revolution possible?) but the empirical one about how and under what circumstances specific strategies of resistance have particular effects.

### Conclusion: Max Weber Redux?

But is Foucault's attempt to change the question sufficient? There are reasons to be doubtful. Slavoj Žižek has recently suggested that his effort to maintain a consistent nominalism merely reenacts all the traditional metaphysical quandaries about the relationship between particulars and universals, parts and wholes, etc.<sup>86</sup> Consider, for example, the crucial question: what, exactly, is the connection between micro-practices and the larger political order, for Foucault? If micro-practices are not parts of a functional system, and we assume that there are no transhistorical universals or modes of subjectivity...then what? The problem is that, unless Foucault can say more about the general connection between micro-practices and the larger social order, an analysis of governmentality cannot articulate the full empirical significance of any particular use of power, and therefore cannot fulfill the very task that it implicitly sets for itself. It would seem, then, that an analysis of governmentality remains parasitic on more general judgments about social formations or functional systems. Yet, these are precisely the sort of more universal notions that Foucault's nominalist "physics of power" is designed to avoid. If Žižek's line of critique is correct, then an impasse has been reached.

On the other hand, it seems clear to me that at crucial points in his explication of governmentality in *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault's arguments do in fact hinge on the same conceptions of society as a functional social system that characterize much traditional sociology. So, although Foucault speaks sardonically of the need to replace theories based on "a circular ontology" of the state and its bureaucracy "growing like a huge monster or automatic machine,"<sup>87</sup> his actual argument is that the Peace of Westphalia and the rise of the modern state system constitutes *the* turning point in the political history of the modern West. After 1648, international competition increasingly forces states to discipline their populations and encourage economic growth; this, in turn, requires a competent bureaucratic apparatus of the kind described by Francis Bacon. Of course, this historical narrative is essentially the same one depicted by Max Weber and his contemporary interpreters,<sup>88</sup> and the result is that Foucault's basic diagnosis of political modernity is far closer to Weber's than is usually recognized.<sup>89</sup>

Foucault also comes to share some of Weber's pessimism regarding modern politics. As the excellent anthology *Foucault and Neoliberalism* has persuasively shown, towards the end of his life he began to suspect that many (center) Left attempts to achieve progressive social change have had the opposite effect of reinforcing state power in troubling ways.<sup>90</sup> Daniel Zamora argues that Foucault was "seduced"

by neoliberal ideas and came to see the welfare state and its continual *dirigiste* interventions in economic life as modes of governmentality that might become just as oppressive for the individual as free market capitalism.<sup>91</sup> If Zamora is right, Foucault's late work recreates the old concerns about the inescapable power of the administrative state that run from Tocqueville to Weber to Hayek and beyond. At times, Foucault's prognosis appears similarly bleak.

What, then, is the takeaway? I argue we learn at least two things from the "power nominalist" responses to Weber developed by Gramsci, Althusser, and Foucault. First, their respective theories of hegemony, ideology, and governmentality do expose the myriad ways that everyday relationships of power underpin the state. To this extent, they represent an effective critique of Weber and indicate some important avenues of resistance. However – and this is perhaps the major lesson – I have also tried to show that none of the nominalist responses are entirely coherent on their own terms or satisfactory from a political perspective.

This means that we must continue to take seriously Weber's suggestion that, due to a variety of institutional, economic, and technological processes, meaningful social change is now bound up with the rotation of elites and the continual expansion of state power. We need a theory of social change that is more sensitive to the ways in which the hierarchical power of the state (and the increasingly dynamic technological infrastructure at its disposal) is able to lock an enduring socio-political framework into place. More specifically, we need an improved understanding of the reciprocal relationships that exist between hierarchy and complex systems, wherever social processes appear. Such a theory would still draw on Gramsci, Althusser, and Foucault, but it would also have to modify their concepts in significant ways. Clearly, this is a very tall order. My purpose here has been primarily diagnostic, that is, to help point out some unresolved problems whose very lack of resolution might point the way forward.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, "On Discursiveness in Reading" in *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Richard M. Gummere (New York: GP Putnam Sons, 1918), p. 9.
- <sup>2</sup> Max Weber, Guenther Roth, and Claus Wittich, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 989.
- <sup>3</sup> See V.I. Lenin, "Lecture on the 1905 revolution." Lenin Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jan/09.htm> (accessed April 3, 2018).
- <sup>4</sup> Wolfgang J Mommsen, *The Age of Bureaucracy: Perspectives on the Political Sociology of Max Weber*. (New York: Harper, 1974).
- <sup>5</sup> Weber shows up quite often in their works. See, for example: Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978 – 1987* (New York: Verso, 2006), 102–3; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 163–168.

