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THE DARK SIDE OF SOVEREIGNTY THE QUESTION OF GOVERNMENT IN A HISTORICAL-EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE[1]

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Abstract

This paper aims to question the concept of government in a historical-epistemological perspective. In the first part, I will outline the features and stakes of such questioning, starting with a discussion of conceptual history and the history of governmentality (and their limitations). In the second part, I will seek to sketch out the possible trajectory of such 'epistemological history' of the concept of government, showing how – and in what way – it is intertwined with that pivoted on the concepts of sovereignty and representation. To do so, I will focus on two episodes in particular: physiocracy and neoliberalism.

Keywords

Epistemological history of political concepts, conceptual history, history of governmentality, government, physiocracy, neoliberalism, modern science, cybernetics.

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Resumen

Este artículo pretende cuestionar el concepto de gobierno en una perspectiva histórico-epistemológica. En la primera parte, esbozaré las características y los retos de dicho cuestionamiento, comenzando con una discusión de la historia conceptual y la historia de la gubernamentalidad (y sus limitaciones). En la segunda, trataré de esbozar la posible trayectoria de esa 'historia epistemológica' del concepto de gobierno, mostrando cómo – y de qué manera – se entrelaza con la que pivota sobre los conceptos de soberanía y representación. Para ello, me centraré en dos episodios en particular: la fisiocracia y el neoliberalismo.

Palabras clave

Historia epistemológica de los conceptos politicos, historia conceptual, historia de la gubernamentalidad, gobierno, fisiocracia, neoliberalismo, ciencia moderna, cibernética.

> In general, a game-playing machine may be used to secure the automatic performance of any function *if the performance of this function is subject to a clear-cut, objective criterion of merit*. In checkers and chess, this merit consists of the winning of the game according to the accepted rules of permissible play. These rules, which are totally different from the accepted maxims of good play, are simple and inexorable. Not even an intelligent child can be in doubt concerning them for longer than it takes to read them while facing a board. There may be great doubt as to how to win a game, but no doubt whatever as to whether it has been won or lost.
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> *Norbert Wiener,* God & Golem, Inc.

Prelude

In a press conference he gave in Rome on October 19th, 1974, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan spoke about what Sigmund Freud called an "'impossible' profession" (Freud, 1964, p. 248), namely that of governing, saying that the "people who govern […] haven't, in the final analysis, the foggiest idea what they are doing. Which does not stop them from doing it, and even from doing a halfway decent job. Governors are needed, after all, and governors govern – that's a *matter of fact*. Not only do they govern, but everyone is glad they do so" (Lacan, 2013, pp. 57-58, translation modified, emphasis mine).

Unlike psychoanalytic practice, which is more concerned with the untenability of its own position, dealing "especially with what doesn't work" (Lacan, 2013, p. 61), we cannot say the same about governing.

Although the French psychoanalyst's assertion may be correct to reduce the whole question to a *matter of fact* would be a mistake. On the contrary, one of the aims of this paper and, more broadly, of the line of research I aim to pursue with this paper is to consider this matter of fact as *problematic* and in question.

Government: a matter of fact *or a* problem? *Between conceptual history and the history of governmentality*

Suppose to takes even a cursory look at the history of the concept of sovereignty. In that case, it is almost impossible not to stumble upon what I believe constitutes its 'dark side,' namely, what concerns the field – both semantic and conceptual – of government.

I believe that, within the boundary drawn by such a question, we encounter this field in the first place as a *matter of fact* – "governors are needed, after all, and governors govern." Under this outer cover, if we want to stay faithful to the philoso-phical injunction to "think the thinkability of politics again" (Galli, 2007, p. 9), we must recognize the insistence of a *problem*.

I suggest we can identify two facets of government as a matter of fact. One of them is epistemologically false, and we must refute it by proving its groundlessness. The other one is epistemologically fruitful; indeed, it allows the (in)visibly opaque insistence of the problem to shine through beneath the glassy transparency of the matter of fact.

We can see the first facet in the widespread attitude of regarding government as an invariant in a supposed history of political thought, generally outlined in continuistic terms. This attitude does not deny that 'government' (both as a term and as a concept) has denoted things that are highly different throughout history. Instead, the point is to reflect on these differences and to articulate them – often, and not coincidentally with great difficulty – within a single linear progression in which we can discover (but above all to seek out) continuities and consonances, anticipations and precursors.

To problematize this orientation and radically prove its groundlessness is an excellent achievement of conceptual history.[2] In line with its methodological assumptions, it proposed not to consider government as an invariant but to frame the question by identifying a historical threshold marking the transition from an ancient way of thinking about politics, essentially based on a further development of Aristotelian ethics, to the so-called modern political science.

This new political science finds its cornerstones in the modern concepts of sovereignty and representation, its theoretical genesis in the thought of Thomas Hobbes, and its constitutional expression through the "forced revision of Hobbesian doctrine" (Biral, 1998[2], p. 85, n. 72), represented by the French Revolution. Crucially, this science gained

2. The reference here is mainly to the variant that the conceptual history has adopted – in continuity but simultaneously breaking with the German *Begriffsgeschichte* – within the research group on political concepts in Padua (Chignola & Duso, 2008).

its current relevance in modern Western democracies, where we tend to consider these concepts (and the constellation of concepts derived from them: liberty, rights, people...) as matters of fact.

