



Delft University of Technology

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Clegg, Stewart; Ninan, Johan

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## 7. Governmentality for positive project management

*Stewart Clegg and Johan Ninan*

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### INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of organizations use projects to bring about change and achieve their strategic and operational objectives through a process of “projectification of everything,” it has been claimed (Jensen et al., 2016). Project governance of the formal aspects of project management is essential for the efficient delivery of these projects but not sufficient. Considering the protests from project communities, who ideally stand to gain from infrastructure and related projects, current methods of project governance are inadequate. It is not only external stakeholders that are likely to be dissatisfied as there are low levels of affinity and loyalty for those employed in temporary project settings (Velasco & Wald, 2022). By contrast, in a positive organization, employees find work meaningful, feel proud of their association with the organization, and show greater commitment to the organization and its activities (Cunha et al., 2020). When people feel that something is meaningful, they experience a sense of stability, energy, and direction, even in challenging circumstances. Thus, an environment for employees to flourish and thrive is created in such an organization. We define positive project management as a project management governance philosophy meant to bring diverse stakeholders together with a sense of ownership and commitment.

Broadly, governance concerns the sum of the many ways projects manage their different internal and external stakeholders. To govern is to wield power, the central concept in the social sciences (Clegg et al., 2006), even when practiced democratically (Lawrence, 2020). Manifestations of power in organizations range from episodic coercion to systemic subjectification (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). The general perception of power is that it is negative, where power is understood as a coercive and repressive act constraining human agency. In theory and practice, however, power can be used for either negative or positive purposes. Negative power is manipulative, coercive, violent, dominating, constraining, antagonistic, destructive, and inhibitive. In contrast, positive power is generative, empowering, collaborative, inclusive, and facilitative (Cunha et al., 2020). Negative power generally relies on coercive force to *make* another act in a manner they would not ordinarily do, while positive power achieves its effects by shaping and framing what others *want* to do. Thus, positive power relations are socially constructed and voluntarily entered, as opposed to those that are externally imposed against a person’s will (Nye, 2011).

A particular way of achieving positive power has been much discussed in recent social science, especially that of dealing with organizations and management – the concept of governmentality developed by Michel Foucault (see McKinlay et al., 2012). Foucault’s concept of governmentality focuses on how specific forms of knowledge and power emerge that enable individuals to govern themselves. Governmentality entails consideration of those administrative powers and knowledges that we accept as shaping our everyday lives, and is a concept

involving the subtle exercise of a power aimed at creating self-governing subjects of power. It enables an understanding of the processes including the multiple ways in which it is enacted and the resulting mentalities which underpin governance in project settings. It concerns the ability to structure the actions of others through subtle strategies rather than recourse to coercive control or constraint (Foucault, 2003a). The practice of governmentality aspires to create a common sensemaking frame (Weick, 1995) whereby project participants will voluntarily and willingly agree to be normatively governed in choices forming the subjectivity of their project selves (Barnett et al., 2014). The aspiration is that the personal ambitions of those governed will become enmeshed with those of the overall project management team through their subjectification to these norms.

Governmentality can be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole administrative apparatus (Foucault, 2003b). From such a positive power perspective, governmentality has the potential to create an indispensable force for effective governing of both internal and external stakeholders in project settings. Our focus on governmentality includes the broader definition of governing in consideration of the productive nature of power. In this chapter, we argue that governmentality can be a method to achieve more positive project management. We proceed by providing an overview of the concept of governmentality and its application to positive project management. The following section introduces the notion of governmentality, describing the historical origins of the approach and its most important conceptual terms and features. It then discusses some applications of governmentality in project settings, along with the case of the Juukan Gorge. The final sections of the chapter record the governmentality implications of the digital world, of considerable significance for the management of projects in the 21st century.

## GOVERNMENTALITY

Governmentality is the study of the complex relationship between the subject and power along with their political rationalities, motivations, and technologies through which governance occurs (Lawrence, 2020). The term was coined by Michel Foucault in a lecture series, “The Birth of Biopolitics,” presented at the College de France in the 1970s, which was concerned with tracing the historical shift in ways of thinking about and exercising power in certain societies (Marks, 2000). In the lecture, Foucault talks about how the activity of government became separated from the self-preservation of the sovereign and is redirected toward optimizing the wellbeing of the population (Foucault, 2003c). In the modern era the focus of the activity of government is to make its population potentially more “docile” and “productive,” thereby shifting from the management of a territory to the management of the population (Jessop, 2007). Thus, for Foucault, governmentality is the “art of government” and the “conduct of conduct” and involves the multiple ways through which social order induces individuals and groups to think and behave in certain ways (Foucault, 2007).

