The Governmentality of School Autonomy and Self-Management: A Foucauldian Analysis

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School of Education
Declaration by the author

“I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by any other person except where due reference is made in the text.”

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Abstract

Over the past four decades in Australia, many politicians, policy-makers, experts and social commentators have sought to increase the organisational autonomy of public schools and their principals. This trend of shifting the locus of educational decision-making and management away from bureaucratic centres to individual schools and parents continues, with the Western Australian state government recently introducing the Independent Public Schools policy. This policy devolves an increased range of organisational and curriculum responsibilities from the state education bureaucracy to selected public schools. This thesis examines what appears to be the enduring trend towards school autonomy and self-management.

The perspective of this thesis is informed by the theoretical, analytical and historical insights of Foucauldian studies of government, or governmentality. Foucault’s studies have increasingly influenced sociological and historical studies in education. His notions of power and discipline have been elaborated and applied in the study of the micro power relations of schooling. Unfortunately, while the study of schooling as a technology for disciplining the individual’s mind and body has received most attention, Foucault’s studies in government have been less widely understood, elaborated and used. This thesis explores Foucault’s genealogy of the formation of the modern liberal state (and governmentality) and the
rich and subtle insights it provides into the complex relationship between the state, politics, society and the government of education.

I explore Foucauldian studies in government with the aim of teasing out their implication for our understanding of the relationship between self-managing school reforms and the state, politics and government. In particular, I argue that the trend in public schools towards school autonomy and self-management cannot be adequately understood without understanding the inherent dilemma embedded within the discourses of politics and government of modern liberal democracies. This problem can be described as an agonistic tension in liberal governmentality between political and governmental authorities enabling individual and economic freedom, whilst needing to secure the state and the welfare of its constituent elements under the condition of freedom.

This tension fuelled a ‘crisis of liberalism’ or a ‘crisis of liberal governmentality’ in the late twentieth century. This crisis involved vociferous critiques of the welfare state in conjunction with a cultural renewal of the discourses of individual freedom, emancipation, liberation and empowerment. According to Foucault, central to this crisis was concern about the costs of the perceived growth of excessive government of the post World War Two era, measured both economically and in terms of personal and political freedom. This thesis puts the case that the emergence of ‘self-managing school reforms’ is linked to this ‘crisis of liberalism’. The self-managing school constitutes both an instrument and object of
government, re-regulating the domain of education according to an ethos of individual empowerment, activity, enterprise, autonomy and responsibility.

To illustrate some of the consequences of these reforms, two case studies are examined. The first explores the emergence at a national level of the devolution of responsibilities and authority to schools, particularly canvassed in the *Schools In Australia* report (1973) and by the Commonwealth Schools Commission (1973-1988). The second case study examines the use of self-management techniques and practices in schools. These reforms have sought to strengthen the capacity of those within schools to manage themselves and their schools as competitive enterprises with diminished reliance on central education bureaucracies. I argue that this development, like the case of devolution, is linked to the new ways of rationalising and enacting the care and government of the population and the state emerging from the crisis of liberalism. I conclude with a discussion of the implication of this trend towards self-management, specifically in terms of what is at stake for the liberal state from a mode of government that seeks to govern for its citizens’ freedom and also, often antagonistically, for the state’s security.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... xii  

Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 1  
  A Foucauldian approach to studying self-management ................................................. 4  
  Governmentality ............................................................................................................ 8  
  Thesis overview ............................................................................................................ 10  
  Thesis structure ............................................................................................................. 13  

PART I: SELF-MANAGING REFORMS .................................................................. 15  

Chapter 1: The Self-Managing School ........................................................................ 17  
  Introduction .................................................................................................................. 17  
  The self-managing school ............................................................................................ 18  
    The ‘self’ in self-management .................................................................................. 20  
    The ‘management’ in self-management .................................................................. 22  
    Caveat ....................................................................................................................... 23  
  The self-managing school as a technical assemblage ................................................. 24  
  The self-managing school as a political-technical assemblage .................................. 28  
    The politics of school self-management .................................................................. 34  
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 39  

