Self & Society, 2016
Vol. 44, No. 4, 431–433, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2015.1053219

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Governing the Soul – a quarter of a century on

Commentary by Nikolas Rose

The studies that make up *Governing the Soul* were written in the 1980s, over a quarter of a century ago. I am grateful, therefore, to Bruce Scott for his judgement of their continuing relevance and his thoughtful analysis of the argument they make. The book was intended as a companion volume to *The Psychological Complex*, which was published by Routledge and Kegan Paul in 1985 and which sought to examine the connections between the socio-political transformation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the formation of psychology as a mode of expertise for the management of human individuals. How had a 'science of the individual' become possible; and what were the connections between the knowledges and techniques of individualization invented in the name of psychology and the practices for the administration of individuals that had taken shape in hospitals, schools, prisons, factories and elsewhere over this period? The book argued that far from the discipline of psychology being born in the tranquillity of the academy, and having the good fortune to be relevant to the needs of those who would govern human conduct, the reverse was closer to the case: the conditions for the formation of psychology as a discipline were established in these practical settings, and psychology's conception of normality grew out of its role in practices for the identification and normalization of troublesome individuals. Normality, for the psychology of the individual, was thus essentially tied to practices of normalization (adapting a phrase Georges Canguilhem liked to quote: while health – for medicine – was life in the silence of the organs, normality – for psychology – was life in the silence of the authorities).

My book *Governing the Soul* was intended to supplement *The Psychological Complex* – to extend the analysis to the world of war, work and the family, but, more fundamentally, to contest the idea that humanistic and psychodynamic psychologies were a radical counterweight to the normalizing practices of the psychology of individual differences. Like *The Psychological Complex*, it was intended less as 'critique' than as a critical analysis of how we had become the kinds of people we took ourselves to be in our present, and the role played by the positive sciences of psy in that process. In particular I wanted to explore the ways in which the dynamic psychologies and psychotherapies, with their promises of reshaping subjectivity, had transposed the questions of what it was to live a good life from the domain of ethics to that of psychology. As I put it then, the self that was liberated by the celebration of the psychological norms of autonomy and self-realization was obliged to live its life tied to the project of its own identity.

Both these books fell on stony ground at the time of their publication. *The Psychological Complex* sold very few copies before it was remaindered and pulped. A few years later I bought back the rights for a few pounds and recently a generous enthusiast for the book kindly digitized it for me, and it can now be downloaded for free from my website. The same silence greeted the publication of *Governing the Soul*, and it was only rescued from oblivion because my editor at Routledge, who had an inexplicable fondness for the book, took it with him when he moved to Free Association Books, who then published the second edition.

The books perplexed the few who read them at the time – not quite history, not quite sociology, not quite social psychology – although the latter was where they were shelved when they made their rare appearances in bookshops. Perhaps this was not surprising: partly at the behest of the publishers, I decided to strip the books of any conceptual or methodological discussion. As is now evident to anyone who reads them, the books were conceived as 'histories of the present' in the mode of those produced by Michel Foucault; they deliberately eschewed the fashion for commentary on his work in favour of actually attempting to carry out the kind of fieldwork in philosophy – the studies of our present and ourselves in that present – that Foucault sought to inspire. To that extent, their closest analogue was Jacques Donzelot's *Policing of Families* published in 1979, and the subject of a very detailed critical exposition by Jill Hodges and Athar Hussain (1979) in the journal *Ideology and Consciousness* that I had founded with a few like-minded friends. Indeed, the very notion of a 'psy complex' came initially from Donzelot.

I later tried to rectify the absence of conceptual guidelines, adding a short 'methodological' preface to the second edition of *Governing the Soul*, and publishing a set of essays in 1996 under the title *Inventing Ourselves*. This latter book was a rather anomalous member of the Cambridge Studies in the History of Psychology, a series edited by a superb historical scholar, Mitchel Ash. I had also hoped to underpin these essays with a large historical volume on *The Birth of the Self*, comprised of many extracts from original texts accompanied by critical genealogical commentary, but the challenge of obtaining the dozens of permissions required to publish the extracts – which varied from a couple of sentences to a few paragraphs in length – proved too much for my publishers. Nonetheless, from another perspective, *Governing the Soul* was the first of a series of studies in what became known as 'governmentality' that I and others pursued over the 1990s, and that I later gathered together in *Powers of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). These studies aimed to reframe political thought around the analysis of rationalities and technologies for the 'conduct of conduct', and emphasized the constitutive role of a multiplicity of 'non-state' authorities – including the knowledges and technologies of the psy sciences and the other social and human sciences – in governing human beings.

I did complete one further set of studies specifically focused on the birth of psychological modernity in my work on the history of the Tavistock Clinic and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, which I undertook with Peter Miller. Sadly, the book that we had planned – *The Tavistock Effect* – was never completed, but a number of those studies are now gathered together in *Governing the Present* (Polity Press, 2008). And in 2013, with my co-researcher Joelle Abi-Rached, I published *Neuro: The New Brain Sciences and the Management of the Mind* (Princeton University Press, 2013),[1] which explored the hypothesis that the psychological

complex of my earlier analysis was giving way to a 'neurobiological complex', and the deep psychological space that had opened up in the interior of the human being across the twentieth century – the space charted by the psy sciences – was now closing down, as mental disorders are rebranded as brain disorders, and cognition, emotion and volition are mapped directly onto the brain.

It is too early to tell whether the neurosciences will produce such a fundamental reshaping of our sense of ourselves as that associated with the rise of the psy sciences across the twentieth century, or lead to the emergence of a new and powerful array of engineers of the human soul. In any event, I hope that a new generation of scholars will turn their attention to these developments, and examine critically the peculiar combination of emancipation and obligation that they entail. If they do, I hope that the ethos that inspired *Governing the Soul* and these other volumes might provide some guidelines as to how such an investigation might proceed. I thank Bruce Scott for his careful attention to that dusty text, and I hope that he is right that my attempts at history of the present can indeed also serve as cartographies of potential futures: not to predict or close down the future, but to make it more intelligible, and hence more amenable to transformation by our own actions.

Note

1. This book was reviewed in *Self & Society*, *40*(4), 2013, pp. 73–74.

Notes on contributor

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