

Governmentality and Benchmarking: theoretical reflections on an historical case

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Abstract. The paper discusses the application of Foucault's conception of «governmental» power to the technique of benchmarking. It uses an historical case study, analysing the Architects and Building Branch, a specialist unit within the Ministry of Education advising on school architecture. The paper shows that the Branch's development and diffusion of «best practice» in school building could be seen as a deployment of «governmental» power. However, a crucial weakness in such a Foucauldian account is the failure to analyse the Treasury's tendentious use of performance data from school building in the 1950s to erect the Branch as a benchmark in order to impose an «economic liberal» agenda on other government departments. The paper uses the case to question Foucault's opposition between «extrinsic» and «intrinsic» forms of «liberalism».

Keywords: governmentality, liberalism, Foucault, benchmarking, school architecture, power.

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**Gobernabilidad y análisis comparativo:
reflexiones teóricas sobre un caso histórico**

Resumen. El artículo discute la aplicación del concepto foucaultiano del «poder» gubernamental con base en un análisis comparativo. A través de un estudio de caso histórico examina la Subdirección de Arquitectos y Construcciones, unidad especializada del Ministerio de Educación, encargada de brindar asesoría en cuanto a la construcción de escuelas. En ese sentido, se evidencia que el desarrollo y la difusión de las «mejores prácticas» en dicho aspecto, podría considerarse un despliegue del poder gubernamental. Sin embargo, una deficiencia esencial de este discurso foucaultiano es que no indaga en el uso tendencioso que hizo el Ministerio de Hacienda en torno a los datos de rendimiento de la construcción de escuelas en la década de 1950 para erigir la subdirección, como un punto de referencia, a fin de imponer una agenda «liberal económica» a otros departamentos gubernamentales. Con fundamento en el aludido caso, se cuestiona la discrepancia de Foucault entre formas «extrínsecas» e «intrínsecas» de «liberalismo».

Palabras clave: gobernabilidad, liberalismo, Foucault, análisis comparativo, construcción escolar, poder.

Introduction

Benchmarking is an ubiquitous component of the public sector management (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). While the technique comes in a variety of forms (Francis and Holloway, 2007), it has generic elements: organisational performance is compared with the object of improving standards in less efficient/effective organisations through the transfer of «best practice» from the «benchmark» (Bruno and Didier, 2013; Francis and Holloway, 2007; Walgebrach and Hegele, 2001).

This paper seeks to assess the argument that the understanding of benchmarking can be advanced by applying Michel Foucault's analysis of forms of power to the study of the technique. There is, apparently, no direct source for such analysis in Foucault's own published work. The English term «benchmarking» has been imported into discussions in the French literature (Bruno, 2008; Bruno and Didier, 2013). Bruno (2008:29) has also suggested that the English term could be translated as «etallonnage des performances» (setting performance standards) or «évaluation comparative» (comparative evaluation). A comprehensive source of Foucault's writings is the four volume collection «Dits et Ecrits» (Foucault, 1994 a, b, c and d). The index to the four volumes (Foucault, 1994d) contains no reference to either the English or the two French terms. However, there is a secondary literature (Bruno, 2008; Bruno and Didier, 2013; Frandson and Triantafillou, 2011; Haahr, 2004; Triantafillou 2007, 2014) which has presented the case that the analysis of benchmarking can be developed through applying a «Foucauldian» analysis of forms of power, particularly utilising Foucault's concept of «governmentality».

A crucial element in this literature is a critique of an influential approach to the analysis of public sector benchmarking. In this approach benchmarking is a tool deployed by senior politicians and officials at a central state level. Conceptualisations of the strategic objectives of such actors vary (see Hood, 1990). However, one widely cited argument is that public sector management techniques like benchmarking allow central state actors to simultaneously constrain expenditure on public services while distancing central government from (politically contentious) «operational» decisions (Hood, 1990). However, an invariant feature of such accounts is a «top down» emphasis, which is an object of criticism in the «Foucauldian» benchmarking literature.

In this paper Foucault's concepts are discussed using a historical case study. The case examined is the substantial school building programme in England and Wales in the 1950s. The management of this programme, by the Ministry of Education, was treated, at the time, as setting a standard to which other government departments should aspire. This view has also been broadly endorsed in the subsequent historical literature (Bullock, 2002; Burke, 2013; Cowan *et al.*, 2012; Franklin, 2012; Maclure, 1984; Saint, 1987; Seaborne and Lowe, 1977).