The formal rationality of the Hobbesian political science introduces an entirely new way of structuring political discourse, which I cannot possibly reproduce in it whole complexity within this context. I will, therefore, only summarize it in a few lines.[3] Besides pointing out the need – to which I will return – to think about civil science with the same precision with which natural science has allowed us to think about nature, Hobbes endows it with a peculiar anthropology based on the concepts of individual liberty and equality.

On the one hand, due to the possibility of hurting each other, the conceptual couple of liberty and equality makes the permanent state of war inevitable, a state of war that, according to Hobbes, characterizes the state of nature and makes the transition from it to the institution of the commonwealth necessary. On the other hand, they render what has long been considered "not only among necessities but also among advantages," namely, the fact that "from birth, some are destined to be governed and others to govern" (Aristotle, 1995, p. 6, translation modified), as intolerable, as it is unreasonable. This change of perspective entailed the transformation of the relations of command and obedience into another form (of legitimacy).

Within an ellipse whose focal points are occupied by the concepts of authorization and representation, Hobbes lays the ground for the only tolerable form of obedience that we can logically admit, that of the entire body politic upon itself through the figure of its *representative*. As Hobbes clearly states in the 16th chapter of his *Leviathan*, the representative is *legitimized to act* – an action to which each of the individuals composing the body politic must render strict obedience – insofar as they are *authorized to express* the will of the body politic.

Such a perspective marks what Giuseppe Duso, following Max Weber, has aptly called the 'birth of power,' which would bring about the 'end of government.' This happened first at the level of the logical apparatus and then gradually through a reorganization of the structure of knowledge and its doctrine (Scattola, 1994; 2003), which accompanied the triggering of a series of constitutional processes that found their (slow) outcomes in the birth of the modern state.[4]

3. For a comprehensive overview, see Biral, 19982; Piccinini, 1999.
4. By the term 'modern state,' I refer here specifically to the result of the "profound structural change" that took place around "the middle of the 18th century" (Brunner, 1968b, p. 117) and culminated in the reorganization of institutional and constitutional structures after the end of the *Ancien Régime*. The modern state – understood as a "historically conditioned

We must see in the 'end of government' the demise of an "ancient principle" (Duso, 2007, p. 84), complex and irreducible to the existence of a command-obedience relationship without legitimacy (a reduction made by Hobbes), around which, albeit in very different ways, it had thought politics until then. This is a principle we can start sketching out if we consider the "difference characterizing parts of society and the rationality of the fact that in society there is a relation for which some govern, and others are governed." Moreover, it is, above all, a principle whereby "good government and its ability to relate to the idea of justice is judged from time to time at the level of concrete action and not a formal model" (Duso, 2008a, pp. 186 and 189).

Nevertheless, Duso himself ~~poin~~ts out the persistence of a "reality implied by the notion of government" besides the 'end of government,' (Duso, 2006, p. 382) which proves that things are more complex than one might imagine. Indeed, "the framework constituted by the binomial of liberty and power tends to negate the necessity of a relationship of government amongst people". Nevertheless, "in reality, such a relationship is maintained *despite* the formal rationality that characterize power" (Duso 2008b, p. 307, emphasis mine).

And how so? In the form of a "permanent, institutionalized command-obedience relationship" (Brunner, 1968a, p. 66). Following Weber (2019) and Otto Brunner (1968a), we can call it 'domination,' in the light of what has been said so far about the nature of the formal legitimation mechanisms that make its acceptance possible.[5] Through them, on the one hand, the "heteronomy of the command and the personal difference between who commands and who obeys" is preserved. On the other hand, the legitimation strategy based on the authorization-representation pair conceals "the fully accountable political dimension of both those who command and those who obey" (Duso, 2008b, pp. 307-308).

This relationship is maintained in a series of declensions. They belong to a history more or less intertwined with that which has pivoted on the concepts of sovereignty and representation and has found its most recent expression in modern Western democracies, where the government essentially coincides with the activities of the executive.

However, precisely on this point the statements of conceptual history regarding the issue of government reach a theoretical limit and therefore require some adjustments.

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form of power organization" – in the broader sense, on the other hand, is referred to by Rotelli & Schiera, 1971-1973 and Schiera, 2004, which attest its emergence in the 13th century.

5. On this topic, see Duso, 2008a, and in light of the dialogue with this paper, Duso, 2013.

Indeed, while it has played a crucial role in undermining an earlier facet of government as a matter of fact, asserting the insistence of a 'reality indicated by the notion of government,' still, without rigorously questioning how this insistence 'insists,' it runs the risk of creating a second-order generality.

In asserting the reality of such an insistence, it implicitly shows how – in *lacanese* – the foreclusion of the *Real* of government from the *Symbolic* of political science implies a return of the latter in the 'disruptive' form of domination. Moreover, one could derive from this observation the conviction that political science must address the question of government. Without doing that, the latter remains in a permanent crisis, of which the history of democracy would be the most glaring symptom, with its periodic calls to 'contest its boundaries' (Benhabib, 1996).[6]

However, conceptual history fails to investigate how politics symbolized the Real of government in the course of modernity outside – or, in a position of extimity to – the Symbolic of modern political science. That is why it is unable to produce what I call a *clinic* of government as a matter of fact from which we would have to *critically* extract the opaque and 'unthought' dimension of the problem.

