

BOOK REVIEW

Governing the Social in Neoliberal Times, edited by Deborah Brock. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2019. \$32.95 CDN., paper. ISBN: 978-0-77486-091-8. Pages 1 – 328.

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“Publish or perish” is the mantra of academic success in neoliberal times. As interdisciplinary PhD students with a commitment to social justice and change work, we sought an opportunity to collaborate, co-learn, and share our perspectives via collective writing. Settling on a book review, we hoped to find a text with space for our diverse experiences and time to resist the structures within which we live and learn. Seeking to provide “a lens for discovering the less obvious organization and flows of power that serve to sustain relations of social inequality” (p. 4), *Governing the Social in Neoliberal Times*, edited by Deborah Brock, was of interest because the analysis promised an unveiling of the complex power flows and social dynamics which for and inform the social in our everyday lives.

Designed for readers throughout their scholarly journey, *Governing the Social* applies Foucault’s governmentality to interrogate and investigate how normalization, neoliberalism, and governmental power influence practices of subjectification in everyday life, shaping some of the most pressing issues of our time. While the book could have benefitted from a more nuanced, intersectional approach to unpacking neoliberal governmentality, *Governing the Social* provides a strong foundation in Foucault’s core ideas, concepts, and applications that may spur further critical analytical work and continue building the consciousness required to understand the consequences of power, privilege, and inspire everyday acts of resistance.

Divided into three sections, *Governing the Social* features a wide array of case studies which illustrate how specific practices of neoliberal governmentality have shaped the West over the last four decades. Part one “Governing Subjects, Communities and Cultures”, emphasizes the “everydayness of neoliberalism” (p. 35) as a transformative force, especially through the promotion of individual accomplishments. Part two “Governing Responsibility”, moves on to argue the importance of understanding how neoliberal logics insidiously infiltrate socially conscious movements and shape individuals’ good deeds, ultimately locating the risk of leaving governing logics unchallenged.

Finally, part three, “Governing (in)Security”, draws attention to how day-to-day practices of neoliberal governmentality can be powerful forces which shape nation building, belonging, and our expectations of self, fellow people, and government. While the choice to organize the book in three parts allows readers to view how neoliberal governance operates at different scales, it can create artificial separation between the governing of subjects,

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responsibility, and in(security). As an example, in chapter two, the authors unpack the use of “love” in the fight for equality rights for LGBTQ2S+ folks, while chapter twelve considers the regulation of gender and sexualities in the refugee process. Engaging with these chapters back-to-back may provide a deeper understanding of how neoliberal governmentality shapes subjecthood, and how subjecthood informs the governing of risk and insecurity in neoliberal states.

Theoretically rigorous, each chapter applies contemporary approaches to governmentality as an analytical framework, analyzing news stories, reports, and legal/policy documents to evidence the breadth of neoliberalism as a governing logic. The chapters in section one identify how the ‘new normal’ shaped by neoliberalism affects diverse peoples, communities, and cultures. Examples of neoliberal social formations within disabled and LGBTQ populations, racialized communities, and Indigenous Nations, expose the shifting nature of power, uncovering “organizing” alternative rationalities and practices of neoliberal governance. The chapters in section two unveil state strategies used to normalize particular standards and ideals which transform individuals to neoliberal subjects through the pursuit of self-improvement efforts and self-governance in order to achieve unrealistic standards of moral subjecthood.

This, along with the shift to individual responsibility for harmful conditions created by state and market driven decisions, and the fabrication of fear which informs risk management, surveillance and control, successfully demonstrate how individuals are forced to adapt to social and economic instability created from neoliberal conditions. Finally, each of the chapters in part three trace the complex and often contradictory politics of risk, security, and belonging and their construction as biopolitical problems under advanced neoliberalism, drawing a compelling picture of how state policies and practices around resiliency, truth-claims, and population movement govern the (in)security of populations.

While we thoroughly appreciated how the analysis was centred around guiding questions which invite readers to sharpen their awareness of how power flows in daily life, who benefits, and why, more synchronicity between the aim of each chapter, and how each chapter met the aims laid out in the introduction would have been helpful. As a group of scholars whose diverse backgrounds ground our scholarship and practice, we were not sure the book was “for us” as an audience. First, many chapters only hinted at how the diversity of structures within which we live - including colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, structural racism, ableism - interact with neoliberal governing logics which shape our day-to-day experiences as people.

As a result, we found ourselves asking if the use of governmentality *on its own* was the most useful framework for unpacking neoliberalism. Combining governmentality with more detailed intersectional analysis, might have provided a more nuanced understanding of the role of advanced liberalism in how we govern ourselves socially. Second, the introduction hinted at practical applications for resistance work and social change (p.15, 27) and on this metric we were left unsettled. We found that this was an important tension in the book, which led to unclear or unresolved notions of change, resistance, and strategies for change. While some chapters provided practical strategies for resisting neoliberalism as a governing force, other

chapters did not. While each case study thoughtfully sketched the path of neoliberal governmentality, we were often left asking “but what *do* we do?” During our initial read, this left us conflicted about the role of change and resistance in the book, which took focus away from the strong theoretical contributions woven throughout each chapter - which is where *Governing the Social* truly shines. Attending to resistance much the same as terms like “power” or “biopolitics” would have helped us widen or narrow our expectations of the practical application of this book as related to social change.

Ultimately, the authors promised a book which would “investigate specific practices of neoliberal governmentality so that we can make sense of the profound social, political, and economic changes that have occurred in the West” (p. 26). This book absolutely meets these aims, inviting the reader to consider new, unseen, concealed or subtle dimensions of neoliberal influence including their own biases and privileges. But, they also hinted at the expansive disciplinary scope of governmentality along with practical applications for resistance work and social change. This meant that we were (to some extent) expecting a different book, which more consistently incorporated the lived experiences of a multiplicity of scholars, practitioners, and everyday people. Regardless, we found that *Governing the Social in Neoliberal Times* was a strong and theoretically rigorous book, which provided us additional analytical tools and language to use in talking about neoliberalism. Equally useful for all learners interested in governmentality and neoliberalism, this book is a timely and valuable read during our current times of social crisis.