The particular organisational innovation, which was deemed central to the success of the programme, was the creation of the Architects and Building (henceforth A and B) Branch within the Ministry of Education. While the Branch was principally staffed by architects, it sought to develop new techniques of school design which involved co-operation between architects, cost accountants, educational inspectors and teachers. The case analysis uses a variety of archival sources. Ministry of Education papers are used to illuminate the rationalia for A and B Branch design

concepts; and unpublished statistical series in these papers are relevant in re-assessing the Ministry's and the Branch's achievements in managing the school building programme. Treasury papers are also important given the Treasury's role (discussed below) in promoting the benchmark status of the Ministry and the Branch.

These papers are held in the National Archives and two other archival sources are used. David and Mary Medd (nee Crowley) were members of the architectural staff of the Branch. Mary worked in the Branch from 1949 to 1972; and David from 1949 to 1978. They were the *de facto* «theorists» of Branch practice and their papers are held in the Institute of Education (University College, London). Finally the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) archive contains important criticism, by architectural professionals, of a generic approach to school design which was effectively superseded by the design concepts of the Branch.

The paper is divided into four parts: the first discusses Foucault's distinction between «governmental» and «juridico-discursive» forms of power. The second applies a «Foucauldian» analysis to the school building case; the third explores the limitations of this analysis; and the conclusion draws the arguments together and attempts to situate the weaknesses identified in the third section in the context of theoretical tensions in Foucault's analysis of power.

Governmental and juridico-discursive forms of power

For Foucault (2012) «power» must be defined in a «broad» sense as the «mechanisms and procedures» whose effects are to «direct human

conduct» (see also Triantafillou, 2014). He also argues that there has been a «tendency» for a particular form of power, which he terms «governmental», to achieve «pre-eminence»; and that, through this process, the state has become «governmentalised» (2007:108).

«Governmental» power «directs» conduct through techniques and the knowledge(s) related to such techniques (Foucault, 1980; 1990). Thus, benchmarking involves a series of discrete but linked activities. The performance measures to be used have to be selected and this choice will necessarily structure the designation of the «benchmark» organisation. The «lessons» for other organisations to be derived from the benchmark need to be determined. The expected general improvement in performance standards require the transfer of «best practice»; and the implementation of such lessons needs to be monitored (Bruno and Didier, 2013; Dominique *et al.*, 2013). The technique thus «directs conduct» as it enjoins the undertaking of a set of practices. In turn it is also related to a «knowledge base» involving, for example, performance measurement and management; and concepts of organisational change.

The «governmentalisation» of the state is, for Foucault (2007), structured by the requirement that «governmental» power produce «positive», putatively beneficial, effects for a population. Thus, the deployment of governmental power carries the expectation that measurable «improvements» will take place across a range of social and economic indicators (Foucault, 2007; Haahr, 2004). A further characteristic of governmentality is that power is dispersed and, thus, not «found» in a central location. For Foucault it is necessary, in studying power, to go «beyond the framework of the state»; and the modern state can «only function on the basis of pre-existing powers» (1980:122). The state is «superstructural» (Foucault,

1980) because it depends, for the achievement of «positive» effects, on techniques like benchmarking and their related «knowledges» (Bruno, 2013; Triantiffilou, 2014).

Foucault contrasts governmentality to a form of power which he terms «juridico-discursive». Foucault's discussion of this form of power is, in some respects, paradoxical. On one hand it is posited as a less complex form than governmentality. However, Foucault's discussion of the juridico-discursive form involves what Minson has appropriately termed, «a certain ambiguity» (1985:82). Like governmental power juridico-discursive power is characterised by a central mechanism. This is command and juridico-discursive power has «the effect of obedience» (Foucault, 1990:85). However, command is not underpinned purely by physical force. Commands are «juridical» because they are «centred on a statement of the law» (Foucault, 1990:87); and «discursive» because they are «maintained through language or (...) through an act of discourse» (Foucault, 1990:83).

It is possible to conceptualise (at least in part) certain forms of benchmarking in «juridico-discursive» terms. Thus, for example, the UK Labour Government, in 1999, introduced legislation which made it obligatory for local authorities to produce a «Best Value Performance Plan» which, inter alia, required the authorities to compare their performance with other service providers (Entwistle and Laffin, 2005). This legislation can be viewed as combining the key features of juridico-discursive power. It involved a command with a legal status embodied in discursive forms (legislation, circulars specifying how policy should be implemented, etc.). Furthermore, this mandatory form of benchmarking appeared to emanate from a central location. The legislation was initiated by central government imposing obligations on subordinate local authorities.

Foucault sees juridico-discursive power as «negative». This «negative» characteristic is linked with the origins of this form of power which he sees as emerging from a struggle between the «great institutions of power that developed in the Middle Ages – monarchy, the state with its apparatus» and a «multiplicity of prior powers» which were «dense and entangled» (Foucault, 1990:86). In this struggle monarchy sought to create a «unitary regime (...) acting through mechanisms of interdiction and sanction» (Foucault, 1990:87). The object was to underpin the sovereignty of the «unitary regime» by breaking, or at least limiting, the capacity of decentralised powers to engage in «private settling of lawsuits» and «private wars» (Foucault, 1990:87). The object of juridico-discursive power was thus not to produce «positive» results for a population but rather to assert the authority of a single central power as an end in itself (Foucault, 2007).

