From Discipline to Flexibilization?
Rereading Foucault in the Shadow of Globalization

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Michel Foucault was the great theorist of the fordist mode of social regulation. Writing at the zenith of the postwar Keynesian welfare state, he taught us to see the dark underside of even its most vaunted achievements. Viewed through his eyes, social services became disciplinary apparatuses, humanist reforms became panoptical surveillance regimes, public health measures became deployments of biopower, and therapeutic practices became vehicles of subjection. From his perspective, the components of the postwar social state constituted a carceral archipelago of disciplinary domination, all the more insidious because self-imposed.

Granted, Foucault did not himself understand his project as an anatomy of fordist regulation. Positing a greater scope for his diagnosis, he preferred to associate disciplinary power with “modernity” simpliciter. And most of his readers, including me, followed suit. As a result, the ensuing debates turned on whether the Foucauldian picture of modernity was too dark and one-sided, neglecting the latter’s emancipatory tendencies.¹

Today, however, circumstances warrant a narrower reading. If we now see ourselves as standing on the brink of a new, postfordist epoch of globalization, then we should reread Foucault in that light. No longer an interpreter of modernity per se, he becomes a theorist of the fordist mode of social regulation, grasping its inner logic, like the Owl of Minerva, at the moment of its historical waning. From this perspective, it is significant that his great works of social analysis – *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *Discipline and Punish*, *The History of Sexuality*, volume one – were written in the 1960s and 1970s, just as the OECD countries abandoned Bretton Woods, the international financial framework that undergirded national Keynesianism and thus made possible the welfare state. In other words, Foucault mapped the contours of the disciplinary society just as the ground was being cut out from under it. And although it is only now with hindsight becoming clear, this was also the moment at which discipline’s successor was struggling to be born. The irony is plain: whether we call it postindustrial society or neoliberal globalization, a new regime oriented to “deregulation” and “flexibilization” was about to take shape just as Foucault was conceptualizing disciplinary normalization.

Of course, to read Foucault in this way is to problematize his relevance to the present. If he theorized fordist regulation, then how does his diagnosis relate to
postfordism? Is his account of the disciplinary society dépassé? Or does the regulatory grammar of fordism also subtend neoliberal globalization? In what follows, I shall examine such questions while steering clear of both of those hypotheses. Proposing a third, “transformationalist” interpretation, I shall maintain that while the emerging postfordist mode of social regulation diverges sufficiently from the fordist one to preclude simple extension of the Foucauldian analysis of discipline, that analysis can still serve to illuminate it. More precisely, it can inspire us to creatively transform Foucauldian categories to account for new modes of “governmentality” in the era of neoliberal globalization.

1. Conceptualizing Fordist Discipline

To conceptualize discipline as the fordist mode of social regulation is to bring together Foucauldian and Marxian categorizations. Whether or not Foucault himself would have countenanced the association is a question that could well be debated, as one can find textual support for both sides.2 Here, however, I pass over that issue, as my intention is not to be faithful to Foucault. I seek, rather, to historicize him, just as he himself sought to historicize many others, not least among them Marx. In my effort, as in his, historicization means recontextualization, rereading texts in light of categories and problems not available to their authors. And so in this sense I shall be faithful to him after all.

So: discipline as the fordist mode of social regulation. Let me begin to unpack the meaning of that hypothesis by explaining what I mean by fordism. As I use the term, “fordism” covers the period of “the short twentieth century,” from the First World War to the fall of Communism. In this period, capitalism generated a distinctive mode of accumulation, premised on mass industrial production, mass commodity consumption, and the vertically integrated corporation. But fordism was not simply a matter of economics. Rather, fordist accumulation mechanisms were embedded in, and dependent upon, a facilitating shell of social, cultural, and political arrangements. In the First World, one such arrangement was the family wage, which linked labor markets to emerging gender norms and family forms, while fostering an orientation to privatized domestic consumption. Another was a burgeoning consumer culture, adumbrated through advertising, mass media, and mass entertainment. Importantly, some of fordism’s most characteristic first-world institutions did not fully develop until after World War Two: the “class compromise” that incorporated labor as a major player in national polities; the Keynesian welfare state, which stabilized national markets and afforded social entitlements to national citizens; and, as mentioned above, an international financial system that enabled national-state steering of national economies. Finally, as these last points suggest, fordism was an international phenomenon organized along national lines. Disproportionately benefiting the wealthy countries of the North Atlantic while depending on colonial (and later, postcolonial) labor and
materials, it fostered national aspirations and institutional forms in the Third World, even as it stunted development of the economic and political capacities needed to realize them. Also central were anti-fascism and anti-communism. In a century of virtually unending hot and cold world wars, fordist states fatefully commixed private industry with publicly financed military production, while also creating international organizations pledged to respect their national sovereignty. The result was a multifaceted social formation. A historically specific phase of capitalism, yet not simply an economic category, fordist was an international configuration that embedded mass production and mass consumption in national frames.

