'Governed freedom?' AusAID and international governmentality in Oceania[1]

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The first development conference I ever attended was a CAPSTRANS Social Transformation Conference in 2000 at the University of Wollongong.

A standout for me that week was something one of the keynotes said. Scott Guggenheim—who some of you may know is a prominent social anthropologist who at the time was working at the World Bank, and incidentally now advisers AusAID's-Indonesia Partnership Program—spoke about the importance of 'why' questions.

He referred to the kind of work he was dealing with at the time as all about the 'how'. How do we implement this program? How can we make this project more effective? And so on.

What he was talking about, and this is what I found most insightful, was his reflections on the kinds of things academic conferences do. In his case, it was the emphasis on the importance of the 'why' questions, rather than the nitty gritty of the 'how' that resonated. In other words, **why** are we implementing this program? **Why** are we involved in this project? And I got a sense from him that the **'why'** necessarily preceded the **'how'**.

For me then, the conference theme this week, of "Integrating Development Research, Policy and Practice" *invites*, in the way exemplified by Guggenheim, a discussion of **why** this research and not that research; **why** this policy and not that one, and **why** this development practice instead of another?

With this in mind, my preliminary discussion today is about posing 'why questions' as a necessary practice, in this case, aimed at stripping bear the promise of 'freedom' as a way of shedding light on what's on offer as part of AusAID's work in Oceania. One of my intentions is to share some initial thoughts on the kinds of possibilities that 'studies in governmentality' open up for thinking and acting in more hopeful ways as part of its contribution to critical post-development.

I'd like to start by drawing on Foucauldian scholar Nikolas Rose (1999) as a way of introducing ideas of freedom, governing and the 'desirable' individual (Rose, 1999; Barry et al, 1996). In his book 'Powers of Freedom – Reframing political thought', Rose (1999) offers an understanding of freedom as a material, technical and governmental entity *rather than* an abstracted ideal as it has often been conceptualised. To draw our attention to the potency of the politics of freedom in the present Rose (1999) highlights the intriguing paradox of being governed in the name of freedom when government, by definition, would seem to constitute its antithesis.

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Liberation from bondage, the right of the individual to act without restraint, the power to do what one likes; each of these signal an act of liberation, a freeing of oneself from dominating force. Yet Rose (1999) has something else in mind when he makes the distinction between acts of domination and those of governing. For the former, to dominate is to attempt to rout the capacity for action (to crush opposition, as it were), while for the latter—to govern—is to recognise and allow the capacity for action but to utilise it for specific objectives. In other words, to govern is to "act upon action" (Rose, 1999: 4) in order to enable desired capacities *through* freedom.

Drawing similar conclusions, Barry et al (1996, 8) suggest that freedom should not be equated with anarchy, 'but with a kind of well-regulated and "responsiblised" liberty'. Freedom, in this way, is a formula of rule. Following Foucault, Barry and his colleagues (1996) elaborate on the *constitution* of freedom, its exercise, and 'the extent to which it has become, in our so-called "free societies", a resource for, and not merely a hindrance to, government.

The 'desired' individual to be governed through freedom, then, is one that is *made free*. Burchell's (1996) discussion on the role of the individual is instructive in this regard especially his formulations on neo-liberalism. Emphasising this 'making of freedom', Burchell (1996, 23-24, emphasis in original) refers to the '*artificially* arranged or contrived forms of free, *entrepreneurial* and *competitive* conduct of economic-rational individuals'.

Aligned somewhat with Rose's (1999) account of freedom, Burchell (1996, 24) takes up the way individual freedom 'is here a technical condition of rational government rather than the organising value of a Utopian dream'. Hindess (2004, 26), similarly highlights the way certain liberal rationalities, as far as possible, govern 'through the promotion of certain kinds of free activity and the cultivation among the governed of suitable habits of self-regulation'.

So if we accept for a moment that freedom is not just a 'Utopian dream' but also a material, technical and governmental rationality where free activity is circumscribed by *desired capacities* and *suitable habits of self-regulation*, the relevance to international development and aid relations is clearly apparent.

And of course, the reason people need to be helped to be 'made free' in the first place is due to their various deficiencies relative to defining measures. This necessary problematisation is a familiar story and people like Escobar, Ferguson, Shiva and others have written extensively on this. What I find fascinating, and I want to highlight here, is the *power* of this productive space we call international development—this dissemination by experts, governments, NGOs and the like of the necessary means to produce what Rose (1999, 78) calls 'civilised sensibilities', and the remarkably narrow story—narrow version of freedom—on offer.

Taking AusAID's work then, the hallmarks of international governmentality are firmly at play as it problematises, manages and governs Oceania. The region is fragile, complex and difficult. There are human capacity constraints, limited natural resources, and insufficient economic growth. There's high vulnerability and limited economies of scale (*Australia's Regional aid program to the Pacific: 2011-2015*, 2010).