In this regard, more is needed to identify domination as the form by which the governing relationship is maintained despite the formal rationality that characterizes pow-er. As Brunner notes, "in the present, domination [...] exists widely. The bureaucratic apparatuses of entities such as the state, municipalities, associations, and economic en-terprises would be a case in point. Nevertheless, noting the "relevance of the factor 'domination' says nothing about the tasks of the entity in question" (Brunner, 1968, p. 105). More radically, I believe that it tells us nothing – or at least very little – about how the question of government has been taken up by political thought *since* the crisis of ancient political *epistēmē* and *through* the gradual spread of modern political *doxai*. To do this, we would have to interrogate the whole series of histories interwoven with the history pivoted on the concepts of sovereignty and representation to which I referred earlier.

As is well known, Michel Foucault primarily raised the problem of framing these histories in general terms within the confines of the "history of governmentality," that he declared his intention to undertake in the February 1st, 1978 lecture on *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault, 2009, p. 108). Such a history is intertwined with the broader 'history of government' to which he alludes in the same course and with the broader

6. The two questions at stake are formulated particularly clearly in Duso, 2006.

study of the ancient and late ancient world around the ethical problem of self-government that he will undertake in the upcoming courses of the 1980s.

The scope of the semantic and conceptual spectrum the word 'governmentality' circumscribes in Foucault's reflection is broad. However, I believe that, at a minimal level, it starts from the word 'to govern' acquiring a "specifically political meaning" (Foucault, 2009, p. 122) in the 16th century. Consequently, I think it is entirely legitimate to understand the history of governmentality as the history of what the French philosopher calls "the government in its political form" (Foucault, 2009, p. 89, translation modified).

As Foucault describes it in the 1977-1978 lectures, it begins with the web of 'reason of state-police science-cameralism-mercantilism' that, in some ways, defines the threshold of modernity. Then, it continues with the "modern governmental reason" (Foucault, 2008, p. 10), which begins with the physiocracy and runs through the winding history of liberalism, ending up with the more contemporary neoliberal governmentality. This is a vibrant story focused not only on the state but rather on the state *and* its "necessary correlate," the "vis-à-vis" (Foucault, 2009, pp. 350, 349) of the state, namely, society.[7]

In recent decades, either in the wake of the Foucauldian legacy or independently of it, several critical studies have dealt with one or more stages of this history of 'government in its political form.' Sometimes they emphasize how closely it is interwoven not only with the history of the modern state but also with the history of the logical apparatus and the conceptual constellation in which it finds its rational foundations and epistemic assumptions (Marcenò, 2011) before the latter even came into being. Sometimes, however, they show how it allowed a series of lines of escape to become visible, "resistance and preservation [...], overcoming and subversion" (Rotelli & Schiera, 1973, p. 7), vis-à-vis the centrality of the modern state and its logic (Dardot & Laval, 2014). They show, in addition, how running precisely along these lines of escape, the increasingly radical transformations to which the latter has been subjected in more recent times came about (Giannone, 2010; 2019; Ouellet, 2016, pp. 191-236; Palumbo & Bellamy, 2010; Rosenau & Czempiel, 1993).

Such histories of governmentality had the merit of shedding light on many archives and contexts that – for structural reasons – had not directly attracted the attention of conceptual history. However, they have proven themselves equally incapable of carrying out a clinic of government as a matter of fact, being limited to what I would rather call a

7. On this subject, see Chignola, 2004; 2011; Schiera, 1987; Ricciardi, 2010.

phenomenology of government and its configurations. This phenomenology has yielded considerable insight into the structures of the various governmental rationalities. However, it has not been capable of deconstructing them in a way that extracts from these rationalities the problematic core – the unthought – that they could not (and cannot) think of for structural reasons.

Differently from conceptual history, which has reconstructed the emergence of modern political concepts to deconstruct them without accepting these concepts as matters of fact, the history of governmentality has reconstructed the emergence of the concept of government but in the end – at least, this is my impression – accepted it as a matter of fact as well.

Indeed, it did so in a way that is not that of naïve common-sense empiricism – 'governors are needed, after all, and governors govern.' It is not even that of the genealogi-cal-theological matrix (Karsenti, 2009) of those who, as Giorgio Agamben (2011), "[t] hrough the Church Fathers and Rousseau [...] essentially recognizes no discontinuity, since it is always the identical theological matrix of Christian *oikonomia*" (Sebastianelli, 2017, p. 20). On the contrary, adhering to a "historical ontology" (Foucault, 1984, p. 45) helped to write a history of differences, changes of course, and breaks. Moreover, it could be argued that precisely based on an "ontology of the present" (Foucault, 2010, p. 21) we can draw a line of continuity between the history of governmentality and conceptual history. The latter is also from the very first moment, "oriented to the present [*gegenwartsbezogen*]" (Koselleck, 1972, p. xiv). In uncovering "a series of complex, difficult and never-functionalized relationships, a series of relationships which in a certain sense never functions at all" (Foucault, 1996, p. 39), what else could indeed we discern if not a critical questioning of concepts to allow their unthoughts to become visible?

However, it is something else. The investigation carried out by Foucault and subsequently by much of the work inspired by his history of governmentality does not aim to identify, under these modes of non-functioning, an unthought in the terms I have described it so far – the problematic kernel obscured by the matter of fact. Instead, by putting pressure on these modes of non-functioning, it circumscribes and creates the space of a political action that can escape the grasp of the structures through which this or that governmental rationality maintains its existence (Cesaroni, 2020, pp. 193-202; Ferrari, 2021). In doing so, however, one more or less consciously assumes that the question of government is wholly exhausted in the forms of modern and contemporary governmental rationalities. An assumption in which the unthought is likely to remain

unthought and the matter of fact the statement of a matter of fact, albeit critically reformulated.