Understood in this way, what does fordist have to do with Foucault? To establish the link, we must assume that fordist was not just a set of mutually adapted institutions. We must posit, rather, that subtending those institutions was a distinctive set of regulatory mechanisms which suffused them with a common ethos. Widely diffused throughout society, these small-scale techniques of coordination organized relations on the “capillary” level: in factories and hospitals, in prisons and schools, in state welfare agencies and private households, in the formal associations of civil society and informal daily interaction. The “micropolitical” counterpart of fordist accumulation, these practices of “governmentality” embodied a distinctive “political rationality.” Reducible neither to raison d’état nor to universal instrumental reason, the regulatory grammar of fordist operated far beneath the commanding heights. Yet it was equally far removed from “traditional” social regulation by customs and values. Organizing individuals, arraying bodies in space and time, coordinating their forces, transmitting power among them, this mode of governmentality ordered ground-level social relations according to expertly designed logics of control. The upshot was a historically new mode of social regulation – a fordist mode suited to nationally bounded societies of mass production and mass consumption.

So far I have sketched the idea of fordist regulation in the abstract. Now I must fill in its qualitative character. Exactly what sort of governmentality is proper to fordist? What constitutes the specificity of its characteristic ordering mechanisms and political rationality? The answers, I suggest, can be found in Foucault’s account of disciplinary biopower. But this suggestion raises serious problems. What in Foucauldian discipline is specifically fordist? Moreover, what should we make of the fact that Foucault located many of discipline’s defining moments long prior to the twentieth century – in Enlightenment medical reforms, Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, and nineteenth-century uses of population statistics? Finally, how shall we understand the fact that although Foucault never thematized the problem of scale, he nevertheless implicitly situated his analysis of discipline in relation to the national/international nexus?

To begin with the historical problem: it is certainly true that Foucault traced the origins of discipline to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But he also claimed to be writing “the history of the present.” Thus, we are justified, I
contend, in reading his early material through the prism of genealogy (his word). In that case, the clinic and the prison appear as early and still isolated proving grounds for regulatory practices that became fully developed, operational, and hegemonic only much later, in the twentieth century. On this reading, for which one could cite textual support, the disciplinary society emerged in its own right only after the general diffusion of techniques that had been pioneered much earlier, in scattered discrete institutions. Only then, with the advent of fordism, did discipline become generalized and emblematic of society at large.

Not only is this hypothesis historically plausible, but it also affords some clues to our two other questions: the qualitative character of fordist governmentality and the problem of scale. In particular, it suggests three defining features of that mode of social regulation, now interpreted as Foucauldian discipline: totalization, social concentration within a national frame, and self-regulation. Let me elaborate each in turn, drawing largely on US examples, construed in Foucauldian terms.

First of all, fordist discipline was totalizing, aimed at rationalizing all major aspects of social life, including many never before subject to deliberate organization. Animated by a passion for control, Henry Ford’s managers sought to rationalize not only factory production but also the family and community life of their workers, on the assumption that work habits began in the home. In the teens and twenties, likewise, US reformers began to build municipal, state, and federal regulatory agencies aimed at ensuring public health and safety. The same period saw the proliferation of codified bodies of rationalizing social expertise: manuals of child-rearing, household management (“home economics”), social work (casework), psychotherapy (medicalized and lay-popular), and industrial psychology, to name just a few. Later came special age-targeted control agencies (juvenile justice) and body-regimens (sex manuals, nutrition programmes, and physical fitness schedules). Apparently, no social arena was off-limits in the campaign to subject everything to rational control. The fordist passion for planning even found expression in mass culture’s utopian fantasies, especially the elaborate synchronized chorus lines of Hollywood films.