The ambiguity to which Minson refers stems from the dual role of juridico-discursive power as both a functioning form of power *and* a form, which generates the «analytical error» that it is «the single mode of existence of power» (1985:82). For Foucault the «analytical error» stems from the way in which criticism of monarchical power developed *within* a juridico-discursive framework. He (1990:88) argues that «political criticism (...) which contested the substantive claims of monarchy did not challenge the principle which held (...) law to be the very form of power». Thus, for the radical republican, as for the supporter of absolutism, the object was to «capture state power» in order to issue commands with the status of laws which negated illegitimate «private» powers. Such a conception is, for Foucault, an obstacle to appreciating the attenuated role of the central state apparatus under governmentality where techniques rather than commands are the crucial mechanism through which power «works».

The example of «mandatory» benchmarking discussed above raises a further paradox. Clearly benchmarking in the form of the Labour «Best Value» legislation is not designed to be «negative». In line with benchmarking generally such interventions aim to improve the welfare of a population not to assert the central state against «private» powers. Foucault attempts to deal with such a paradox by arguing that «governmental» and «juridico-discursive» forms do not appear in a pure form but are articulated together. Thus, he argues that «many» of the «forms» of juridico-discursive power have «persisted» though they have been «gradually penetrated by (...) newer mechanisms of power» (Foucault, 1990:89) In the conclusion the tensions between the putative dominance of governmentality and the conception of forms of power articulated together will be discussed.

The distinction between governmental and juridico-discursive forms of power is also related to Foucault's discussion of liberalism, which he sees (2008:20) as introducing a «new form of rationality» in «the art of government». The crucial feature of Foucault's discussion of liberalism is not the objective of limiting the role of the state *per se* but rather the rationale for such a limitation. Foucault distinguishes an «extrinsic» and «intrinsic» rationale. The limitation is «extrinsic» where the legitimate role of government is defined by distinguishing a sphere in which citizens have obligations to the state and a sphere in which they are free (Foucault, 2008). Ultimately the distinction of spheres is grounded on an «extrinsic» reference to, for example, a putative contract between citizens and the state (Foucault 2008; Laval, 2012).

However an «intrinsically» based liberalism justifies limitations on government in terms of the perceived *effects* of excessive intervention. To

intervene «too much» is to produce governmental practice which is ill-adjusted (inadapte) (Foucault, 2008:11). This liberalism is governmental because the limitation on government is driven by the requirement to use power «positively». In this framework it is not wrong to prohibit a given activity because, for example, it infringes a fundamental «right»; but rather because the effect of the prohibition will be ineffective or counter-productive. The limitation is «intrinsic» to the practice of government. In the next section, the case is discussed in the light of these concepts.

Building cheaper and better schools: the Ministry of Education and the architects and building branch in the 1950s

The Ministry of Education in the 1950s managed a major school building programme designed to produce a substantial increase in school places (by 1960 the number of students in local authority schools, financed through local and central taxation, had increased 23 per cent over the decade, Ministry of Education, 1951; 1961). The need for this programme stemmed from a combination of policy initiatives and demographic pressures. The 1944 Education Act included a commitment (implemented in 1947) to raise the school leaving age to 15 (Cowan *et al.*, 2012). The creation of new towns and the expansion of housing estates also required the creation of new schools (Land *et al.*, 1992). Demand was also driven by the much higher post-war birth rate with the 1947 rate 28 per cent higher than that for 1945 (calculated from Lowe 1988).

However, the programme was initiated in an increasingly unfavourable economic context with the balance of payments and devaluation crises of 1947 and 1949 creating pressures to restrain public spending (Land *et al.*, 1992).

The Labour government set ceilings on the capital cost per school place in 1949. These cost limits were applied to the *nett* cost per school place. This was intended to cover elements such as the cost of school buildings including built-in furniture and fittings and associated playgrounds which could be expected not to vary greatly between schools of a given type (Ministry of Education, 1957). Features such as roads or the provision of services to the school building were not included because the Ministry believed that cost variations reflected differences in site conditions (Ministry of Education, 1957).

