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On Nikolas Rose's *Governing the soul*

Governing the soul: the shaping of the private self (2nd edn), by Nikolas Rose, London, Free Association Books, 1999, 320 pp., £19.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-1853434440

Retro-reviewed by Bruce Scott, Ph.D.

Governing the Soul (1st edition 1989; 2nd edition revised 1999) is a book perhaps more relevant now in 2016, in our growing age of austerity and bureaucratization of mental distress, whoever wins the May 2015 UK general election,[1] than when it was first published. In 2016, the 'psy-world'[2] is faced with a seemingly impenetrable and insurmountable neoliberal territorial turf war, suffused with the false utopia of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), psychopharmacology and the desire for the perfect self. Rose highlights the ostensibly arbitrary and pseudo-scientific historical results of the dialectics of the past (and to come – today) of how our culture and society have been guided into a slavish adherence to a narrative that worships 'the self' based upon the dictates of psychological and applied human sciences. This narrative, as Rose horrifyingly shows us, did not arise out of a benign, genuine, ethical and inclusive dialectic (i.e. by excluding other ways of conceptualizing mental distress and the 'self'), but rather from the effects (sometimes intended, sometimes accidental) of subtle political and social engineering which manipulated the diverse individual psyche into the conceptualization of a universal psyche, which has seeped into the fabric of our political, social and educational institutions, as well as our individual consciousness.

The book is divided into four parts: 1) People at war; 2) The productive subject (i.e. work/labour); 3) The child, the family and the outside world (e.g. social work); and 4) Managing our selves. This illustrates how and why the 'self' has been subtly coerced into an adherence to technologies of the 'self'[3] via the effects/results of political and social dialectics within the human sciences and human management concerning the areas of war, work, child/family and the subsequent emergent 'self' we have today. These technologies of the 'self', however politically motivated and brutally coercive and exploitative in their early stages of historical development (and highly questionable on philosophical grounds), have mutated into a discourse where freedom and choice have become synonymous with such technologies.

In the introduction, Rose sternly warns:

> Human technologies involve the calculated organization of human forces and capacities … Relations of hierarchy, from age to educational qualifications and accreditation, locate individuals in chains of allegiance and dependency, empowering some to direct

others and obliging others to comply … Mechanisms of reformation and therapy provide the means whereby self-regulatory techniques may be reshaped according to the principles of psychological theory. As networks form, as relays, translations and connections couple political aspirations with modes of action upon persons, technologies of subjectivity are established that enable strategies of power to infiltrate the interstices of the human soul. (*GtS*, p. 8)

This warning, it seems, goes unheeded within the psy-world;[4] cut to present day psy-politics, with the worship at the altar of CBT, cosmetic psychopharmacology, invented diagnoses courtesy of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), and calls for enhanced regulation of the psy-world. Such ventures ignore the double-edged sword of technology; technological applications in the human sphere negate and split off aspects of subjectivity, human life and nature, and their recuperation is wholly neglected. But of course, as many authors attest to, such thoughtless application of technology comes back to haunt us (e.g. Berardi, 2015; Fischer, 2009).

Such thoughtlessness and misguided planned application of technologies on to the human sphere is discussed in the first part of Rose's book, 'People at war'. As a result of scientific exploration into human subjectivities during the First and Second World Wars, the treatment and cure of human psychological fragilities became less medicalized, so to speak, and more like a movement of mental hygiene which resembled a technological management of human life. As Rose argues:

In the years following the end of the war … not only could mental capacities be aligned with institutional roles, but it appeared that organizational pathology could be prevented and efficiency could be promoted by acting upon the psychological relations that traversed organizational life. Solidarity and morale could be produced by administrative means … experts of subjectivity and intersubjectivity would seek to stake their claim in all institutions of society. (*GtS*, p. 62)

And stake their claim they have. The application of human technologies, starting from a caring and curing position (i.e. purely therapeutic), has melded into a concern for workers' satisfaction with the aim of placing greater importance upon incorporating labour efficiency and profit. As Rose writes:

Adjustment … required the successful resolution of conflicting instinctual forces and their harnessing to the particular requirements of social and industrial life. And the corollary was that social and industrial inefficiency were the outcome of failures of adjustment of the internal life of the individual to the external reality in which he or she lived and worked – in short, they were the outcome of maladjustment. (*GtS*, p. 62)

And

The question of industrial efficiency was, at root, one of mental hygiene – the diagnosis and treatment of the minor mental troubles of the manager or the worker before they produced major and disabling problems; the promotion of correct habits in light of a knowledge of the nature of mental life; the organization of the factory itself so as to minimize the production of symptoms of emotional and mental instability and enhance adjustment. (*GtS*, p. 69)

Such human technological devices, developed and used through the ravages of wartime and post-war tactics for the efficiency and productivity of labour, metamorphosed into:

> … a set of techniques simultaneously based upon an esoteric scientific knowledge they possess, realized through detailed technical prescriptions and devices they can construct and operate, and consonant with national economic health, increased organizational effectiveness, and progressive humanistic values. (*GtS*, p. 119)

The scene was (and now is), therefore, well and truly set: the application of technologies of the self into the realms of the child, family and ultimately what so-called liberated self-advanced Western neoliberal capitalist societies have conceptualized as optimal self-management and enhancement, that we have come to love and cherish. Along with the application of technologies of the self being developed and utilized during the war/post-war period and applied to labour in the workplace:

> Throughout the nineteenth century … [*and early 21st century*] anxieties concerning children have occasioned a panoply of programmes that have tried to conserve and shape children by moulding the petty details of the domestic, conjugal, and sexual lives of their parents.

> Along this maze of pathways, the child – as an idea and a target – has become inextricably connected to the aspirations of the authorities. (*GtS*, p. 123; my addition and emphasis)

In Chapter 12, 'The gaze of the psychologist', Rose wonderfully describes how a new way of conceptualizing childhood and the family (e.g. IQ testing, psychological theories of child development, parenting styles, norms, marriage guidance, social work and so forth) gave rise to a conceptualization of how and why a 'normative expertise of childhood, family life and subjectivity could be governed in a new way' (*GtS*, p. 119) These methods had not only a humanitarian effect (e.g. helping troubled children and families) but also an economic one, by identifying childhood deficiency and deviancy and aiding and abetting the security of family life which fed back into the very fabric of economic and political life; controlling citizens from the cradle, through the family, leading to efficiency and productivity at an industrial level, i.e. labour.

However authoritarian and dictatorial these historical developments seem, Rose outlines in the fourth and final part of the book, 'Managing ourselves', how the psychotherapeutic and humanistic discourses, as well as a discourse legitimizing and encouraging a liberation of the self (e.g. we can be the self we want to be), have slowly and steadily been inculcated into the fabric of the child, the family and the very core of subjectivity. The technologies of the self, their practitioners and advocates, far from being dictatorial and authoritarian, address themselves to the citizen as helpers and experts in daily life problems. A culture has developed whereby we are no longer the oppressed and abused alienated labour of Marxian lore, but citizens who have the means and tools at his or her disposal to help gain the success of the self that is promised (and desired) in a neoliberal capitalist culture. As Rose eloquently writes:

> If the new techniques for the care of the self are subjectifying, it is not because experts have colluded in the globalization of political power, seeking to dominate and subjugate the autonomy of the self through the bureaucratic management of life itself. Rather, it is that modern selves have become attached to a project of freedom, have come to live in terms of identity, and to search for the means to enhance that autonomy through the application of expertise. In this matrix of power and knowledge the modern self has been born; to grasp its workings is to go some way towards understanding the sort of human beings we are. (*GtS*, p. 262)

