

Socialist Governmentality?

Health care, technologies of the self and subjectification in European state socialism, 1945-1990.

After the collapse of the Cold War two-bloc system in 1989/90, historiography and social sciences tended to sharply contrast post-World War II socialist and non-socialist societies. Recently, the focus has shifted to a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective interested in differences as much as parallels, including intersections and convergences between the two systems. Some even ask, if the Iron Curtain might not be better described as a permeable Nylon Curtain. In this context, a more general question has emerged: whether and how Michel Foucault's ideas on liberal (and capitalist) "governmentality", first formulated in 1977/78, can be productively applied on contemporary or historical socialist societies. After all, at first glance the liberal and individualized technologies of the self stand in sharp contrast to the ideologically shaped and administratively mediated formation of a "socialist personality".

It is hardly controversial that the Foucauldian concept of "biopolitics" – securing and enhancing "life" of the governed "population" – is a very useful tool for analyzing both socialist and non-socialist government policies when it comes to, for example, birth regulation and pronatalism, agricultural policies or preventive health care regimes. "Governmentality" as defined by Foucault, however, characterizes biopolitics which seems to be specifically connected to a way of live in neoliberal-democratic and capitalist societies. The concept focuses on "private" lifestyles (diet and physical activity, sex, emotions, etc.). The shaping of individual behavior and subjectivity through a "conduct of conduct" ensures that the individual's striving for autonomy and their capacity for self-control, self-reliance, and reflexivity serve the (presumed) common good. Governmentality, then, describes how self-conduct simultaneously "governs" others by governing oneself in ways that are desirable for the polity and acceptable to the governed.

In the last decades, the concept of governmentality helped to understand how neoliberalism made citizens responsible for the former tasks of the postwar-welfare state and how the market redistributed those tasks to the individual (subject). From this theoretical standpoint, governmentality seems incompatible with socialist ideology, state control, physical repression, and the prerogative of the collective. In recent years, however, we learned that pursuing a bottom-up perspective can provide additional or even deeper insights

into the complexities of socialist realities. This is the aim of the proposed workshop: To take a closer look at governmentality, not from the perspective of policy makers or the power apparatus, but by using the example of healthcare in post-1945 Socialist Europe.

We propose to explore concrete examples from everyday health care settings – in psychological counseling, clinical social work, and community medicine, in treating chronic diseases and in preventive health care, in school education and the workplace, in healthy leisure activities, and in shaping a happy family life. What mechanisms of dissemination, reception, and mediation of self-techniques can be found and analyzed? Were elements or patterns of governmentality transferred from the West to the East or do we also find “home-grown” inventions? Were socialist societies more “liberal” than they realised and wanted to be? If so, what does this mean for the way we look at governmentality in “Western” societies?

The workshop will be held in Berlin on September 13-14, 2023. We plan this to be a fairly small group of people to make the discussions as open and lively as possible. To facilitate a productive discussion, we invite papers from ongoing research that will be distributed to participants (and commentators) in advance. Expenses for travel and hotel will be covered. We welcome abstracts in English of no more than 300 words. Please send an abstract and a short CV by e-mail (henriette.voelker@charite.de) by December 19, 2022.

The workshop is organized by Dr. Alexa Geisthövel and Laura Hottenrott (both ERC Leviathan) and Prof. Dr. Viola Balz (FOR “normal#verrückt”). We gratefully acknowledge the support of the European Research Council (ERC Grant 854503) and the German Research Foundation (DFG FOR 3031). Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

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