The cost ceilings were apparently ambitious with an initial cut in 1950 followed by another in 1951. The 1951 ceilings required a 25 per cent reduction in the nominal cost per place in secondary schools and a 30 per cent nominal cut in primary schools when set against average costs per school place in 1949 (Seaborne and Lowe, 1977). These ceilings were rendered more challenging because average costs in the building industry increased 19 per cent between 1949 and 1951 (calculated from Mitchell *et al.*, 1988). Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were also obliged to provide minimum levels of *teaching* space (previously central government had only *advised* on minimum standards considered desirable, but Section 10 of the 1944 Education required that the Minister of Education prescribe minimum accommodation standards for primary and secondary schools and the first of such standards (which covered teaching space) was published in April 1945) (Ministry of Education, 1957).

The Ministry initially deployed the Hutting Operation for the Raising of the School Leaving Age (HORSA) programme to meet the demand for more school places. This accounted for 58 per cent of new school places provided between 1945 and 1949 (calculated from Land *et al.*, 1992). This programme used prefabricated units of a generic type but it was heavily criticised by professional architects. Thus, the report of the RIBA Committee on School

Design and Construction (RIBA, 1945) questioned not only the appropriateness of the design for educational use but also standards of heating, ventilation and insulation.

A more sophisticated approach to reconciling the supply of new places with cost ceilings was the creation of the A and B Branch in 1949 (Maclure, 1984). The most innovative aspect of the Branch was the «Development Group». Its principal function was to undertake «research into building theory, collaboration and experiment» (Saint, 1987:115). An important manifestation of such experimentation was the issuing of Building Bulletins the first of which was on the design of primary schools (Ministry of Education, 1949). This enabled the Branch to analyse design practices and related techniques (such as the use of management accounting, Ministry of Education, 1951) but also to report on schools designed by Branch architects (in association with particular LEAs) (Bullock, 2002). The Bulletins were effectively a key part of the Branch's attempt to disseminate «best practice». Architects from one LEA (Hertfordshire) played a central role in the Branch. The Chief Architect at the Ministry (appointed in 1948, Maclure, 1984) and the Medds had worked in the Hertfordshire school building programme and the Medd Papers show the key role of this LEA as a *de facto* network where individuals, who had worked in Hertfordshire, moved between a range of key public sector architectural posts (Institute of Education, 1981).

There were a number of distinctive features to the Branch approach to school design. A central objective was to reduce the *overall* area per school place while maximising *teaching* space. This approach could reduce costs since, *ceteris paribus*, a school with a smaller overall area per place would also have a lower cost per place (National Archives, 1950a). A number of tactics were proposed. Spaces like dining areas or corridors could be used for teaching

by incorporating sliding or folding doors (Ministry of Education, 1950). Circulation space could be reduced by configuring rooms so that broadly related rooms such as a general workshops and science rooms were grouped together (Kay and Medd, 1965). Circulation space could also be reduced by designing teaching rooms on a more general purpose basis thus minimising the need for students to transfer between rooms (Johnson-Marshall, 1951).

Observation of teachers and children was also a crucial component of A and B design practice (Kay and Medd, 1965). As the Medds (1971) put it, architects and educators should be «joint professional colleagues». The Branch design approach was also adjusted to local conditions. Hertfordshire had pioneered extensive use of prefabrication in school building (Saint 1987). However, prefabrication was not, for the Branch, a universally prescribed method. Thus in the Building Bulletin discussing a Branch designed junior school in Amersham it was argued that extensive prefabrication had not been used because the building programme of this LEA was too small to justify it (Ministry of Education, 1958).

The Ministry's management of the school building programme was quickly portrayed as a «success story». The Cabinet Building Committee asked the industrialist W. H. Pilkington to assess the Ministry's cost control performance in school building. Pilkington was impressed and concluded that the approach and methods of the Ministry of Education «should be studied by other departments» (National Archives, 1952a), a view reiterated nine years later by the Select Committee on Estimates (1961) in its report on school building.

Having outlined the case, it is now possible to turn to how far it can be analysed in terms of the «Foucauldian» concepts of forms of power outlined earlier. For Foucault governmental power works through the impact

on «conduct» of techniques. The Branch effectively devised what could be seen as an intermediate cost control performance measure. If the overall area per school place could be cut this could be expected to exert a downward pressure on the overall cost per place (the final cost performance measure). The Branch also proposed a series of design tactics to achieve better performance on the intermediate and thus the final cost indicator. These techniques could thus be viewed as attempting to «govern conduct». Furthermore, a statistical series in the National Archives (1961) on area per school place in primary and secondary schools supports the view that Branch attempts to govern the «conduct» of LEA architects were effective. In 1949 average area per school place in primary schools in England and Wales was 67.3 square feet; and in secondary schools 110.4 square feet. By 1954 average area per place in primary schools had fallen to 41.9 square feet (a reduction of 39 per cent relative to 1949); and in secondary schools in 1954 average area per place was 74.2 square feet (a reduction of 33 per cent from 1949).