To my mind such a situation, a politics of the self, the therapeutization the self, 'demanding recompense, of making amends, of holding to account' (*GtS*, p. 119), favours what Nietzsche feared and prophesied; our reliance on the religion of comfortableness (Nietzsche, 1974, pp. 269–270). This is where another ethics of the self could emerge or be suppressed (contra a neoliberal capitalist self), which can conceptualize the self, subjectivity, mental distress and what is normal or abnormal in a different and more fundamental and radical way. Such an ethics deconstructs the so-called modern liberties the self has been gifted, challenges and questions the reasons why we see ourselves in a certain light and how we view subjective suffering or mental distress. Rose alludes to this, but does not go far enough in his questioning and challenging of the neoliberal status quo. In the final few lines of his 'Afterword' he writes:

> Could one not imagine another kind of freedom, whose ethics were resolutely 'superficial'? An ethics whose vectors did not run from outer to inner, and did not question appearances in the name of their hidden truth, but which ran across the outsides, between, among persons, where subjectivities were distributed, collective and orientated to action? An ethic, that is to say, that did not seek to problematize, to celebrate or to govern the soul. (*GtS*, p. 272)

Indeed, one can imagine another type of freedom and ethics. There are thousands of years of philosophy, the arts, music, literature and a whole host of radical psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic thinking which oppose or deconstruct the neoliberal fetish for sanitized well-being. Unfortunately, the majority of our psychologized and political culture ignores, dismisses or is ignorant of such thought. Rose does seem to dismiss (or at least omit) a radical psychotherapeutic or psychoanalytic reading of the neoliberal malaise and its reliance upon Nietzsche's nightmare of the religion of comfortableness. However, his book does open up the historical antecedents, and presents the effects of a sometimes arbitrary, sometimes Machiavellian Hegelian dialectic that has run for over 100 years, that has cornered the domain where our subjectivities are supposed to lie. Reading his book, while keeping in mind recent historical developments in the psy-field (e.g. evidence-based medicine in the talking therapies, Improving Access to Psychological Therapies [IAPT], CBT, Health and Care Professions Council [HCPC] and Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care [PSA] regulation)[5] encourages a critical questioning of these developments. These are not, by any account, benign developments liberating us from our psychological hells. They should not be treated lightly or evade critique. Rose's book begs us to ask the question: who has the right, and by what means, to govern the self? This is a subversive question, which it seems the architects of the technologies of the self and their associated industries (and recipients – or victims?) would perhaps rather dismiss and forget.

Some books age badly; their authors lack a sense of historical imperatives, they do not have the insight into potential events that will come and/or they are unlucky enough to be usurped by the surprising result of an accidental dialectic that becomes history. Some books get better with age; their authors have their fingers on the pulse, they have luck on their side, but they have an uncanny insight into the future which becomes hauntingly evident the more the book ages. Nikolas Rose's book *Governing the Soul* is one such book of the latter description and it should have a second subtitle: 'I told you so!'.

Notes

1. This review was written approximately one month before the UK general election of May 2015.
2. The term 'psy-world' refers loosely to professions, institutions and cultures that rely upon psychological/psychiatric science and/or psychotherapeutic theories of human behaviour and thought.
3. 'Technologies of the self' involve the psychological/scientific theories of human mental and behavioural functioning and how to control and predict these. They cover the psychology of personality, motivation, aptitudes, IQ, abnormality, normality, mental hygiene and so forth.
4. The prefix 'psy' is indicative of the psychological, psychiatric and psychotherapeutic professions/institutions.
5. The HCPC is a statutory regulator of psychologists and arts therapists; the PSA, or Professional Standards Authority, operates voluntary registers for talking therapists (e.g. UKCP, BACP etc.).

Notes on contributor

Dr Bruce Scott originally trained as an experimental psychologist. His Ph.D. thesis was on the cognitive model of depression and the cognitive effects of SSRIs. He then trained as a psychoanalyst with the Philadelphia Association, London. He is author of *The Testimony of Experience: The Docta Ignorantia and the Philadelphia Association Communities* (PCCS, 2014). He lives in the Scottish Borders with his wife and children.

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