If fordist discipline was totalizing, it was nevertheless – and this is its second defining feature – socially concentrated within a national frame. As the century unfolded, various previously discrete disciplines converged upon a new societal space within the nation-state. Called “the social” both by Hannah Arendt and the Foucauldian Jacques Donzelot, this was a dense nexus of overlapping apparatuses where institutions of social control became interconnected. In the social, the fields of industrial relations, social work, criminal justice, public health, corrections, psychotherapy, marriage-counseling, and education became mutually permeable, each drawing from the same reservoir of rationalizing practices while elaborating its own variations on the common grammar of governmentality. In some countries, including Foucault’s France, this disciplinary heartland was largely the province of the national state; in others, such as the United States, nongovernmental agencies
played a larger role, supplementing state apparatuses. In all cases, however, the social was correlated with a national state. Although Foucault did not explicitly thematize the question of scale, his account assumed that disciplinary ordering was nationally bounded. From his perspective, the national-social was fordist regulation’s ground zero, the zone of its densest elaboration and the launching pad for its wider diffusion. It was from this zone that fordist discipline radiated outward, imperceptibly spreading throughout national society. Yet social concentration did not entail vertical hierarchy, with commands flowing unidirectionally downward from the top of a traditional pyramid. Rather, disciplinary apparatuses subsisted side-by-side in the space of the national-social, their agents cooperating and competing on a par. Their milieu was one of middle-class professionalism, in which practitioners enjoyed considerable discretion, even as their activities were highly rationalized. The result was that disciplinary powers were socially concentrated yet horizontally arrayed within a national frame. Thus, as Foucault insisted, fordist discipline was simultaneously systematic and “capillary.”

The third major feature of fordist discipline follows from the preceding two: this mode of social ordering worked largely through individual self-regulation. This was the original meaning of the phrase “social control,” coined in 1907 by the American sociologist Edward Ross, as a democratic alternative to hierarchy and external coercion. As Foucault emphasized, advocates of social control sought to foster self-activating subjects capable of internal self-governance. Wagering that such subjects would be more rational, cooperative, and productive than those directly subordinated to external authority, fordist reformers devised new organizational forms and management practices. In offices, factories, and social-service agencies, supervisors were urged to listen to workers and clients, solicit their input, and increase their scope of autonomous action. On the supply side, meanwhile, child psychologists, educators, and child-raising experts proposed to reform practices for socializing children. Aiming to nurture future autonomous self-regulating citizens, they urged mothers to feed on demand, fathers to abjure corporal punishment, teachers to foster curiosity and to explain the rationales behind rules. Analogous desiderata informed practices as disparate as marriage counseling and open-ended sentencing of criminals. The overall thrust was to “subjectify” individuals, to encourage linguistification of their internal processes as a means of holding them responsible for those processes, thereby augmenting their capacities for self-policing. Effectively conscripting individuals as agents of social control while at the same time promoting their autonomy, fordist discipline sought to replace external coercion with internal self-regulation.7

In general, then, fordist discipline was totalizing, socially concentrated within a national frame, and oriented to self-regulation. The result was a form of governmentality that far transcended the bounds of the state, even as it remained nationally bounded. Widely diffused throughout national societies, productive as opposed to repressive, rational as opposed to charismatic, it mobilized “useful [if not wholly
Certainly, many criticisms can be raised against this quasi-Foucauldian account of fordist regulation. For one thing, it is overly condemnatory of fordism, neglectful of the latter’s progressive and emancipatory aspects. In particular, it is too dismissive of the individualizing, subjectifying moment of social control, too quick to reduce its autonomy-fostering orientation to a normalizing regimentation. Finally, it is embroiled in a performative contradiction, as it depends for its critical power on the very humanist norms, above all autonomy, that it wants simultaneously to unmask. Although I myself have raised such criticisms of Foucault in the past, and although I still consider them pertinent now, I shall not pursue them here. Here, rather, I address a different problem: the relation between discipline and postfordism. In so doing, I intend to problematize what I once called Foucault’s “empirical insights,” as opposed to his “normative confusions.”