On the one hand, the conceptual-historical study of government as a matter of fact thus identifies the unthought of modern political science precisely in the question of government. On the other hand, the history of governmentality shows how the question of government does not cease to be 'thought and rethought' in the course of modernity. It allows specific modes of non-functioning for each of these attempts to become perspicuous, but it cannot extract what is unspoken and unthought.

We thus stumble upon an apparent contradiction that we can only resolve by complicating the perspective of both conceptual history and the history of governmentality.

For an epistemological history of political concepts

We have already seen how conceptual history approaches the question of government by identifying a historical threshold. However, it is worth recalling that this historical threshold constitutes an *epistemological notion* –[8] a crucial node that distinguishes it from the Koselleckian variant (Koselleck, 2004; 2018) of German *Begriffsgeschichte* (Chignola, 2008; 2016).

This means that behind the Hobbesian will to think of politics as a theory characterized by formal rigor along the lines of natural sciences, we can see the workings of "a new concept of science and a consequent shift in the sciences concerning man" (Biral, 1999, p. 256). According to Hobbes (1983, pp. 23-38; 1928, pp. xvii-xviii),[9] only by thinking civil science with the same precision featured by Galilean physics it is possible to escape the risk of contingency and a politics based on a precarious conception of justice. A very material example of this risk is the civil wars of religion which troubled France and England while he was writing his books.

From a historical-conceptual point of view, the question of government becomes the unthinkable and the unthought that disturbs the seemingly flawless coherence of modern political science *primarily* and *essentially* through the imposition of such a rationality.

8. The reference here is to Koselleck, 1996 (p. 69, emphasis mine): "The *Sattelzeit* is neither an *ontological notion* nor is it tied to a single national language."
9. See Skinner, 2002; Galli, 2011.

However, the same rationality, I argue, has driven and still drives modern and contemporary governmental attempts to cope with the same question. It follows that what this kind of rationality forbids us to think is *something* that brings into play the concept of government and that cannot be *entirely* foreclosed by modern political science nor domesticated by modern and contemporary governmental rationalities.

Obliquely to the government as a matter of fact, I propose to name this 'something' government as a *problem.* To give it consistency – as expected – it will not just take the standpoint of either conceptual history or the history of governmentality. Rather, I will outline a history of the ways in which a particular kind of rationality – whose features conceptual history has helped to identify, if only to some extent – has conditioned, among other things, attempts to think scientifically about politics: of the consequences of that conditioning and its unthoughts.

I propose to call this inquiry the Epistemological History of Political Concepts [EHPC]. It, indeed, undertakes to examine a political concept from its epistemological premises, in the belief that we have to identify this level as the genetic site of production of the unthoughts of modern political concepts. At the same time, ~~it is~~ only by adopting new and different premises ~~that it~~ becomes possible to think of them differently – or, more simply, actually to think of them.

There are better places to reconstruct all the theoretical bases of this type of investigation, which, in any case, far from being a methodological cookbook, can only find *in* its exercise the conditions *for* its exercise. A strong thesis about the nature of the kind of rationality that have conditioned, among other things, the attempts to think scientifically about politics since modernity constitutes one of its fundamental postulates.

We have already seen the features of formal rationality on which Hobbes bases his apparatus. We find them as such in constructing any modern political concept, in which the criteria of operativity, abstraction, and purity vis-à-vis experience are supposed to be active (Duso, 2003). More generally, we find them in every "theoretical performance whose claim to scientificity is identified with the definition of axioms, with the apodictic character of deductions and with the construction of a political model that is universally valuable" (Cesaroni, 2017, p. 521).

On this point, EHPC's thesis is both more clearly stated and more universal. Namely, such rationality is the result of advocating an *epistemological posture* whose genesis is at the height of the so-called modern scientific revolution and assumes a twofold reduction. The first is an ontological reduction of reality to (id)entities. These entities are fully formed and given, stable and calculable, i.e., structures whose behavior and evolution

are known and predictable in advance, at least at a potential level, because they can be described in terms of deterministic causal relations. The second is an epistemological reduction of science to axiomatic-deductive systems, where ideas are arranged within a theory and concepts express their membership to the general laws of that theory.

This epistemological posture is an *ideological posture*. In this context, I can only formulate it as an axiom, but its apodicticity becomes concrete when applied to the history of sciences. It works as an obstacle to the actual praxis of science, whose essence is normative and irreducible to an ideal syntax. It equally works as an obstacle to the scientific understanding of a complex reality involved in continuous processes of individuation and, therefore, resistant to any reduction to equally ideal structures and entities.[10]

From these backgrounds, to write an Epistemological History of the Concept of Government [EHCG] we have firstly to examine the features that this epistemological posture has assumed from time to time and through which it has conditioned the configuration of governmental rationalities and their knowledge (ideologically saturating the range of thinkability of politics). Only then we can try to extract their unthoughts from intertwining the points of non-holding between the two layers, taking the risk of rewriting other epistemological premises that can create the conditions for their rethinking.

Toward an epistemological history of the concept of government. Hypotheses for a trajectory

If we apply this framework to the study of the concepts of modern political science as identified and reconstructed by conceptual history, something significant for our study already emerges.

In this respect, the figure of Hobbes also provides a particularly useful prism for our inquiry for reasons that are in part different from those stated in works of conceptual history. Apart from some anachronisms that do not affect the coherence of the analysis, it is possible to recognize in him a synthesis of science and politics in light of the influence exerted by the mentioned epistemological posture.

