Part III
Self and Politics

Introduction

Politics always implies an idea of the persons governed. Consequently, this section brings together analyses of political developments paying due heed to the relevance will is afforded in each of them. ‘What is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?’ (Madison quoted in Barber, 1984/2003, p. 679) – with reference to James Madison, Benjamin Barber identifies it as a commonplace ‘that particular understandings of political life are intimately associated with particular views of human nature’ (1984/2003, p. 679). This ‘commonplace,’ however, is pivotal for the analyses of political rationalities. As political rationalities address the adequacy of political actions and authorities along principles and ideals, they have both an epistemic and a moral form. In this vein, the idiom of political rationalities proves to be not just mere rhetoric, but the performative articulation of reality’s amenability to political deliberations (Rose and Miller, 1992, p. 177). In particular, the capacity of self-regulation by way of individual autonomy is a key issue: its specific conceptions vary between holding it as a prerequisite, a reason, or an effect of political deliberation, and it is around this issue that different political rationalities and governmental technologies can be discerned.

The self as a willing one is at the core of liberal political thought: assuming that individuals are rational maximizers of pre-political preferences, liberalism holds the liberty of the person as a primary value. This *a priori* sets a tight limit to state action. Any state action aiming at other objectives than the coexistence of freedoms is deemed illegitimate. The individual is free to do anything except to harm others; he or she is responsible for whatever action is pursued. Welfarism, however, focuses on the individual in two totally different views, the dangerous and the endangered individual, and
relies on an idea of the social that is completely absent in liberal thought. Taking the social as ‘a causal force with its own natural laws’ (Cruikshank), problems are not to be reduced to a result of individual failures but are to be viewed from the interdependence between people. The social constraints and conditions of voluntary action thus come to the fore giving rise to a more complex account of what political action is about: on the one hand, the defense of society against dangerous individuals and, on the other hand, the defense of individuals against the risks of sociality (Donzelot, 1988).

Against such an idea of the social and its implications, Margaret Thatcher’s often-quoted statement ‘there is no such thing as society’ (1987) signaled the restoration of the liberal idea of society as merely the sum of individuals solely responsible for their own well-being. Neoliberal politics thus is based on the responsibilization of individuals using free will as the basic criterion for attributing responsibility. In this understanding, responsibilization operates as a building block for creating selves that willingly refrain from endangering society.

Indeed, the rise of neoliberalism ‘is accompanied by the proliferation of new technologies of government that “arise out of the shifting of responsibilities from governmental agencies and authorities to organizations without electoral accountability and responsibility (for example, the ‘privatization’ of ‘public’ utilities, the civil service, prisons, insurance and security)” (Isin and Wood). In fact, it can be said that the task of government today is no longer engaged in traditional planning, but is more involved in enabling, inspiring, and assisting citizens to take responsibility for social problems in their communities, and formulating appropriate orientations and rationalities for their actions’ (Ilcan and Basok, 2004, p. 132). The idea of those governed is a decisive element inherent in such formulations.

In this vein, John Clarke, Janet Newman, and Louise Westmarland in Chapter 5 explore the role of conceptions of the consumer in the reform of public services in the UK. New Labour’s articulation of the citizen-consumer started off as a critique of a ‘rationing culture’. In a neoliberal style of thought, New Labour locates the consumer as a ‘willing self’: a subject capable of self-direction, but hitherto unreasonably constrained by state or regulatory conditions. Furthermore, New Labour’s consumer discourse inverted the associations of market as an inequality-producing mechanism and state as an equality-producing mechanism: New Labour argued that the state and its public services have created inequality and that choice could be the remedy to produce equality, for example, along issues of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and disability.
Clarke and his colleagues employed questionnaires, interviews, and group discussions to find out whether users of public services viewed themselves as consumers of services. Their study showed that a significant number of people neither identified as consumers nor as citizens, but located themselves either in ‘patient/user’ or ‘public/community’ relationships. With regard to these findings, Clarke and colleagues challenge what, as they maintain, a number of studies of governmentality assume too readily: that discourses translate into practices and that discursively constituted subjections evoke the subjects they seek. As the interviewees showed skeptical, cynical, distanced, and reluctant responses when talking about themselves as being expected to be ‘consumers,’ Clarke and colleagues portray them as ‘subjects of doubt’ answering back to the discursively constituted subjections and ultimately proving to be rather unwilling selves.

In the guise of US neoconservatism, Barbara Cruikshank, however, observes a political conception that diagnoses neoliberal politics and its discursive preoccupation with willing selves as working far too well: whereas neoliberal policies rely upon the autonomy and economic rationality of the individual will to replace governmental functions, neoconservatives deem the willing self an effect of neoliberal governance that should be tamed by measures of remoralization. Market rationality without any state intervention, so goes neoconservative belief, cannot produce the moral ground on which it stands and therefore the neoliberal retreat of state action in favor of the market principle is a fatal undertaking. ‘Neocons’ claim authoritarian state intervention to be the appropriate remedy against a force produced by neoliberal policy and conceived of as dangerous: the free will. In Chapter 6 Cruikshank takes up the question of whether or not entirely new forms of power have emerged in the present political context, which she characterizes as ‘neo-politics’. Her analysis concentrates upon neoconservative reforms of disciplinary power that take sexuality and family formation as their targets in the effort to revive the ‘traditional family’ and civil society. These reforms are revealed as a new configuration of power/knowledge in which the will is no longer useful as an instrument and effect of power. Rather, the will is treated as an obstacle to good government.

Mariana Valverde in Chapter 7 focuses on yet another transformation in governing practices and their conceptions of the persons governed. She describes this transformation as a movement from state-wide social planning to what she calls targeted governing. Governance of this type dispenses with the policing of cities or nations as a whole; instead, high-risk spaces, high-risk people, or risk factors are identified as targets of intervention. As city or state-wide social planning requires surveillance
over a whole territory and population, this transformation might be
deeled the death of the dream of the panopticon caused by practical
and legal difficulties. Valverde, however, does not see targeted governance
solely as a more modest proposal motivated by the recognition of the
panopticon’s failures. According to her observation, targeted governance
is not only touted as more practical or more respectful of privacy than
universal governance, but also as more desirable in normative terms.
Now that the effort to govern society or the person as a whole has come
to appear utopian or even dangerous, other operations are called for,
operations aligning power with particular knowledge practices such as
‘evidence-based’ medicine.

By way of exploring the contemporary medical treatment of alcoholism,
Valverde shows that instead of systematically treating the person identi-
fied as an alcoholic as a whole, drugs are used to selectively affect an iso-
lated process in the brain in order to produce an adjustment. As the
ideas of normalization and pathologization of the person give way to
the adjustment and correction of brain disorders, identity-based gover-
nance may be waning. Nevertheless, a new identity regime and a new
panopticon can be observed to be emerging on the basis of the identifi-
cation of ever-new forms of ‘targets’ for governance.

Whereas the practices scrutinized by Valverde suggest an end of the
person ‘as we know it,’ the arrangements analyzed by both Cruikshank
and Clarke and his colleagues all adhere to concepts of personhood.
In either case, however, the will proves to be a specific target of self-
regulation – a target to be affected by medication, remoralizing measures,
or the demand to choose.

References