2. From Discipline to Flexibilization?

The preceding account of fordist discipline assumes at least three empirical propositions that no longer hold true today. It assumes, first, that social regulation is organized nationally, that its object is a national population living in a national society under the auspices of a national state, which in turn manages a national economy. It assumes, second, that social regulation constitutes a nonmarketized counterpart to a regime of capital accumulation, that it is concentrated in the zone of “the social,” and that its characteristic institutions are the governmental and nongovernmental agencies that comprise the (national) social-welfare state. It assumes, finally, that regulation’s logic is subjectifying and individualizing, that in enlisting individuals as agents of self-regulation, it simultaneously fosters their autonomy and subjects them to control, or rather, it fosters their autonomy as a means to their control.

If these propositions held true in the era of fordism, their status is doubtful today. In the post-89 era of postfordist globalization, social interactions increasingly transcend the borders of states. As a result, the ordering of social relations is undergoing a major shift in scale, equivalent to denationalization and transnationalization. No longer exclusively a national matter, if indeed it ever was, social ordering now occurs simultaneously at several different levels. In the case of public health, for example, country-based agencies are increasingly expected to harmonize their policies with those at the transnational and international levels. The same is true for policing, banking regulation, labor standards, environmental regulation, and counterterrorism. Thus, although national ordering is not disappearing, it is in the process of being decentered as its regulatory mechanisms become articulated (sometimes cooperatively, sometimes competitively) with those at other levels. What is emerging, therefore, is a new type of regulatory structure,
a multi-layered system of globalized governmentality whose full contours have yet to be determined.

At the same time, regulation is also undergoing a process of desocialization. In today’s hegemonic – neoliberal – variant of globalization, massive, unfettered, transnational flows of capital are derailing the Keynesian project of national economic steering. The tendency is to transform the fordist welfare state into a postfordist “competition state,” as countries scramble to cut taxes and eliminate “red tape” in hopes of keeping and attracting investment. The resulting “race to the bottom” fuels myriad projects of deregulation, as well as efforts to privatize social services, whether by shifting them onto the market or by devolving them onto the family (which means, in effect, onto women). Although the extent of such projects varies from country to country, the overall effect is a global tendency to destructure the zone of “the (national) social,” formerly the heartland of fordist discipline. Decreasingly socially concentrated, and increasingly marketized and familialized, postfordist processes of social ordering are less likely to converge on an identifiable zone. Rather, globalization is generating is a new landscape of social regulation, more privatized and dispersed than any envisioned by Foucault.

Finally, as fordist discipline wanes in the face of globalization, its orientation to self-regulation tends to dissipate too. As more of the work of socialization is marketized, fordism’s labor-intensive individualizing focus tends to drop out. In psychotherapy, for example, the time-intensive talk-oriented approaches favored under fordism are increasingly excluded from insurance coverage and replaced by instant-fix pharma-psychology. In addition, the enfeeblement of Keynesian state steering means more unemployment and less downward redistribution, hence increased inequality and social instability. The resulting vacuum is more likely to be filled by outright repression than by efforts to promote individual autonomy. In the US, accordingly, some observers posit the transformation of the social state into a “prison-industrial complex,” where incarceration of male minority youth becomes the favored policy on unemployment. The prisons in question, moreover, have little in common with the humanist panopticons described by Foucault. Their management often subcontracted to for-profit corporations, they are less laboratories of self-reflection than hotbeds of racialized and sexualized violence – of rape, exploitation, corruption, untreated HIV, murderous gangs, and murderous guards. If such prisons epitomize one aspect of postfordism, it is one that no longer works through individual self-governance. Here, rather, we encounter the return of repression, if not the return of the repressed.

In all these respects, postfordist globalization is a far cry from Foucauldian discipline: multi-layered as opposed to nationally bounded, dispersed and marketized as opposed to socially concentrated, increasingly repressive as opposed to self-regulating. With such divergences, it is tempting to conclude that the disciplinary society is simply dépassé. One might even be tempted to declare, following Jean Baudrillard, that we should all “oublier Foucault.”
3. Globalized Governmentality

That, however, would be a mistake. If contemporary society is postfordist and therefore post-disciplinary, it can nevertheless be profitably analyzed from a quasi-Foucauldian point of view. The key is to identify the characteristic ordering mechanisms and political rationality of the emerging new mode of regulation. The result would be a quasi-Foucauldian account of a new form of globalizing governmentality.