Chapter 2: The Political Dimension of Self-Management ........................................ 42  
  Introduction .................................................................................................................. 42  
  Freedom from the state ............................................................................................... 43  
    Freedom and self-managing reform ....................................................................... 47  
    Freeing the liberal subject? ..................................................................................... 50  
  Is empowerment ‘de-governmentalisation’? ............................................................... 55  
  The crisis of legitimacy ............................................................................................... 60  
    A welcomed or regrettable reform? ....................................................................... 63  
    Distinguishing between sovereign power and governmental power .................... 66  
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 71  

Chapter 3: History, Theory and Method .................................................................. 73  
  Introduction .................................................................................................................. 73  
  Rethinking the state and government ...................................................................... 74  
  A transformation in the modalities of rule .................................................................. 77  
    The state and techniques and practices of government ............................................ 77  
    Rationalities of government .................................................................................... 80  
    Political discourse ................................................................................................. 83  
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 87  

PART II: THE FORMATION OF THE LIBERAL STATE AND ITS CRISIS ............. 90  

Chapter 4: The Roots of the Pastoral State .............................................................. 99  
  Introduction .................................................................................................................. 99
The shepherd-flock and city-citizen games................................. 100
Reason of state........................................................................ 104
Police..................................................................................... 111
Political rationality.................................................................. 118
  The state as pastoral power..................................................... 120
Conclusion.............................................................................. 122

Chapter 5: Liberal Governmental Rationality and its Dilemma ...... 123
Introduction.............................................................................. 123
Liberalism.................................................................................. 124
  The economy ...................................................................... 125
  The population .................................................................. 131
Civil society ............................................................................ 135
  The governmental rationality of liberalism ......................... 137
An internal dilemma for liberalism....................................... 143
Conclusion.............................................................................. 148

Chapter 6: The Crisis of Liberalism: From Welfare to Advanced
Liberalism ............................................................................... 150
Introduction.............................................................................. 150
Liberalism and the welfare state............................................. 151
  The emergence of social government .................................. 154
  The governmental rationality of social liberalism .............. 159
  Troubling trends of the social state.................................... 163
Reactions to the welfare state and social government.......... 166
  German neo-liberalism and the market............................... 167
  German neo-liberalism and competition............................ 171
  American neo-liberalism and entrepreneurship .................. 174
  The dilemma of freedom and security............................... 177
Advanced Liberalism................................................................. 182
Conclusion.............................................................................. 186

PART III : PROGRAMS OF FREEDOM: EMPOWERMENT &
ENTREPRENEURIAL MANAGEMENT........................................ 188
Introduction.............................................................................. 190
Analysing the link between government and self-managing reforms.... 193
  Problematisations and government.................................... 194

Chapter 7: Governing the Family-Education Nexus Through
Empowerment.......................................................................... 199
Introduction.............................................................................. 199
Sketching the persistent problem of the family and parenting..... 200
  Schooling and the family...................................................... 202
  Strengthening the home-school link:................................... 206
  disadvantage, compensation and socialisation.................... 206
Governing through empowerment......................................... 210
  An advanced liberal orientation to governing...................... 215
Liberating parents from bureaucracy..................................... 219
  Government or freedom?.................................................... 223
Liberating teachers from bureaucracy.................................... 225
Capitalising the self............................................................... 230
Conclusion.............................................................................. 236
Chapter 8: Analysing Entrepreneurial Self-Management .............. 238
Introduction........................................................................... 238
Representations of management............................................... 240
  Critical Analysis: Instrumentalism ......................................... 242
  Instrumental rationality versus multiple rationalities ............... 246
  The unified versus the decentred self .................................... 251
Two principles for the analysis of management as a liberal technology of government ................................................. 254
  Managing through freedom .................................................. 255
  A rational and independent expertise ..................................... 257
Conclusion............................................................................. 260