What the region needs are clear benchmarks, controlled auditing, robust performance indicators and standardisation. The Pacific Plan and its four pillars; economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security, form the guiding rationalities to attain the freedom that is to come from these technical entities.

AusAID documents, economic surveys and performance reports, outline the many deficiencies and problems, but importantly for the present purpose, they are oriented toward *desired capacities* and *suitable habits of self-regulation*. These desired orientations, of course, require healthy and educated populations and these too are closely monitored to cultivate a certain *constitution of freedom*. AusAID's *Tracking Development and Governance in the Pacific (2009) report,* for example, offers the evaluative means to create productive subjects relative to the Millennium Development Goals.

In line with the kind of thing I'm suggesting here, Ilcan and Phillips (2010) refer to the self-discipline and self-management manifest in the MDGs as they represent the latest neoliberal rationalities of government, recasting and reshaping contemporary development problems and solutions through things such as information profiling and responsiblisation.

This 'acting upon action' produces 'the responsible development subject', who for Ilcan and Phillips (2010), are *made* responsible in order to care for themselves in various capacities, even to be deemed responsible for the high risks their less developed status has produced.

Responsibilisation plays a formative role in AusAID's instruments of governing. The regime of performance indicators it deploys mark the 'responsible' out—these become the ideal types exhibiting the right forms of conduct to be *made free*. AusAID's regional aid program to the Pacific: 2011-2015 (2010) refer to the likes of Samoa and Vanuatu as having 'demonstrated the *value of economic reforms* to their long term growth prospects' (2010, 4, emphasis added).

Often, suitable habits of self-regulation *become* the marker of responsibilisation. For example, the Pacific Regional Program Performance Report 2011 identifies those regional organisations who cultivate desired capacities of self-management. 'While the University of the South Pacific and Forum Fisheries Agency', the Report states, 'are well placed to report on their results through performance indicators...the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat still have significant scope to improve on outcomes' (2012, 4). According to the Report, 'the main areas of weakness is that the Pacific regional organisations—and the Pacific Plan itself—need much more robust performance frameworks' (2012, 10). And in the case of regional organisations under the Regional Program, funding agreements are linked to performance targets—suitable habits, it seems, come with rewards.

The 'hierarchy of performers' evident here and documented in numerous AusAID publications, act to engender a competitiveness which further cultivates an economic-rational *capacity for action* relative to specific objectives. Naming certain 'responsible development subjects', and shaming others, promotes a self-disciplining aimed to stimulate capacities befitting of a responsible entity; whether an organisation, population or individual.

The Pacific Regional Performance Report 2011 rates program areas on a sliding scale with 'key achievements' and 'factors affecting progress'. These areas are graded according to the likelihood of achieving stated objectives within specific timeframes. What is interesting is that Multilaterals, which come under one of the areas in the Performance Report, fall outside the gaze of responsiblisation. For multilaterals there is no listing of 'factors affecting progress' in their section of the Report. One conclusion to make from this is that the World Bank and Asian Development Bank in this case, do not require the same level of governing and are spared delineation in the 'hierarchy of performers'. They are not marked for cultivation nor are they consigned to take on desirable habits—they're status, I would suggest, is one that is *already free*.

I want to return now to this question of why *this* research? Why consider governing rationalities and technologies as a necessary practice when it comes to AusAID's 'acts upon action' to produce 'civilised sensibilities'?

A key provocation of Foucault's is his refusal to warrant a natural order and given priority to the political boundaries of the state and it is this idea that has been taken up by contemporary writers in the development domain as they explore power *beyond,* what Larner & Walters (2004) aptly describe as, the 'grand theories' of the economy and politics and their apparent inevitability and totalising discursive frames.

Studies in governmentality in the context of international development 'make the familiar strange', to use Paul Rabinow's (1977) phrase, by shedding light on the completely artificial and constructed nature of neoliberal rationalities. In other words, the remarkably narrow *making of freedom* offered by AusAID is far from evident despite the considerable aid apparatus at play; nor is it, as I've argued here, a dominating force.

For me, the hopeful agenda of studies in governmentality is in this rendering of freedom as a constructed set of technical entities. By reading power as always also emanating *beyond the state*, depriving "the state" of its explanatory powers, as Mitchell Dean (2010, 229) puts it, as well as also being located *beyond* powerful donor narratives and their generative material realities—a different trajectory of *what it is to be made free* emerges. Indeed, power emanates from multiple sites and at a range of scales and brings into being conditions of *other* possibilities—of *other* versions of 'free societies'.

Thank you for you for your time.