Governmentality that is concerned with making a body of people productive can be considered as a form of positive power; it creates positive effects not by limiting what people can do but by enabling an increased scope for their agency and actions, within limits. It focuses on positively shaping the imaginaries and character orientations of a specific body of people. Power is exercised indirectly via modes of subjectification, self-management, and proactive compliance (Clegg, 2019), which is why it can be considered a form of positive power; it

enables rather than constrains. Multiple scholars suggest governmentality has proved to be perhaps Foucault's most productive concept as it concerns managing a body politic as a collective mass (McKinlay & Taylor, 2014; Miller & Rose, 2008).

Governmentality techniques strive to create and reinforce the type of subjects they seek to govern. Rather than seeing power relations as a matter of different forces' positions and resources, Foucault saw it in terms of strategies, discourses, and processes (Clegg, 2023). The focus was on "the totality of practices, by which one can constitute, define, organize, instrumentalize the strategies which individuals in their liberty can have in regard to each other" (Foucault, 1988, p. 20). Governmental technologies can vary from mundane documents, calculations, techniques, apparatuses, to specific programs and procedures through which authorities seek to embody and give effect to governmental ambitions (Rose & Miller, 1992). There are multiple techniques and sites in which governmentality works. Unlike government in the traditional sense, governmentality goes beyond the traditional boundaries of the state apparatus to be government ubiquitous in social relationships, in the most ordinary of activities, the finest of empirical minutiae (McKee, 2009). Governmentality concerns the nature and practice of government (Burchell, 1993) through the mentalities of those that are its subjects, those that identify with and practice its freedoms and know its pleasures and practice its discourse of self-surveillance and subjectification (Sewell, 1998). The governed become subjects of power that achieve outcomes through attraction to their purpose rather than through coercion or payment in their pursuit (Nye, 2008). With governmentality, people voluntarily and willingly position their subjectivity in relation to an external normativity (Jackson & Carter, 1998); hence, organizations must be normatively designed for the successful delivery of governmentality (Simard et al., 2018) as the local "art of governing." Calculated attempts to direct human behavior normatively toward aims make up the background rationality of governmentality (Dean, 1999). Projects, as instruments that bring about transitions and change, that make futures unfold in socio-materiality, seek to shape conduct by working through the desires, aspirations, interests, and beliefs of various actors both internal to the project and outside of its formal remit.

The earliest work on governmentality for positive project management was the study of designing an alliance culture between a public-sector body and three private-sector contractors for the construction of a large infrastructure project meant to prevent storm water detritus and sewage ending up in the harbor in Sydney, Australia (Clegg et al., 2002; Pitsis et al., 2003). The project offices were festooned with banners declaring the ideals of a "no-blame" culture and promoting "whatever is best for the project," along with glossy photography and clearly visible mission and vision statements. The walls of the staff kitchen were decorated with stories about the project that had been cut out of the local and metropolitan press. The progress of the project was displayed in charts throughout the office space. Notices were posted about forthcoming social and training events. All parties to the alliance contract were partners in a risk/reward scheme which was based on successful achievement of key performance indicators of schedule, budget, occupational health and safety, community, and ecology. Normativity was instituted through training, through inclusive practices involving the workforce and sub-contractors, and through the visual cues of the space in which project staff worked. A visible commitment to the key performance indicators was evident from observation of the project office where all the alliance partners were collocated. Through these strategies a culture of trust became widely shared both internally between project teams and externally between stakeholders formally and informally implicated in the project. Trust reduced transaction

costs in terms of control and increased the opportunity for positive interaction. Thus, the study highlighted how different governmentality instruments in project settings were used for positive project management.

After the work of Clegg et al. (2002), other scholars considered governmentality aspects in project settings. Müller et al. (2016) showed a significant correlation between governmentality as an enabler for project governance and organizational success. Renou (2017) emphasized the importance of governmentality for performance measurement and regulation in the case of water utilities in France. Ninan et al. (2019) studied a metro rail project in which the role of governmentality in branding the project and managing the project community on social media was vital. As we shall see in the next section with the case of Juukan Gorge, the projection of governmentality can occur not only through face-to-face contact but also through use of digital tools.