Chapter 9: Entrepreneurial Self-Management......................... 262
Introduction......................................................................... 262
The problem with schools ...................................................... 264
  Teachers and the discourses of derision .................................. 264
  Outcomes and the organisation of schools .............................. 267
The entrepreneurial, self-managing school ............................. 270
  Objective-setting in the self-managing school ......................... 272
  The corporate plan in the self-managing school ....................... 273
The principal as an entrepreneurial manager ......................... 276
  Freeing the manager? .......................................................... 279
Entrepreneurial management and the crisis of liberalism .......... 280
Performance calculations ..................................................... 282
  The authority of numbers .................................................... 286
  Testing and statistics in school self-management ...................... 289
  Data and the market ........................................................... 292
Conclusion............................................................................. 294

Conclusion............................................................................. 297
Self-managing reforms ......................................................... 299
A transformation in the rationalities and modalities of government .... 300
School reform and transformations of the rationalities and technologies of government ........................................... 303
Freedom, autonomy and government ..................................... 306
Concluding thoughts ............................................................ 309

APPENDIX (A) .................................................................. 316
Self-management from an official perspective ......................... 316
REFERENCES .................................................................. 319
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Introduction

In Western Australia, where this thesis was written, the state government recently invited state schools to apply for what it terms Independent Public School status (Department of Education 2010c). Independent public school status accords school leaders and teachers greater decision-making autonomy and flexibility than those schools managed by the ‘one size fits all’ approach of the central bureaucracy (Department of Education 2010a). The Department’s information material lists twenty-five ‘flexibilities’ that Independent Public Schools are accorded, including the recruitment of staff, the use of resources, the design and use of curriculum, and responsiveness to their communities and other demands and opportunities (Department of Education 2010bb). Principals and school communities have eagerly taken up this invitation to ‘unlock their school’s future’ (Strauss 2010).

While the Director-General of Education touts the Independent Public School (IPS) policy as a new initiative, the IPS policy’s discourse of school autonomy and independence is located within a policy trajectory of devolution, school autonomy and self-management that has marked the
discourses of education management since at least the 1970s. In Australia, a policy of devolving decision-making responsibilities from bureaucratic centres to the school level was first canvassed in the early 1970s (Karmel 1973) and since this time a plethora of official government reports has sought to shift the locus of educational decision-making away from bureaucratic centres to individual schools (Beazley et al. 1984; Black 1993; Directorate of School Education 1994; Hoffman 1994; McCarrey 1993; Ministry of Education 1987).

Former Western Australian Minister for Education, Bob Pearce, described the nature of this shift in an interesting way. He described it as an inversion in how education systems were being thought about and governed (Pearce 1987). He observed that for most of the twentieth century public education was organised around centralised education bureaucracies. Individual schools belonged to an educational system and it was the educational system and decisions related to it that determined a school’s activities. The quality of individual schools was perceived to be a product of fostering the effectiveness, excellence and efficiency of the whole education system. Pearce reasoned that during the 1980s this rationality had been inverted. The individual public school was perceived to be the key organisational unit of education systems and it was the effectiveness and excellence of individual schools that determined the excellence and effectiveness of education systems.

These developments were described in the late 1980s by Caldwell and Spinks (1988; 1992) in terms of the emergence of the ‘self-managing school’, something resembling the Independent Public School. The self-
managing school designates a model of school that under the condition of decentralisation assumes a range of responsibilities for the day-to-day management of schools. While central education bureaucracies maintain strategic and legal functions, the rationalities, techniques and practices of management expertise are employed in the pursuit of the management of schools as relatively autonomous organisations. This includes assuming the responsibilities of managing school budgets and staff recruitment, creating school policies and development plans, implementing performance management regimes, and building school cultures (Beare et al. 1989; Brennan 2009; Caldwell and Spinks 1988; Caldwell and Spinks 1992; Harman et al. 1991). Considering these past developments, today’s Independent Public School initiative appears to be linked to a continuing reform to the organisation of schools and their relationship to the education system. The central concern of this thesis is this ongoing reform towards achieving school autonomy and self-management (as witnessed by the IPS initiative), and its continued relevance to political and educational decision-making. This concern can be posed as four broad questions about self-managing school reform: (1) How should it be understood? (2) What are the conditions of possibility for its existence? (3) What is its significance to contemporary politics and government? (4) What might an analysis of its relationship to politics and government tell us about contemporary reforms like the IPS initiative?
A Foucauldian approach to studying self-management