- <sup>6</sup> Adam Holden and Stuart Elden, "It cannot be a real person, a concrete individual": Althusser and Foucault on Machiavelli's Political Technique," *Borderlands* 4, no. 2 (2005): 1–15.
- <sup>7</sup> Lucien Goldman, *Immanuel Kant* (New York: Verso, 2011), 13.
- <sup>8</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York: Verso, 2014), 1.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.
- <sup>11</sup> On Hegelian Marxism, see Perry Anderson, *Western Marxism* (New York: Verso, 1979). On fascist reworkings of Hegel, see James A. Gregor, *Mussolini's Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought* (New Jersey: Princeton, 2005), 88, 153.
- <sup>12</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon, 1960), 92–3.
- <sup>13</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Ed. Allen W. Wood. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 289.
- <sup>14</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon, 1960), 36.
- <sup>15</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 170.
- <sup>16</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York: Verso, 2014), 57.
- <sup>17</sup> As Hegel put it, "Reason and politics have played the same game. The former has taught what despotism wanted to teach, contempt for humanity and incapacity of man to achieve the good and to fulfill his essence through his own efforts." Quoted in Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon, 1960), 12.
- <sup>18</sup> Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1971), 179.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.
- <sup>20</sup> Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *The Age of Bureaucracy* (New York: Harper, 1974), 36.
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in Joseph Buttigieg, "Antonio Gramsci: Liberation Begins with Critical Thinking" in *Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Catherine Zuckert (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.
- <sup>23</sup> Nicolò Machiavelli. *Selected Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 14–16.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>25</sup> Miguel Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 149.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.
- <sup>27</sup> Nicolò Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 77, 79.
- <sup>28</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York: Verso, 2014), 59.
- <sup>29</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1971), 61.
- <sup>30</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York: Verso, 2014), 57.
- <sup>31</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 142.
- <sup>32</sup> Gregory Elliot, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 117.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.
- <sup>35</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 127–189.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.
- <sup>41</sup> Martin Murray, *Jacques Lacan: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 94.
- <sup>42</sup> Gregory Elliot, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 156.
- <sup>43</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 174.
- <sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 176.
- <sup>45</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 167.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.
- <sup>47</sup> Mari Ruti, *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 5.
- <sup>48</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (New York: Verso, 2005), 44.
- <sup>49</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 139.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>51</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (New York: Verso, 2005), 149.
- <sup>52</sup> Miguel Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 22.
- <sup>53</sup> Mikko Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolò Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 15.
- <sup>54</sup> Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us* (London: Verso, 2000), 26.
- <sup>55</sup> Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter* (New York: Verso, 2006), 193.
- <sup>56</sup> Andrew Ryder. "Foucault and Althusser: Epistemological Differences with Political Effects," *Foucault Studies*, no.16 (2013): 134–153.
- <sup>57</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 3.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.
- <sup>59</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 49.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>64</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 154.
- <sup>65</sup> Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*. 2nd Edition (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005).
- <sup>66</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 33.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.
- <sup>74</sup> Sean Erwin, "Political Technique, The Conflict of Umori, and Foucault's Reading of Machiavelli," in *Sécurité, Territoire, Population, Foucault Studies* no. 19 (2015): 172–190.
- <sup>75</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 267.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.
- <sup>81</sup> See, for example, the critique of Foucault in James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 101.
- <sup>82</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 277.
- <sup>83</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), xv.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.
- <sup>86</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil* (New York: Verso, 2014), 58–60.
- <sup>87</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977–78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 354.
- <sup>88</sup> See especially Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power Vol II: The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States: AD 900–1992* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1992), 16–20.
- <sup>89</sup> For a recent discussion of these similarities, see David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules* (New York: Melville House, 2016).
- <sup>90</sup> See Michael C. Behrent and Daniel Zamora, eds., *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015).
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3.
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