We have stressed the positive aspects of governmentality but have said little about how it emerges. One important consideration is through striving to create a definitive break with past practices, premised on more conventional power relations. In the case of the project that Clegg et al. (2002) and Pitsis et al. (2003) researched, the project had to be accomplished within a tight temporality. The project would have failed if it had not been ready for the Sydney Olympic Games. The immediacy and immovability of this event created a positive breach with past practices of competitive tendering and the adversarial micropolitics that often accompanied accomplishing the winning tender, given tight margins in the project-based construction industry (for examples, look at the empirics in Clegg, 1975). Sometimes the breaching is less positive, however, events can create significant breaches between pasts and futures, such as happened in the case to which we turn next, when a naturally occurring “breaching experiment” (Garfinkel, 1967) occurred on a macro-scale.

## JUUKAN GORGE CASE

Sometimes, in corporate circles, it takes a public relations disaster to make clear the importance of governmentality in terms of corporate actors’ responsibility, autonomy, and choice. A case in point occurred in the corporate behemoth, Rio Tinto, the minerals and resources project company. In May 2020 Rio Tinto blasted a cliff face near its Brockman iron ore mine in the Pilbara, Western Australia, to access iron ore. The blasting destroyed a site of spiritual significance to the traditional owners of the land. Much adverse media coverage followed the event. Interpretations of the event were very largely agreed that the blasting was illegitimate even if not illegal because in destroying a place of indigenous value it demonstrated corporate values that were out of tune with contemporary accounting of the significance of respecting indigenous places, practices, and peoples. Under West Australian law, Rio Tinto had the legal right to mine the area but in light of the media and indigenous reaction to so doing, they breached legitimacy. After the event, the following appeared on the Rio Tinto website:

This was a breach of the trust placed in us by the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura people and other Traditional Owners of the lands on which our business operates. We apologise unreservedly to the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) people, and to people across Australia and beyond, for the destruction of Juukan Gorge ... In allowing the destruction of Juukan Gorge to occur, we fell far short of our values as a company and breached the trust placed in us by the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we operate. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that the destruction of

a site of such exceptional cultural significance never happens again, to earn back the trust that has been lost and to re-establish our leadership in communities and social performance.

(<https://www.riotinto.com/en/news/inquiry-into-juukan-gorge>)

Rio Tinto has a segmented organizational structure with product divisions, such as iron ore, operating as autonomous strategic business units, in which responsibility, autonomy, and choice to make decisions reside. Choice in this case led to decision-making with disastrous environmental and stakeholder consequences that threatened the legitimacy of the entire corporation, as Rio Tinto recognized in its changes to governance published on its website.

For the future, strategic business units, such as the iron division, were assigned responsibility for communities and social performance, partnerships, and engagement. A central communities and social performance area of expertise was being established to build line management capability and provide support as well as deliver assurance. An Integrated Heritage Management Process established reviews of all sites and ranks each for cultural significance, informed through consultation with the traditional owners of the land, and confirms that these traditional owners have been consulted prior to any material impact of Rio Tinto activity, the nature of which will be explicitly advised. Instead of blasting and extracting to take advantage of market opportunities, the new forms of mining subjectivity were to embrace indigenous peoples and their knowledge. The subjectivities of miners, fused in engineering and economics, were to be reframed by acknowledging the subjectivity of those whose lands had previously been taken for granted. In addition, a new approvals process for projects of “high” or “very high” significance under the new Integrated Heritage Management Process was established that meant that the heritage subcommittee of the executive committee or the board must approve projects referred to it and provide commitments to greater transparency and material benefit to traditional owners. On Rio Tinto’s website, an interview with indigenous man Brad Welsh, chief adviser to the chief executive officer on indigenous affairs, is given prominence on the website (<https://www.riotinto.com/news/stories/how-we-are-listening>), stressing “truth telling” and treating traditional owners as partners.

What these reforms signal is a realization in Rio Tinto that governance must be more than a formal instrument; it must extend to governmentality shaping the choices and dispositions of its executives in areas much broader than their technical and managerial expertise. These subjects must now extend their knowledge to an appreciation of anthropology and a respect for cultural traditions among those who are residents and traditional custodians of the lands on which Rio Tinto operates; moreover, the voice of these custodians will now be heard in agreements that have to be negotiated in advance of any project work. Rio Tinto learned through a failure of governmentality how significant and costly such shortcomings can be, both internally and externally (Verrender, 2020). Destroying trust can occur rapidly (Kramer, 2009), as Juukan Gorge demonstrates. It is not just traditional owners of the land and places on it that are external stakeholders in projects, as the next section elaborates.