A number of perspectives on self-managing reforms can be discerned from the literature. One explanation for ‘self-managing reforms’ is that these merely signal education systems being dragged into the twenty-first century. For too long, it is said, education systems have been organised archaically (Beare et al. 1989; Caldwell and Spinks 1988). In this reasoning, the creation of self-managing schools is a reasonable solution to the putative endemic inefficiency and dysfunction of antiquated public bureaucracies and bureaucratic modes of governance. Contemporary economic, management and organisational research points to a de-bureaucratised and devolved mode of governance as a form of organisation that is superior to centralised bureaucratic management (Bennis 1975; Buchanan and Wagner 1977; Du Gay and Hall 1996; Osborne and Gaebler 1993; Peters and Waterman 1982). Here, self-management is construed as largely an organisational reform made possible by the advancement of technical knowledges of organisations and human beings.

Another explanation for school autonomy and self-management is that it reflects a social, political and cultural movement towards freedom and empowerment. On one side of this argument are those who criticise the welfare state and its supposed trampling of individual freedom and choice through its excessive regulation (Howard 2005; Kemp 1997). For these liberals and neo-liberals, the policy of school self-management represents a welcomed demise of the power of government bureaucracies and the vested
interests ensconced within them, and the restoration of individual and community power. On the other side of this explanation in terms of freedom and empowerment are social progressives who, although sceptical about liberalism’s valuing of markets and choice, nevertheless construe school self-management as empowering for schools, teachers and communities (Dudley and Vidovich 1995; Rizvi 1994). An essential element of self-management, so the argument goes, is its capacity to empower individuals from the unnecessary constraints imposed on self-determination by bureaucracy and the state.

Related to the social progressive’s perspective is another explanation for the emergence of self-management that comes from a critical theoretical trajectory. Often advanced by critical sociologists, it is argued that self-management is the regrettable scion of the political programme of the New Right and neoliberal ideologues (Gewirtz 2002; Whitty et al. 1998). This analysis locates the emergence of self-management in a crisis and restructure of the welfare state in the 1970s and 1980s, and it seeks to uncover the veil of obfuscation that supposedly hides the political ideologies and economic interests self-management serves (Ball 1990a; Gewirtz 2002; Smyth 1993). Of particular importance to this mode of analysis is how self-management addresses the state’s need to secure the control, consent and obedience of the population in order to secure its own legitimacy.

While I do not reject these popular perspectives in toto, my approach to self-managing reform is somewhat different.
Unlike the above ‘technical’ explanation, this thesis does not regard self-managing reforms as merely ‘organisational reform’ because to do so circumscribes the field of analysis to the domain of ‘organisations’ and to questions of structure and function. Firstly, it is not clear that decentralisation and self-management actually produces the benefits its advocates claim, with many studies finding little or no detrimental impact on academic outcomes caused by school self-management policies (Grissmer et al. 2000; Levacic and Hardman 1999; Malen et al. 1990; Walberg et al. 2000). Secondly, this perspective fails to engage analytically with the link between the discourses of politics and government and the production and enactment of organisational reform (Angus 1994; Miller and O'Leary 1989; Miller and Rose 1995; Rose 1999a; Smyth 1993). This thesis construes self-managing reforms to be governmental.

My concern for ‘government’, however, needs to be distinguished from the social progressive and neo-liberal perspectives that equate self-managing reforms with the functions of freedom and empowerment. This perspective glosses over how freedom and empowerment are deployed within the objectives and practices of government. So enamoured by the normative ideal of individual autonomy and self-governance, the idealisation of freedom and empowerment comes at the expense of properly understanding the governmental conditions of individual self-governance. Alternatively, I do not regard government as a coercive instrument for securing control and the legitimacy of the state and capital. This perspective is fraught with a limitation. It adopts the posture of what Rose (1999a) terms socio-critique, whereby political authorities and government
are construed as principally concerned with the functions of control, capital accumulation and legitimacy. Socio-critique too narrowly understands self-management as serving the interests of the state and capital by oppressing autonomy, instrumentalising consciousness and conduct, and obfuscating reality and the exercise of power.