As I see it, this project has at least three major parameters. A first crucial task is to conceptualize the transnational character of postfordist regulation. A second task is to theorize its increasing reliance on dispersed and marketized modes of governmentality. A third task is to analyze its distinctive political rationality, including its characteristic objects of intervention, modes of subjectification, and mix of repression and self-regulation. For each task, fortunately, we can draw on some pioneering work that is already available.

The transnational character of contemporary governmentality is the explicit subject of a large body of literature on globalization. Under the heading of “governance without government,” many scholars are mapping the contours of a new multi-layered regulatory apparatus which operates on a transnational scale. In this picture, social ordering is no longer nationally bounded, nor correlated with a national state, nor centered in any single locus of coordination. Rather, the locus of governmentality is being unbundled, broken up into several distinct functions, and assigned to several distinct agencies which operate at several distinct levels, some global, some regional, some local and subnational. For example, military and security functions are being disaggregated, relocated, and rescaled as a result of “humanitarian interventions,” “peacekeeping operations,” the “war on terrorism,” and a host of multilateral security arrangements. Likewise, criminal law and policing functions are being unbundled, rebundled, and rescaled, sometimes upward, as in the case of international war crimes tribunals, the International Criminal Court, “universal jurisdiction,” and Interpol; but sometimes downward, as in the case of tribal courts and the privatization of prisons. Meanwhile, responsibility for contract law is being rescaled as a result of the emergence of a private transnational regime for resolving business disputes (a revival of the lex mercatoria). Economic steering functions are being rescaled upward to regional trading blocs, such as the European Union, NAFTA, and Marcosur, and to formal and informal transnational bodies, such as the World Bank, and the IMF, and the World Economic Forum; but also downward, to municipal and provincial agencies, increasingly responsible for fostering development, regulating wages and taxes, and providing social welfare. In general, then, we are seeing the emergence of a new multi-leveled structure of governmentality, a complex edifice in which the national state is but one level among others.12

This new globalizing mode of regulation brings a considerable dispersion of governmentality. Unlike its fordist predecessor, the postfordist mode of regulation
tends to “govern-at-a-distance,” through flexible, fluctuating networks that transcend structured institutional sites.¹³ No longer nation-state-centered, today’s social ordering works through the powers and wills of a dispersed collection of entities, including states, supranational organizations, transnational firms, NGOs, professional associations, and individuals. At the country level, for example, QUANGOs assume regulatory functions previously held by the state; with the privatization of prisons, utilities, and schools, electoral accountability is supplanted by negotiations among “partners” on “community” boards.¹⁴ At the international level, likewise, a motley and changing crew of unelected notables convenes annually for loosely institutionalized discussions at Davos, while legal regulation of transnational business gives way to new forms of ad hoc, informal arbitration, whose private and discretionary character insulates them from public scrutiny.¹⁵ The result is a ruling apparatus whose composition is so complex and shifting that the distinguished international-relations theorist Robert F. Cox has named it “la nebuleuse.”¹⁶

Its shadowy quality notwithstanding, postfordist governmentality evinces some recognizable qualitative traits. This mode of regulation relies far more heavily than its predecessor on marketized ordering mechanisms. In the guise of neoliberalism, it vastly expands the scope of economic rationality, introducing competition into social services, transforming clients into consumers, and subjecting expert professionals to market discipline. In this regime of “de-statized governmentality,” substantive welfare policy gives way to formal technologies of economic accountability as auditors replace service professionals as the frontline disciplinarians.¹⁷ Meanwhile, as vouchers replace public services and privatized “risk management” replaces social insurance, individuals are made to assume new levels of “responsibility” for their lives. Displacing fordist techniques of “social control,” market mechanisms organize large swaths of human activity; even decisions about marriage and childbearing are entangled with market incentives and disincentives.

The result is a new, postfordist mode of subjectification. Neither the Victorian subject of individualizing normalization nor the fordist subject of collective welfare, the new subject of governmentality is the actively responsible agent. A subject of (market) choice and a consumer of services, this individual is obligated to enhance her quality of life through her own decisions.¹⁸ In this new “care of self,” everyone is an expert on herself, responsible for managing her own human capital to maximal effect.¹⁹ In this respect, the fordist project of self-regulation is continued by other means.