Governmental power was also deployed to achieve «positive» effects. The policy of expanding educational provision was increasingly seen as a driver of economic growth (Dean, 1992). This was reflected in the language used by the Minister of Education, Sir David Eccles. He argued that the immediate post-war world was an «age of science and technology»; education was the «soil» of an expanding economy while other social services were the «fruit» (National Archives, 1956). Branch practice was designed to reconcile this putatively desirable expansion of educational provision with budgetary constraints.

Power was also dispersed. The Development Group was a research organisation operating with considerable autonomy. The character of this autonomy was reflected in the status accorded to the architectural

«technicians». Thus, the Chief Architect of the Ministry was the joint head of the Branch with an equivalent not a subordinate status to his administrative counterpart. The overwhelming bulk of school building was also undertaken by LEAs and the Branch sought to influence LEA building practice but it could not issue commands. The achievement of the key policy objectives depended on the effectiveness of the relevant technicians (architects, cost accountants, school inspectors). This was reflected in the *de facto* rejection of HORSAs as imposing a crude generic solution which effectively produced «ill-adapted» government.

Finally the «art of government» deployed could be seen as an instance of governmentalised liberalism. The Branch's refusal to prescribe the use of prefabrication was based on the argument that it was not appropriate in the circumstances of LEAs with limited school building programmes. In the next section the discussion focuses on the role of the Treasury in establishing the status of the Ministry and the Branch as a benchmark in the management of public sector capital programmes and how the examination of the role of the Treasury raises question for a reading of the case in terms of a dominant «governmentality».

«Appropriate» government? The Treasury and the Constitution of the branch as a benchmark

The Treasury was in a position to play a salient role in the creation of a benchmark status for the Branch because, central to its departmental role, it was the control of public expenditure. Thus, the Treasury official who presented the Treasury's evidence to the Select Committee on Estimates

in 1961 (J.A.C. Robertson) had also been asked (by the Treasury Ministers) to produce a substantial report on «Control of Government Expenditure on Building» (National Archives 1959). This report compared the management of capital projects in hospitals, schools, universities, housing and the police service. The Treasury was consistent in its view that the work of the Ministry and the Branch set a standard which should be emulated across the public sector. In 1952 a Treasury official was arguing that the Ministry of Health should set up its own version of the Branch. School building was said to operate on «functional principles» and if analogous techniques were applied to hospital building, this could lead to «large economies without lowering standards» (National Archives, 1952b). Later, the Treasury cited Pilkington's favourable assessment of the cost reductions achieved by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health officials were urged to explore «the possibility of putting hospital building (...) on the same basis as educational building» (National Archives, 1953a). Robertson's report commended the «fresh approach to building» by the Ministry of Education, which had led to «notable economies over the years» (National Archives, 1959); and in his evidence to the Select Committee on Estimates (1961:62) he claimed that the experience of school building could be «susceptible of increasing application in other fields».

The benchmark status of the Ministry and the Branch had two key dimensions. The first was the achievement of staying within apparently demanding cost limits. In this respect a consistent measure of cost control was used. This was the real (inflation adjusted) «nett» cost per school place. The base year for this measure was the cost per place figure in 1949 and it was regularly deployed during the 1950s and early 1960s. It was used in Pilkington's Report (National Archives, 1952a): by the Minister of

Education (Florence Horsburgh) in a memorandum to the Cabinet Building Committee (National Archives, 1952c); by the Treasury in its attempts to induce the Ministry of Health to follow the example of school building (National Archives 1952b; 1953a); by the Ministry of Education (1957) in its history of post-war school building; and in the Treasury's evidence to the Select Committee on Estimates (1961).

However, it was also argued that the Ministry's approach to school building was not only cheaper but more effective. Pilkington's report (National Archives, 1952a) asserted that schools built since the imposition of the cost per place ceilings were «educationally better». He did not discuss the basis for this claim. However, Robertson's report did specify why such schools could be regarded as «better». They were «designed more closely in relation to their educational purpose and function» and thus responded to «user requirements» (National Archives, 1959).

At the beginning of this section it was suggested that the Treasury's constitution of the Ministry and the Branch as a benchmark raised problems for a «Foucauldian» analysis. It might appear that such view is questionable. Thus, for example, the school building programme could be argued to have performed impressively in cost control terms (with cost per place in inflation adjusted terms 50 per cent lower in 1961 than in 1949, Select Committee on Estimates 1961:XIX). Furthermore, the chosen cost control measure appears reasonable since the cost of relatively standardised features of school building were adjusted for the overall building cost index. Equally Robertson's effectiveness criteria could be viewed as reflecting the Branch's practice of formulating design proposals with reference to the practice of teachers and pupils. Thus the Treasury could be seen as operating within a framework of «governmentalised liberalism».