I attempt to overcome what I perceive to be the above analytical pitfalls in the analysis of self-managing reforms by drawing upon Foucauldian studies of government (Barry et al. 1996b; Burchell et al. 1991; Dean and Hindess 1998; Foucault 2007; Foucault 2008; Marston and McDonald 2006; Meredyth and Tyler 1993). The insights and concepts of these studies open up a field of analysis beyond the conception of government as reducible to the activities of a sovereign power seeking legitimacy and control.

While Foucault and his studies have increasingly influenced sociological studies in education, particularly around his notions of power and discipline, Foucault’s studies of government have been less widely elaborated and used. To address this gap, I want to explore aspects of Foucault’s studies in government so as to illustrate and justify their relevance and significance to the study of education and contemporary education reform. Broadly, I use this exploration as a basis for examining how the self-managing school developed from emerging ways of rationalising the problems of government and the government of the state, and how the resulting self-managing school constitutes both an instrument and object of government that re-regulates the domain of education.
The approach I take in this thesis is to explore the relationship between self-managing school reforms and how we think about and enact government. I pursue this exploration using the theoretical and historical insights of Michel Foucault’s studies of power and government (Foucault 1988a; Foucault 2007; Foucault 2008), as well as Foucauldian scholars that have pursued historical and theoretical investigations using the insights of Foucault (Barry et al. 1996b; Burchell et al. 1991). Specifically, I draw upon the family of studies termed ‘studies in governmentality’, ‘governmentality studies’, or ‘Foucauldian studies in government’, and the important elaboration of and research on governmentality conducted in particular by Nikolas Rose (1999b) and Mitchell Dean (1999). Although this thesis does not apply some kind of ideal-type conceptual ‘framework’ derived from governmentality studies to the study of education reform, there are key elements and insights from ‘governmentality studies’ that I use.

Foucauldian studies of government illuminate the connections between how the problems and objectives of the state are rationalised by political authorities, and the knowledge, technologies and practices used in the cultivation of individuals as citizen-subjects. For example, as with governmentality studies I too am concerned with those “practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups” (Dean 1999, 12). Such studies explore how political discourses are translated into the
everyday lives of citizens, and how regulatory knowledges, techniques and practices structure the individual’s field of possible thought and action, instrumentalising people’s freedom and autonomy. Hence, these studies are very much concerned with how freedom and autonomy are conditions for the exercise of power in the modern liberal state.

Employing this broad conceptual orientation, what Dean terms an ‘analytics of government’ (Dean 1999), this study researches a range of everyday, political, expert, social and cultural texts and practices that constitute the truths and knowledge of the present (Popkewitz et al. 2001). This examination of texts, knowledge and techniques is the basis for exploring the relationship between the self-managing reform of schools and transformations in how political authorities and others rationalise the government of the state. Specifically, it links the techniques, practices and objectives of school autonomy and self-management with the emergence of new ways of thinking about the objects of government, the problems that government should be directed to, to what ends government should be directed, and through what means government should occur.

Therefore, the methodological approach of this thesis is distinct from methods that analyse self-management in terms of freedom, or as a technical development for maximising the functioning of the educational organisation. My approach is also distinct from socio-critique because it does not analyse self-management in terms of how it seeks to control and oppress individuals to pre-determined and often obfuscated interests and ends. Instead, I attempt to set out a way of analysing education reform that is distinct from these approaches. The analytics of government I adopt here
explores the link between self-managing school reforms, as the regulatory techniques and practices of government occurring at local sites, and the problematisation and rationalisation of the government of the state and its population. In other words, education and social policy is not construed as simply a system for state control, but sets of knowledge and practices that “produce and promote certain means and ends” (Marston and McDonald 2006, 7).