Nevertheless, the postfordist mode of governmentality differs sharply from its predecessor. Fordist regulation implicitly aspired to universality, despite persistent social inequality. In Foucault’s account, its object of intervention was not only the disciplined individual, but the “general welfare” and “the population” as a whole; disciplinary normalization was linked to “biopower,” which projected national synchronization and standardization, albeit on the backs of subjugated colonials. In contrast, postfordist governmentality has burst open the national frame, as we
have seen. In so doing, moreover, it simultaneously renounces the latter’s universalist thrust, without, however, resorting to laissez-faire. Rather, postfordist regulation establishes new forms of (transnational) segmentation. Working largely through population profiling, it separates and tracks individuals for the sake of efficiency and risk prevention. Sorting the capable-and-competitive wheat from the incapable-and-noncompetitive chaff, postfordist welfare policy constructs different life courses for each. The result is a new kind of segmented governmentality: responsibilized self-regulation from some, brute repression for others. In this “dual society,” a hypercompetitive, fully networked zone coexists with a marginal sector of excluded low-achievers.

The preceding sketch is only that: a cursory overview of some of the ways in which postfordist governmentality is being envisioned. Much work remains to be done. Let me close by indicating two additional directions for further research.

One intriguing possibility concerns the ordering functions performed by “networks” in postfordism. A ubiquitous buzzword of globalization, the term “network” names both a form of social organization and an infrastructure of communication. The hallmark of networks is their ability to combine rule-governed organization with flexibility, open-endedness, decenteredness, and spatial dispersion. Thus, in business, we have the various transnational chains of firms – suppliers, contractors, jobbers, etc. – that comprise the lean, easily altered structure of niche-oriented “just-in-time” production. Likewise, in the peculiar intersection of politics, religion, and criminality that is so much on our minds today, we have terrorist networks: transnational, decentered, spatially dispersed, seemingly leaderless, and impossible to locate, at least by anything so clunky as a national state, yet capable of stunningly well-organized acts of synchronized massive destruction, enlisting McWorld in the service of Jihad, if not forever destabilizing the distinction between them.

Seemingly more rhizomatic and Deleuzian than disciplinary and Foucauldian, networks may nevertheless be emerging as important new vehicles of postfordist governmentality. Critical theorists of globalization would do well to try to analyze them in Foucauldian terms. Above all, we might explore their articulation (both competitive and cooperative) with more familiar types of regulatory agencies.

A second candidate for a quasi-Foucauldian analysis of globalization is the related notion of “flexibilization.” Another ubiquitous buzzword of globalization, “flexibilization” names both a mode of social organization and a process of self-constitution. Better: it is a process of self-constitution that correlates with, arises from, and resembles a mode of social organization. The hallmarks of flexibilization are fluidity, provisionality, and a temporal horizon of “no long term.” Thus, what networks are to space, flexibilization is to time. So we have the flexible specialization of just-in-time production in the world of business. And we have the “flexible men” (and women) described by Richard Sennett, who frequently change jobs and even careers, relocating at the drop of a hat, whose collegial relations and friendships are trimmed to fit the horizon of no long term, and whose selfhood
does not consist in a single meaningful, coherent, overarching life-narrative. Such flexible selves seem more fragmented and postmodern than the subjectified, identitarian selves described by Foucault. Yet they may nevertheless be emerging as important new vehicles of self-regulation – at least for the “capable classes.” And so critical theorists might subject them too to a quasi-Foucauldian analysis. Above all, they might try to determine whether the project of social control through self-governance and even personal autonomy might outlive fordism in some new guise.

In all such analyses, we should recall that discipline was Foucault’s answer to the following question: how does power operate in the absence of the king? Today, of course, his answer is no longer persuasive, but that is not all. More disturbingly, the question itself needs to be reformulated: How does power operate after the decentering of the national frame, which continued to organize social regulation long after the demise of the monarch? In fact, it would be hard to formulate a better guiding question as we seek to understand new modes of governmentality in the era of neoliberal globalization. In my view, such an effort is the most fitting way by far to honor one of the most original and important thinkers of the previous century.

NOTES


4. Foucault, Discipline and Punish.


7. Zaretsky, Secrets of the Soul.


13. Hardt and Negri, Empire.


18. Ibid.