Indeed, in the wake of Descartes, this posture influences Hobbes's natural philosophy. This is evident in all his attempts to philosophically neutralize the possible pro-

10. I use the adjective 'ideological' and the noun 'obstacle' following Canguilhem, 1988 and Bachelard, 2002, pp. 24-32 freely.

blems arising from the (Galilean) discovery of matter in motion, which had definitively undermined the image of the 'closed' and hierarchically ordered Aristotelian-Ptolemaic 'world', by the coherence of a stable and universal geometrical-mechanical construction. On the other hand – setting aside Descartes and his provisional morality – his civil science is also largely influenced by the same posture, as we have already pointed out. A monstrous geometric-mechanical construction – the *Leviathan* – is called to neutralize the potential dangers of another monster. This other monster is what we might call *social* matter in motion, spectrally identified with the deliberately ambiguous concept of the *multitude* but more concretely attributable to the projection of a society of orders – the premodern '*societas civilis sive status*' divided into estates (Brunner, 1968c) – in perpetual crisis. It was so because it was deprived of the harmony that guaranteed for it the "theological-cosmological continuum *in the name of which* the sovereign is *authorized* to govern and which provides models by which he must govern" (Foucault, 2009, p. 234, emphasis mine). Indeed, it began to wane a little over a century later, giving way to a society of free and equal, natural *and* social individuals.[11]

It seems that even this brief epistemological digression within Hobbesian reflection says something about the consistency of the 'something' I have named 'the government as a problem': primarily about the unthoughts of modern political science, but also about the kind of rationality that underlies it.

With a *boutade*, we might say that what such an epistemological posture neutralizes and renders unthinkable is precisely the "mysteries of matter and motion" [*materiæ motusque arcana*] that Hobbes himself had ambitiously declared he wanted to "discover" (Hobbes, 1839, p. lxxxix). In contrast, the critical analysis of such neutralization allows us to identify as unthought, both at the epistemological and the epistemic levels of politics, a whole series of issues related to the conceptual framework of materiality and motility.

Let us try to point them out: the question of undecidability and its relation to the decision, the inevitable presence of elements of unpredictability and contingency, the irreducibility of any material difference to an ideal representation, the problem of evolution, growth, and change, the problem of disorder and instability (and their specifically political equivalent: conflict), etc.

I believe that it is precisely this kind of issue that governmental rationalities have sought to 'think and rethink' throughout their history, as they share the same episte-

11. For all these issues, see Bardin 2016; 2019. On the concept of 'motion' in Hobbesian reflection, see also the classic Spragens, 1973.

mological posture with political science. All of this has contributed in various ways to their further (and more actual) neutralization.

On this basis, I propose to call such rationality the *science of government*. This term ~~is~~ can ~~both to~~ at the same time distinguishes it from the ancient art of government and ~~to~~ makes both its relation and its difference to modern political science and its disciplines (the sciences of the State, see Schiera, 1968) perspicuous.

If modern political science practices a foreclusion of such issues, the science of government aims at their domestication through its disciplines (humanities and social sciences).[12] This means that paradoxical as it may seem, within these sciences, the very elements that political science sought to repress *to* allow a reduction of social reality to the kind of structures I have just described play a crucial role in implementing the same reduction process. Suppose political science *has banished* every potentially risky element *from* the space of political action. In that case, the science of government is concerned with where these elements *reappear within* the latter, not to generate some legitimacy but to perform another form of neutralization on them.[13]

Now, to write the EHCG is to write the history of this science.

First, one must try to identify the historical threshold at which the question of government was articulated – at least at the theoretical level – *in terms of science*. For the sake of clarity, I specify I use 'science' in the precise (I emphasize: ideological) meaning that I have attributed to this term up to this moment, i.e., as a consequence of the orientation towards the reductions resulting from a particular epistemological posture.

To (begin to) do this, let us take a final digression into Foucault's history of governmentality.

As has been argued at length, in *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault articulates the relationship between the notion of (i) 'government' understood as the general idea that one man can lead another, and (ii) 'governmentality,' understood as the application of this idea to the political realm. This articulation leads to several points of strain within the French philosopher's reconstruction (Cesaroni, 2010, pp. 177-191). This is all the more true if we considers that, at least initially, the notion of government seems to overlap in every way with that of 'pastoral power.' In Foucault's opinion, the latter is the

12. I use the term 'domestication' because of its (o)economic semantic sediments.

13. It will have to be said, then, that the way modern and contemporary governmental rationality has 'thought and rethought' the question of government has made it impossible *actually* to think it. In this sense, the question of government represents not only the unthought of modern political science but, more broadly, the one of what I call the *epistemic apparatus of modern politics* (political science and science of government). On this topic, see especially Chignola, 2004; Ricciardi, 2010.

birthplace of the "idea that one could govern men, or that one did govern men" (Foucault, 2009, p. 123) in the East, but especially among the Jewish people and the Christian Church.

The most striking point, as far as our analysis is concerned, concerns the impossibility of finding any reflection on the political government before the 16th century. Foucault, gradually becoming aware of these inconsistencies, corrects course in a later phase of his reflections (Foucault, 1981) by deleting the overlapping relationship between government and pastoral power, thus identifying elements of government outside the Judeo-Christian tradition as well.

All this allows him to readily admit the existence of a political declension of government long before the emergence of the reason of state. However, we must reconsider the novelty that accompanies the emergence of the reason of state too. We are no longer confronted for the first time with applying the general idea of government to the political realm but rather with the emergence of a specific governmental reason.