## GOVERNMENTALITY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

In the modern digital era, more and more digital technologies and information and communication technology tools are used in project settings, such as the Rio Tinto website. With the advent of these technologies, there is a need to rethink the taken-for-granted concepts and

consider the different instruments and sites where governmentality acts. Discourses, emojis, photos, videos, and diverse other forms of engagement prevalent in the modern digital era's socio-materiality can have governmentality implications (Ninan et al., 2020). The use of social media in an infrastructure project in India is recorded in Ninan et al. (2019). The project had a social media strategy for communicating effectively with stakeholders outside the project's formal bounds. The objective was to build alliances with key constituencies of interest, forged through building a common sense of pride and purpose that incorporated those upon whom project work had effects. Progress updates of the project such as work completed, progress photos, and service information were regularly shared on the official social media platform of the project. Glossy images depicted the inside of trains and outside of stations and did not cover any negative events such as accidents, safety issues, or delays. There was an explicit focus on promoting the project using positive rhetoric, such as the project "transforming the city" and how awards bestowed on the project were a source of pride for the city. Promotional events and awareness programs to educate the community about the benefits of the project were conducted in parks, malls, and colleges. Reports of other events such as hoisting flags for national days and celebration of regional festivals were shared on the social media platforms.

Painting competitions on the theme "go green metro" were conducted for school children. The use of these strategies resulted in some visible changes in the behavior of the project community. Traffic diversions during construction did not create problems due to the support gained from the community through the social media strategy. The project's celebration of regional festivals became an icon of the city's identity, complementing similar discourses found in the social media interactions of the project organization. In addition, there were community brand advocates for the project, encouraging community members in supporting and defending the decisions of the project on social media. This transformation of identity occurred in part because the project targeted sections of the population, such as school children, specifically to enroll and translate their unformed interest into being loyal supporters of the project. A positive brand image for the project was developed; community members claimed that they were proud of the project rather than being inconvenienced.

The implications of the governmentality effect were extended from the external stakeholders to the project team in a subsequent work (Ninan et al., 2021). Project teams were also exposed to the same social media. All the project participants were also members of the community, they read the discourse on social media posts and news articles and were also subjects of power through governmentality. They took pride in the asset and understood the importance of what they were building, resulting in them being individually motivated and taking responsibility on their own. Project team rationalities also involved an acceptability of public inconvenience in the process of the construction, often stating that the public has accepted the project.

The practice of governmentality does not mean that resistance does not exist. Because power, in the Foucauldian view, flows everywhere, it is also subject to tactical reversals, resistance, and change (Foucault, 1978). The subjects of power can react and resist governmental actions as governmentality is exercised over free subjects with a capacity for action, rather than those oppressed (McKee, 2009). Hence, such resistance should be treated as an inventory of alternatives to current governing practices or political strategies and not as a liberation from an oppressor that has to be overthrown, destroyed, or abandoned (Cooper, 1994). Protesters of projects create their own social media pages and other public discourses in the process of resisting the governmental actions of the promoters of projects prevalent on social media.

For instance, the protesters of the Westconnex project in Sydney, Australia, created a Twitter page titled “WestCONnex Action” highlighting how the project is a large “con” project by the government, in the process trying to sway governmentality in their favor. Labels are one of the ways through which resistance to governmentality acts. Labels in project settings exist as a labyrinth tangling up peoples and practices, from different agencies, in and around projects which are then contested and maintained through more labels (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021).

In studying governmentality practices in projects, research should focus on micro-level analysis of inscriptions, practices, and discourses to trace how positive processes of power act upon and shape individual and group behavior (Lawrence, 2020). Observations of practices, open-ended and semi-structured interviews with respondents, study of data sets related to project settings, such as social media, news articles, corporate emails, LinkedIn profiles, etc., can help understand these practices in the 21st century.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we describe governmentality for positive project management and consider the potential of positive power as social relational processes that are generative, empowering, and facilitative of individual and collective flourishing. In the case of Rio Tinto repairing the breach meant empowering both indigenous voices and corporate voices, the former through having to engage positively rather than adversely with actors that were usually marginalized and resisted. In the Juukan Gorge case a website posting was used as an instrument of governmentality.

Project organizations can adopt governmentality processes to generate positive project management such as enabling dialogue, spreading positive news of the project, and creating an inclusive culture around the project, through digital and social media apps for the modern era. Diverse tools such as social media, videos, and online news articles can be employed. Digital media can play a pivotal role in positive project management through governmentality as it can have marketing and branding implications in projects not only for “cooling out” (Goffman, 1952) potential opposition but also for constituting project participants as subjects aware of their role in creating civic virtue.

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