The Treasury's support for the benchmark status of the Ministry reflected the «superstructural» status of the state under governmentality. «Appropriate» government was driven «from below» via the techniques of cost control and functional design developed by the Branch and diffused to LEA building practice. However, if the Treasury was practising an «appropriate» form of government then this suggests that the benchmark itself was «appropriate». To assess how far this was the case three issues will be discussed: the status of the cost metric; the question of the «functional» approach to school design; and the issue of how far Branch practice was transferable between government departments.

There are two related difficulties with the cost metric. The metric consistently compared the average nett cost per place in 1949 with a current inflation adjusted cost per place measure. The first problem with such comparisons is that they can give no idea of the *trajectory* of change. Thus, at one extreme cost reductions could take the form of consistent year on year improvements at a relatively constant level. On the other hand, improvements could be dramatic in a given sub-period but then fall off or plateau (this issue is also relevant for benchmarking in the private sector see, for example the cogent analysis of Williams *et al.*, 1992). The second problem is the status of the cost standard in the base year. If this were relatively «generous» then subsequent cost reductions could be seen as less impressive. These two issues are related because, if the base standard was relatively «loose», it could be anticipated that rapid early cost reduction could have been achieved by «picking the low hanging fruit».

In the case of school building there is compelling evidence that cost standards in the base year were not exacting *and* that cost reductions operated for a relatively short period but there was subsequently a plateau in

real average cost per school place. In response to Treasury encouragement to adopt Branch methods a Ministry of Health official argued that the reductions in cost per school place was «only possible because of antecedent lavishness» (National Archives, 1953b). This view was also admitted within the Treasury. In his 1959 report Robertson referred to «educational building» in 1949 as having the «general reputation (...) in government circles including the Treasury, of being costly (...) and perhaps extravagant» (National Archives, 1959). He reiterated this view in his evidence to the Select Committee on Estimates (1961:61) referring to the «feeling» before the introduction of the cost per place limits that «value for money on school building was not being achieved».

The trajectory of cost reduction was characterised by rapid early improvements followed by a plateau. The average inflation adjusted cost per place in primary schools fell by 53 per cent between 1949 and 1961; and the corresponding fall for secondary schools was 51 per cent: but average cost per place as early as 1954 was 51 per cent lower than the 1949 base in primary schools and 49 per cent lower in secondary schools (National Archives, 1961). There were subsequently small fluctuations with the lowest real average cost per place figures in both primary and secondary schools attained in 1958 but average cost per place then rose slightly. In effect real average cost per place plateaued in schools in England and Wales from the mid-1950s. A broadly similar pattern applied in average area per school place. Average area per place fell by 38 per cent in primary schools and 34 per cent in secondary schools between 1949 and 1961: but average area per place had already fallen by 38 per cent in primary schools by 1954; and by 33 per cent in secondary schools (National Archives, 1961). There was thus both a case that cost reductions needed to be seen in the context

of «antecedent lavishness»; and that the trajectory of cost reductions was heavily «front loaded».

It is now necessary to turn to the *de facto* «effectiveness» benchmark, the claim that the Branch approach to school design responded to «user requirements». This phrase was used in Robertson's 1959 report but it was accompanied by ambivalence as to how the «user» was defined. Thus Robertson stated that the term did not «always» mean the «direct user» but could extend to a «representative» such as a member of the «inspectorate of the Ministry of Education» (National Archives, 1959). Such view raises an obvious problem. If the «user» could be a «representative» of how, if at all, were the «needs» of the «direct user» reflected in the suggestions of the «representative»? This issue was particularly salient for the Branch. The Branch's focus on teacher observation raises the question of how the teachers observed were selected. The Medds were clear that their reference point was teachers «identified as leading practitioners» who were introduced to the architects by «wise educators of experience» (Medd and Medd, 1971:7) usually drawn from the Ministry's Inspectorate (Burke, 2013; Kay and Medd, 1965).

For the Branch generally, and particularly for the Medds, such teachers were adherents of a «child centred» approach to education (Burke, 2013; Franklin, 2012). Kevin Brehony has pointed out that care is needed in using this concept since a «unified child-centred position (...) is valid only at a high level of abstraction» (1992:198) but he argued that it was possible to «broadly» define «child centred education» as «taking as its starting point the educational needs of the child in a particular stage of its development» as against «transmitting that knowledge which is held to be most worthwhile at a given point in time» (for a similar view see Tisdall, 2017).

In a lecture, given in 1969, David Medd argued that «children learn at different rates» and that «educational development is brought about by experience in using the mental processes through observation, selection, thinking out and finding out» (cited in Franklin, 2012:324).