**Thesis overview**

This thesis puts the case that self-managing reforms can be understood in relation to transformations in how political authorities think about the population and society, the human being, the problems that beset individuals, and the resulting ways of acting upon and intervening in matters of life and state. By this I do not mean that self-managing reforms are self-evident solutions to the problems of governing presented by brute reality, for example, self-management as an inevitable response to the inexorable globalisation of capital and culture. Rather, my proposition is that problems related to schooling and its organisation emerge from problematisations occasioned by certain ways of reasoning related to governing individuals, national populations and problems related to the state. Specifically, I examine the link between school self-management and the emergence in the late twentieth century of a discourse of enterprise and autonomy in the rationalities of government.
But these transformations in the rationalities and modalities of government are not merely the product of changes occurring at the end of the twentieth century. I argue that this contemporary transformation in governmental rationalities and technologies, what Foucault (2008) terms the ‘crisis of liberalism’ (2008, 69), evokes an enduring dilemma at the core of liberal government and today’s welfare state. This dilemma is a product of the historical development of the liberal state and it refers to contestations around how governmental power is rationalised and exercised. Specifically, for liberal government, this crisis revolves around a tension between the state’s pastoral role, or its care for the welfare of individuals, and the fact that how individuals are cared for (their individualisation) is inseparable from how the state’s existence, government, wellbeing, productivity and security is reasoned (totalisation) (Dean 1994; Dean 1999; Foucault 1988a).

This coincidence of totalisation and individualisation manifests a tension at the heart of liberalism. This is a tension between the development of an extensive normalising apparatus of administration that has occurred in the name of care and welfare, and the ambition of producing freedom for individuals, the economy and civil society as a condition for the liberal state’s security. This thesis argues that the critique of the welfare state in the 1970s and the consequent emergence of advanced liberal rationalities and modalities of rule, including self-managing school reforms, can be interpreted as a product of this inherent tension in liberal rule. In short, it manifests a critique and scrutiny over the welfare state’s crossing of the threshold between freedom and ‘unfreedom’.
I then examine how self-managing reforms in education insert into the domains of the family and school an advanced liberal rationality of government, as it seeks to establish increased choice, autonomy, self-governance and empowerment from the state and bureaucratic control. In relation to the domain of the family, self-managing reforms and the diminution of central bureaucratic control have reconstituted the relationship between the family and schools. Parents are seen to be key to the success of the educational enterprise and this increasingly requires them to be ‘empowered’ and actively engaged in their children’s schooling by supporting early intellectual development in the home, by becoming actively involved in matters related to their children’s schooling, and by making decisions about the best school for their children to attend. In relation to the domain of school, these reforms have also reconstituted the space of schooling and teaching. A new ‘empowered’ professional identity for school leaders has been cultivated. This is an identity that emphasises the capacities to self-manage, to be entrepreneurial, to operate in the education marketplace, and to be responsive to local circumstances and consumer demands. By reorganising the centralised management of schools, self-managing reforms appear to support increasing parental choice, community empowerment and school leader autonomy.

I conclude that self-managing school reforms are indicative of a shift in how government and the government of the state is conceptualised and enacted and that self-managing reforms enact a re-regulation of the domain of education. Indicative of a transformation in our modality of government created by a crisis of liberal government, this re-regulation
seeks to establish increased autonomy and freedom for citizens that were supposedly diminished by the welfare state. Both schools and parents have been empowered to take charge of their lives and activities as ‘autonomous choosers’ operating in a market setting (Marshall 1996). This has involved orienting the management of schools to the interests of parents and asserting that parents, rather than the state, bear the principal responsibility for the education of children. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of construing the government of schools in terms of self-management and self-governance.

*Thesis structure*

This thesis is composed of three parts. Part I, ‘Self-Managing Reforms’, offers a definition of the object of my investigation, the self-managing school, and puts forward an explanation for its emergence in terms of a transformation in how government is rationalised and technologised.

Part II, ‘The State and Government’, uses the genealogical work of Foucault to examine more fully the historical conditions for the contemporary crisis of the welfare state and the transformation of the rationalities and technologies of government. Considerable attention is given to Foucault’s historical account of the formation of the modern liberal state because it is an account that has not been used extensively in education research.

Part III, ‘Programs of Freedom: Empowerment and Entrepreneurial Management’, returns to the analysis of self-managing reforms in the
domain of education. Utilising the insights of government outlined in the preceding chapters, it focuses on two case studies to illustrate the transformation in educational governance generated by the crisis of liberalism: the family-school relationship and then on the organisation of schools.