What does the emergence of this "new rationality" (Foucault, 2009, p. 348) mark the end of? If we follow Foucault, it seems to be entirely legitimate to say that it breaks with the "simultaneously Christian and judiciary tradition, a tradition which claimed that government was essentially just" and should adhere to that 'theological-cosmological continuum' to which we referred earlier (Foucault, 1981, p. 243).[14]

Despite the subtlety – and in many respects, the correctness[15] – of this Foucauldian inquiry, I think it is necessary to correct it on two points.

First, it is appropriate to insist that this shift be embedded in a broader epistemic caesura. In these centuries, the question of government is beginning to be thought through the filters of the epistemological posture of modern science. This is not the first application of a general idea of government to the realm of politics. It is instead the exhaustion of a specific epistemological posture – the one associated with a closed and hierarchically ordered world – and a particular way of thinking about the political government that I would describe as Aristotelian-prudential rather than Christian-judiciary. They clear the way to a new epistemological posture, whose features we have already discussed, and a new way of thinking about government.

14. See also Foucault, 2014, pp. 1-19.
15. A closer look at this claim would require a more comprehensive comparison between my theory of epistemological posture and Foucault's reflections on the notion of 'power-knowledge' and its subsequent reformulation in terms of the notion of 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 2010). I defer such a comparison to a forthcoming paper and limit myself to some more pointed remarks in light of the general thrust of this paper.

Which one is it? Let me explain by formulating the second objection I want to raise against the Foucauldian genealogical reconstruction. As adequately documented, the reason of state was an admission of the crisis of the Aristotelian-prudential matrix and an attempt to respond to it. The elaboration of that response remains mainly within the frame of reference of that matrix, even as it helps to recode it radically.[16]

From the 16th century onward, the idea that maintaining the social *ordo* is "part of the general divine order of the world" (Biral, 1999, p. 22) is increasingly diminished. In a sense, it was an old idea. However, it had acquired a new particular declension in the Middle Ages due to a renewed interest in Aristotle and the unifying role exercised by the Church and, by extension, a specific religious culture (Hintze, 1970; Grossi, 1995). According to this idea, "[t]he powers stand within a sacred, inviolable order, and by remaining within this order, they testify their justice" (Biral, 1999, p. 22).

At the level of the EHCG, the reason of state stands as the recognition, source, and consequence of such exhaustion. Nevertheless, only very slowly and gradually does it abandon much of the conceptual reserve of the governmental reason against which it makes a break. On the one hand, therefore, it is the expression of an epistemological posture that precedes the one introduced by modern science. On the other hand, only much later, in the hive of disciplines that Foucault places alongside the reason of state (police science, cameralism, and statistics), an apparent discontinuity with the latter begins to appear. However, it does so from a position of complete subordination to natural law and modern political science (Scattola, 2003, pp. 493-521).[17]

So where should we place the historical threshold where "the art of governing gave way to a science of government" (Sebastianelli, 2017, p. 385)?

I propose to place this threshold at the height of the emergence of physiocracy.[18] However, I must immediately clarify that physiocracy *as a science of government* marks

16. Particularly significant in this regard are the transformations to which the concept of prudence has been subjected on the threshold of modernity. From being a virtue aimed at "the goodness of the action itself, which found the ground for its justice in an objective universe," it is transformed "into a practical activity, based on empirical knowledge and skills" (Marcenò, 2011, p. 93). For a detailed analysis of these vicissitudes, see Scattola, 2003, pp. 109-521.

17. For a critique of Foucault's reconstruction – which does not invalidate its "general conception and core intention" – within this perspective, see Scattola 2006.

18. Schiera, 1977 (in Schiera, 2011) already recognized "in the enlightened codifications of the late eighteenth century and *the early economic frameworks of the physiocrats* [...] the material evidence of the non-violent modes of transition from the ancient regime to the new post-revolutionary historical phase" (p. 119, emphasis mine). Similarly, Ricciardi, 2010, attributes to the "doctrines of the physiocrats" a "transitional semantics" for the "discovery" of society and the political role adopted by the emerging social sciences (p. 35). In a more radical gesture, similar to the one with which Reinhart Koselleck, 1988 claimed that Hobbesian theory "already contains the nucleus of the bourgeois notion of the rule of law [*Rechtstaatsgedanken*]" (p. 22, translation modified), I propose to see in the physiocrats' reflections the nucleus of the constitutional praxis through which the action of the state (both in its 'liberal' and in its 'social' form) towards society was shaped from the first half of the 19th century onwards.

the colonization of the question of government by the epistemological posture of modern science. I leave in the background the question concerning whether it can be regarded as a prehistory of economic science or as its integral part.[19]

Instead, I want to emphasize that in the reflection of the physiocrats, we can see the stigmata of reductions which, as we have seen, characterize the epistemological posture of modern science.

When we deal with this, we can recognize the same need we have seen at work in Hobbesian reasoning. All of this is in a symptomatic attempt to contend with the latter for supremacy as the science of society. It is the abolition of all forms through which the government of society had hitherto been conceived, considered confusing and harmful, and a source of error.

Guillaume-François Le Trosne, for example, calls for subjecting "all received opinions [...] to scrutiny, so as not to admit anything whose evidence has not been verified, and to apply Descartes' universal doubt to all points of economic science" (Le Trosne, 2013, p. 42). The "conflict between opinions [*contrariété des sentiments*]" had to be replaced by an "exact and proven science" of the principles of the natural order, convinced that economic science was nothing but "the application of the natural order to the government of societies, [...] as constant in its principles and as provable as the natural sciences" (Le Trosne, 2013, pp. 42, 27 and 25).