Such thinking, naturally, fed into the school design approach of the Medds. In an unpublished manuscript of 2009 David Medd stressed that his and Mary's approach to school design sought to break with «the dominance of the classroom» where children were not expected to be active learners but to «pay attention» and «keep still» (cited in Burke, 2012:154; see also Medd and Medd, 1971).

While the Branch approach did give a clear educational reference point for «functional design» it raised formidable problems for the concept of «user needs». The practitioners who constituted the reference point could be expected, by virtue of their «leading» status, *not* to be representative of the teaching profession (Franklin, 2012). Thus, when David Medd returned (in 1982) to Woodside School, which he and Mary had designed in the mid-1950s, he expressed his disappointment that teachers there had failed to utilise the scope for new teaching methods which the design allowed (Burke, 2013; see also Galton, 1987 for evidence of the relative independence of teaching styles from classroom layout). This disappointment was interestingly prefigured in report on the school, in 1958, by Robin Tanner, a member of the Ministry's inspectorate who regularly worked with the Medds (Burke, 2013). Tanner found the school design «far and away the best (...) I have seen» but the teaching was characterised by «rigid formality» (Institute of Education, 1958).

In its exhortations to the Ministry of Health to follow Branch practice the Treasury argued that such an approach to building design would

meet the «needs» of «hospital staff» (National Archives, 1952b). Yet, the irony of the focus on «leading practitioners was that the «average teacher» was not likely to be «good enough» for exemplary school architecture (for evidence on the relatively small proportion of teachers committed to «child centred education» see Galton, 1987).

The final problem with the benchmark is the issue of transferability. Transferability pre-supposed that there were not significant inter-departmental differences. This issue was particularly salient in the case of the Ministry of Health. A central difference between health and education was the size of the respective capital programmes. Thus a Ministry of Health official responded to Treasury exhortations to follow Branch practice by outlining the difference. The Ministry of Education «was faced with the problem of providing a large number of new buildings of much the same kind» (National Archives, 1953c). In contrast, the Ministry of Health with a capital programme «one fifth of the size of the education one» was focussed on «adaptations and extensions of existing buildings» where the planning of such adaptations were «largely dictated by the existing buildings» (National Archives, 1953c). The pattern of a National Health Service capital programme consisting of piecemeal patching up of existing hospitals was indisputable and had been accepted by the Treasury (see, for example, National Archives, 1950b; 1954). However, the difficulties which the differences in the character of the capital programmes raised were not examined by the Treasury.

The Treasury thus selectively used evidence on the school building programme to create a benchmark in the A and B Branch, whose performance could be questioned on a number of dimensions. In the conclusion the argument is drawn together and an attempt is made to link the

problems identified in this section to tensions in Foucault's theoretical framework.

Conclusion

The case study supports certain key arguments in the Foucauldian benchmarking literature. The argument was developed using the case study of the management of the 1950s school building programme in England and Wales. The A and B Branch could reasonably be seen as an instance of «governmental» power in operation. While the Branch was created by central government it did not operate through the mechanism of command. It was designed to create and disseminate «best practice» LEAs were not obliged to follow Branch prescriptions, but Branch tactics designed to reduce overall area per school place did appear to exert an influence on LEA practice. The «power mechanism» was thus distinct from the «top down» structure assumed in initiatives like Labour's «Best Value» policy.

However the Foucauldian framework is seriously flawed with respect to the role of the Treasury. The logic of the «superstructural» role of central state institutions was that departments like the Treasury were effectively passive. The Treasury merely reflected the achievements of «techniques» stemming «from below». This is untenable. The Treasury selectively used the evidence to create a problematic «success story». The issues of «antecedent lavishness»; the *de facto* cost plateau; the ambiguous status of «the user»; and of transferability were never critically engaged.

It is now possible to move to the broader implications of Foucault's analysis of forms of power. A central difficulty is Foucault's use of polar opposi-

tions in his analysis. Such systematic oppositions can be seen in the case of «governmental» and «juridico-discursive» forms of power (for an earlier example of analogous oppositions in his work see Foucault, 1977). Governmental power is designed to achieve positive effects, while juridico-discursive power aims to negate challenges to a «unitary» regime. Governmental power is dispersed and «comes from below»: juridico-discursive power stems from a central location. The mechanisms of governmental power (reflecting the necessary variety of techniques) are diverse but juridico-discursive power involves a consistent recourse to «interdiction and sanction» (Foucault, 1990:87).

This use of oppositions extends to the «governmental» and «juridico-discursive» modalities of liberalism. The «intrinsic» limits to government in the former focusing on the «effects» of government are counterposed to the «extrinsic» recourse to principles of political legitimacy in the latter. However, if we return to the case of the Treasury it is possible to see how such postulated oppositions are problematic.