Furthermore, for those who are willing to acknowledge the advances of the exact sciences in a variety of fields but equally unwilling to accept the possibility of an exact science of government of society since "it depends on an incredible number of variable circumstances that are difficult to disentangle and evaluate," one would have to reply with the presentation of a simple (matter of) fact. "There is […] *a natural*, essential and

19. For a reasoned reconstruction of this debate, see Labriola, 2004, pp. 31-82; Sebastianelli, 2019, pp. 184-215. On this topic, I merely point out – following observation by Brunner (1968b, pp. 101 and 126-127) – that physiocracy, when viewed from the standpoint of economic history as an "autonomous scientific discipline," exhibits "meta-economic" features that reflect a broader inclination of economics to be a "universal science of man and society." Unlike Brunner, however, I believe that in these characters, it is not enough to register the symptom of the persistence of "the ancient idea of the cosmos" and the "biblical-Christian conception of history" in which *ancient* European oeconomy [Ökonomik] "had its home." This is once again the broader idea of the divine government of the world (*oikonomia*). As we have seen, it served as the premise and conformity model of the art of political government. Instead, these characters are where the essence of the *new* science of government and the new rationality that guides it becomes visible. This is true both for the works of physiocrats and some modern and contemporary economists whose membership in the history of economic science has never been questioned. As Foucault (2009, p. 104) has aptly noted, two interrelated processes are involved. On the one hand, "there is a quite subtle process […] in which we can see how the science of government, the re-focusing of the economy on something other than the family, and the problem of population are all interconnected". On the other hand, "we could also say that it is thanks to the perception of the specific problems of the population, and thanks to the isolation of the level of reality that we call the economy, that it was possible to think, reflect, and calculate the problem of government outside the juridical framework of sovereignty." On economics as logic of government, see Bazzicalupo, 2016.

general *order* that embodies the constitutive and fundamental laws of all societies; *an order* from which societies cannot deviate without becoming fewer societies, without the political state losing consistency, without its members being more or less divided and in a state of violence; *an order* that cannot be completely abandoned without bringing about the dissolution of society and soon the absolute destruction of the human species." (Dupont, 1910, p. 8)

Together with a specific anthropological account, the concept of *ordre naturel* "understood as the totality of human behaviors that provide the greatest possible advantage in terms of satisfaction of needs and *jouissance*" forms "the epistemological premise and the social condition of possibility for a science of economics" (Sebastianelli, 2019, p. 171). The main idea is that an interest-driven calculus determines human behavior and that, for this reason, it constitutes an invariant that can be the subject of a science of government that claims to be accurate and rigorous, such as the political economy.

Consequently, the latter will represent, on the one hand, the dictionary by which we can translate the immutable laws of the natural order into knowledge with "systematic and arithmetical rigor" (Quesnay, 2005, p. 743). Moreover, on the other hand, the gauge – which in François Quesnay's case takes the form of his famous *Tableau économique* – will guide government action (Quesnay, 2010, p. 297) in its work of "explanation [*declaration*]," "handling [*manutention*]," and 'containment and redress' (Quesnay, 1888, pp. 376, 375 and 377) of the natural order: the maintenance, production, and reproduction of its optimal arrangements and the correction of its possible malfunctions, beginning with an overall process of '(re)orientation' of individual behaviors.[20] To govern in this context means to act in such a way as to maintain the regularity of this (new) kind of order.

With the emergence of physiocracy, a declension of the science of government and social order is defined. Within this latter, the epistemological posture of modern science finds its full expression, and which – in its various transformation, of which I cannot, of course, give a complete account in this context – will orient the history of the concept of government for a long time to come.

In a sense, until the first half of the 20th century.

20. We can explain the pronounced interest of physiocrats in public opinion and education in this sense. See Le Trosne, 1977, p. 295: "It is above all public opinion that one must try to guide: it is it that generally governs men more than reason;" Quesnay, 1888, p. 375: "But the first positive law, the primary law among all other positive laws, is *the institution of public and private instruction in the laws of the natural order* […]."

The question of government. Contemporary trajectories

To question the first half of the 20th century is to approach the present. To do so in terms of an EHCG is to make a considerable temporal leap from the historical threshold we have identified and demarcated. Consequently, it is to leave behind everything in between, which is, therefore, entirely left to be submitted to clinical and critical scrutiny.

I am aware of this. Nevertheless, in this context, I intended to write something other than an EHCG that is fully aware of the complexity of the entire time spectrum in which it developed. Besides, I take the liberty of doing so for two reasons.

First, this means diagnosing the governmental rationality in which we still live and think, and second, I think that this governmental rationality – let us call it: neoliberal – is the product of the most radical remake of the epistemological posture initiated at the beginning of the modern scientific revolution. Consequently, only by re-examining this posture is it possible to lay the foundation for a concept of government that is genuinely different from the modern and contemporary one.

I will proceed schematically.[21] To question neoliberal governmentality from its epistemological premises means examining the connection between neoliberalism's break and the break that the emergence of cybernetics has produced within the epistemological posture of modern science.

Because it is aware of the crisis of modern scientific conceptuality, cybernetics argues for rethinking the categories it underpins, especially the category of finalism. The latter, radically excluded from the specifically modern formulation of posture to which we have referred so far, has, on the contrary, formed the basis of cybernetic reflection since its beginnings.