The tendentious character of the Treasury's account of the benchmark status of the Branch raises the question of whether there was an underlying agenda which structured this approach. Bridge and Lowe (1998:12) have characterised the attitude of Treasury officials to expenditure on the welfare state in the 1950s as «hostile». In line with this characterisation the historical literature on the period (see, for example Lowe, 1989; Tomlinson, 1998) is replete with examples of questionable presentation of data on economic growth and social services expenditure by the Treasury giving a picture of the welfare state as a «burden». In this context the A and B benchmark can be seen as conveying a «congenial» political message. A «well managed» capital expenditure programme meant that «more» could be achieved for «less».

In characterising the basis of this Treasury «hostility» Bridgen and Lowe (1998:9,12) have argued Treasury views of the welfare state in the 1950s were similar to the «economic liberal» wing of the Conservative Party in this period. In particular they see this form of economic liberalism as viewing the welfare state as a source of inefficiency, «dependency» and the promotion of «producer» rather than «consumer» interests (Bridgen and Lowe, 1998:9,12, see also Peden, 2000).

In characterising the Treasury standpoint Bridgen and Lowe (1998) use the term «liberalism». This raises the question as to whether this form of «liberalism» can be encompassed within Foucault's «governmental» and «juridico-discursive» forms. This opposition counterposes a «liberalism based on *a priori* political principles («extrinsic») with one which is calculative of the effects of «excessive» intervention («intrinsic»). However, the Treasury form of «liberalism» is consistent with neither of these categories. Underlying the Treasury hostility to expenditure on the welfare state is a conception of the capitalist economy as delivering the virtues of competition (Peden, 2000). This can be seen if we consider the three arguments against an expanded welfare state in this discourse. Inefficiency putatively stems from the absence of competition, resources are allocated not «earned»; dependency stems from the abridgement of competitive disciplines on the workforce; and producer interests are promoted at the expense of consumers because producers seek to guarantee state subvention of their provision.

Various tactics «follow» from such a position. It is seen as desirable to restrict state provision. Thus the post Second World War Treasury sought to abolish certain components of the National Health Service (dental, ophthalmic services); to postpone the raising of the school leaving age;

and to increase the age at which the state pension could be drawn (Peden, 2000). The imposition of charges for public services was also consistently favoured (Peden, 2000).

This form of «liberalism» is neither «governmental/intrinsic» nor «juridico-discursive/extrinsic». It is not calculative because the competitive capitalist economy is perceived as having invariant effects, thus the perpetually problematic character of state provision/finance. However these invariant effects do not refer to principles of political legitimacy (the appropriate spheres of state authority and of individual freedom) but rather to an *a priori* conception of how competitive economic mechanisms «work».

Finally, it is necessary to explore why Foucault's argument cannot encompass this *a priori* economic liberalism. To understand this it is necessary to return to the governmental/juridico-discursive opposition. This opposition encompasses what may be termed a «cognitive asymmetry». In part this is reflected in the distinct cognitive statuses of the two forms. Governmentality is a mechanism of power, it shows how power «works». However juridico-discursive power is *both* a functioning form of power *and* an obstacle to a full understanding of the mechanisms of power. However, the cognitive asymmetry goes further. Governmentality is posited as the progressively dominant form of power (Foucault, 2007). This «tendency» can be related back to two linked elements. It is characterised both by a «positive» object and by working through techniques designed to achieve such «positive» effects. Thus we have the triumph of a modern form of power combining the object of enhancing the welfare of a population with cognate techniques over an outmoded form (juridico-discursive power) deficient both in terms of its objects and methods. In this

respect an *a priori* economic liberalism of the Treasury type is literally «unthinkable» in Foucault's framework. The analysis of economic effects has to be calculative not part of a given invariant economic framework.

It also follows from this that Foucault's argument that forms of power are articulated together is merely gestural. Thus in a discussion of why juridico-discursive power is an obstacle to the full understanding of power Foucault (1990:89) postulates that it forces us to «conceive of power in terms of a historical form» which is «transitory», while governmental power has taken «charge of man's existence» (for excellent analyses of the teleological character of Foucault's analysis of forms of power see Dupont and Pearce, 2001 and Curtis 2003).

Foucault has, in some respects rightly, been praised for his early perceptiveness regarding the importance of what, for good or ill, has been termed «neo-liberalism» for contemporary government (Mirowski, 2014). Thus his discussion of «German» and «American» forms of «liberalism' in his 1978-9 College de France course (Foucault, 2008) preceded the coming into office of the Thatcher and Reagan governments. However it is perhaps one of the ironies of his treatment of forms of power that it is effectively unable to analyse how *a priori* economic liberalism at a central state level impacts on public sector management techniques like benchmarking.

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