Revised in light of the concept of negative feedback, it allows us to envision the behavior – of a machine, a living organism, a society – as the totality of all "purposeful reactions which are controlled by the error of the reaction – i.e., by the difference between the state of the behaving object at any time and the final state interpreted as the purpose" (Rosenblueth, Wiener & Bigelow, pp. 23-24).

Such a rethinking entails a new understanding of order and its organization, which is not strictly mechanical but characterized by an operational stability and ever dynamic equilibrium. It will be at the heart of an evolution in which the dynamic element plays an increasingly central role. Therefore, the idea that the state of organization of a system

21. For a more detailed account of the concept of neoliberal government (and its unthoughts) that is consistent with the methodological assumptions developed in this paper, see Bardin & Ferrari 2022.

depends solely on its ability to function by blocking out disorder, accidents, chaos, etc. (in technical language: noise) to maintain unchanged structures responsible for conserving internal order will gradually be lost. All of this will eventually lead to a model of self-organization 'from noise,' in which disorder is the very source of the creation (and constant re-creation) of an increasingly complex, comprehensive, and proper order (Ashby, 1962; Atlan, 2011; Von Foerster, 1960).

This model of (self-)organization has quickly gained currency in the humanities and social sciences as well (Mirowski, 2002; Mirowski & Nik-Khan, 2017) and at the broader level of what I have called the science of government. Within this latter, it has brought about the final transition from "theological power" to what Jean Baudrillard (2007, p. 46) has called "teleonomic power," with an apparent reference to the terminology used by molecular biology largely nurtured by cybernetic conceptuality.[22]

It is precisely on this side that the study of the epistemological posture of cybernetics provides us with valuable tools to understand in which elements lie the real break generated by neoliberal governmental rationality and the "epistemic revolution" (Ouellet, 2016) that went with it.

The point of government in a neoliberal perspective is neither to limit the freedom of initiative nor to assume that social stability depends on an invisible hand but rather to carry on a detailed regulation of liberties for the sake of the 'spontaneous' equilibrium of the markets. Never-ending data mining by increasingly conscientious and individualizing algorithms (Berns & Rouvroy, 2013; Stiegler, 2017) allows each subject's behavior to be directed in a *particular* way toward maintaining the *overall* order and stability of the system. This order and this stability, in turn, will always vary, oriented by each subject's behavior, provided it stays (and *simultaneously* in order to stay) in the few parameters necessary for its maintenance.

All the 'irrational' noise that is not immediately reducible to order and stability thus conceived is either silenced or – once neutralized – included in the pattern as a risky and unforeseen opportunity to perfect the system's survival (Castel, 1991; Dean, 1998; Ewald, 1991; Lemke, 2008; Marzocca, 2008). More radically, these elements are normatively integrated into the system's core dynamics in the form of an ethics of flexibility (Fach, 2000; Fraser, 2003), establishing the 'good' functioning of governmentality.

The government is thus resolved in the ongoing operation of protection, management, and promotion of homeostatic mechanisms deemed capable of self-regulation,

22. On both these levels, Friedrich von Hayek played a key juncture role. For an early account, see Oliva, 2016.

but in fact, selected and – if necessary – substituted with others, offering a more inclusive and complex capacity of adaptation to the macro-mechanism of the market (Bruno, 2009). This macro-mechanism is the undisputed horizon that imposes on political power the task of providing a homeostatic equilibrium functional to its progressive implementation (Supiot, 2015). With its 'soft' determinism and immanent teleology, the market thus appears to be a hypermodern version of the clockwork universe theorized in early-modern mechanical science and the vector of a similar – although different – reduction of social reality to a mathematical form.

I am tempted to say that government in its (neo)liberal variant is a well-guarded game, with control mechanisms, that becomes more pervasive the greater the freedom produced and put to use. It is indeed no coincidence that modeling techniques from game theory and operations research have played, and continue to play, a leading role in contemporary government practices.

While discussing precisely the value, productivity, and limits of game theory, Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics, writes:

> The chief criterion as to whether a line of human effort can be embodied in a game is whether there is some objectively recognizable criterion of the merit of the performance of this effort. Otherwise the game assumes the formlessness of the croquet game in *Alice in Wonderland*, where the balls were hedgehogs and kept unrolling themselves, the mallets were flamingoes, the arches cardboard soldiers who kept marching about the field, and the umpire the Queen of Hearts, who kept changing the rules and sending the players to the Headsman to be beheaded. (Wiener, 1964, pp. 25-26)

Despite Wiener's hesitation, and apart from the metaphor, I have the impression that the composition of the social, inside and outside the tight meshes of the neoliberal imaginary and the homeostatic mythologems of stability and equilibrium, is much more like *Alice*'s world than any game that well-formed rules can represent and that provides for a universal and absolute model of organization, resistant to any change. It is a complex and unpredictable 'entity.' The principles of its organization cannot be established a priori and once and for all but must represent the result of the actual – that is, not only 'communicative' but inventive – the interaction of the various levels of complexity that compose it (individuals, groups, institutions, etc.).

Here reappears the consistency of the 'something' that the epistemic apparatus 'political science-science of government' has increasingly sought to neutralize.

It is these unthoughts that an EHCP brings to light, and about which I believe a political science *à venir* should finally begin to reflect, through a new *concept* of government that does not reduce the *question* of government to a matter of fact.

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