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Introduction: The Politics of Ascetics and Governing

It all started the day I quit. In December 2001, I resigned from a position as a tenured professor at a large Arizona university, and settled back in to my old stomping grounds of Fort Worth, Texas. I knew that, at best, this move would leave me a gap of eight months or so until I might or might not locate the next academic position in the fall of 2002.

Jeff Ferrell

For many authors and artists seeking institutional affiliation today, Jeff Ferrell’s decision to leave a position as a tenured professor in order to live as a dumpster diver and trash picker¹ may seem extraordinary. This is not only because tenured positions are hard to come by, but also because the path of the academic career is such that if one decides to forego institutional affiliation one is often disqualified from future institutional affiliation. The rules governing these types of decisions are complex enough that the ascetic engines of academia – *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Chronicle Vitae* – dedicate significant space to advising those who struggle with the question of what I discuss in this book as the contemporary ascetics of knowledge production: the ethic of practice valued by the institutions with which producers of knowledge must be associated in order to be successful as well as the practices implicitly valued in the knowledge that they produce.

This book is only tangentially related to Ferrell’s substantive work, which, like his choice to resign from a tenured position, challenges the ascetics of both knowledge production and cultural production. However, the substantive topic considered here is directly related to Ferrell’s career and the careers of other academics and artists. In spite of what I observe to be the highly disciplined environment of knowledge production,
production, today Ferrell is once again a tenured professor. Although a rare case, Ferrell’s “existential ethnography” demonstrates that knowledge production and cultural production are not only governing or governed activities, but also sites of resistance.

One may reasonably ask how an investigation into the lives of academics can improve everyday life for those outside of the academy. Building on the Frankfurt School, Michel Foucault, and third-generation critical theory, I argue that knowledge production – whether it involves the production of research articles or the production of art exhibits – is politically important. When, in 2014, he was asked to explain the low, perhaps fatal, quality of medical care provided for US veterans, Kenneth Kizer, a former Under Secretary for Health in the Department of Veterans Affairs, referred directly to a set of policies that emerged from the “new public management” (NPM) scholarship. Propagated by scores of knowledge producers in both the US and the UK from the late 1980s onward, NPM advocated “running government like a business” and it was supported by “NPM jobs” in academia, “NPM articles” in scholarly journals, and an institutionalized “NPM curriculum.” In 2006 Fortune magazine was reporting that these reforms had resulted in the achievement of the modern dream in health care: “The seamless integration of science, information, and compassion is the dream of modern health care. Scenes like these are not fantasies, however, but daily realities at the Veterans Health Administration, the federal agency that is the most wired and cost-effective health system in the land.” By 2014, The Washington Post was reporting that “up to 40 veterans may have died while awaiting treatment at the Phoenix hospital and that staff, at the instruction of administrators, kept a secret list of patients waiting for appointments to hide delays in care.” In an interview with The Washington Post, Kizer – “a reformer appointed by President Bill Clinton” who embraced “performance data” – explained that “the measures have become the end. As opposed to a means to an end.” The measures to which Kizer refers were the result of reforms based upon scholarship that translated the market assumptions of neoliberalism – ontological assumptions – into the practice of government policy. The production of knowledge is political and has political consequences.

It is not only knowledge produced by academics that has consequences for how we experience everyday life; when considering how we are governed it is equally important to consider cultural production, which, because of its ascetic impact, I treat as a form of knowledge production. As the founders of Cultural Politics note in their introduction to the journal, the question that needs to be advanced is “what is cultural about
politics and what is political about culture.” Whether it is a museum exhibit that teaches us how to discipline our bodies – “Investigate Health! gives visitors the opportunity to peek into a world of research devoted to studying the factors that impact our health and to discover how we have the power to affect our own wellness” – or a morning television show that celebrates “expert makeovers,” in the course of our everyday lives we are inundated with governing messages. As I have argued in my analysis of the ascetic production involved in celebrity philanthropy, cultural celebration of dispositions (philanthropic, healthy, well-coiffed) conveys the message that such dispositions are valuable and who or what is celebrated as valuable tells us something about what present relations of governing demand and thus reward (valorize). A core argument of this book is that cultural products, because they too become taken-for-granted bases for action (ascetics) for those who seek to be celebrated (valorized), are also knowledge products that tell us what is possible and how we therefore ought “to be” in the world (ontology). In his analysis of cultural critique, Theodor W. Adorno writes, “Not only does the mind mould itself for the sake of its marketability, and thus reproduce the socially prevalent categories. Rather, it grows to resemble ever more closely the status quo even where it subjectively refrains from making a commodity itself.” This is a critical point: potentially ascetic knowledge is positioned in a hierarchy of value that is based on the reproduction of governing social categories.

The ways in which the production of ascetic knowledge – that knowledge, including culture, that instructs us what practices we ought to value and reproduce – is governed have concrete implications for the way our everyday lives are governed. In this collection of essays I critically explore governing as it is practiced through the production of knowledge. This production often involves the valorization of that which governs our sense of the proper disposition toward and reproduction of the present. I locate governing practices in the intersecting circuits of formal knowledge production and everyday cultural encounters and argue that knowledge production and cultural production are related as ascetic knowledge.

My argument assumes that as producers of ontological bases for action, intellectuals, including both authors and artists, are targets of governing. Intellectuals not only constitute knowledge, but are constituted in their pursuit of knowledge. This approach to the practice of governing builds on critical theory, especially the interdisciplinary tradition that rejects the idea that we can understand political practice within the disciplinary (ontological) categories of state (political
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science), economy (economics), and society (sociology). Together, the five portraits explored in the following chapters recommend a shift in the study of governing from its varying onto-disciplinary locations to the critique of concrete practices, including knowledge production, ontological production, institutionalization, and valorization. In this introductory chapter I briefly position my approach to each of these practices as the politics of ascetics and governing. Many of the broad claims made here require further substantiation, which takes place in the following chapters.

There are several reasons why I chose to focus on ascetics rather than the equally important critical traditions of ideology, hegemony, domination, or discipline, all of which help us to understand how knowledge and culture govern and which inform several chapters in this book. As a scholar, I felt that my previous work had, at least for the moment, exhausted what I had to contribute to the discussion of these concepts in relationship to governing. More substantively, ascetics helped me to think about how practices that govern the subject become valued – the implication being that I think that the way in which subjects are governed depends in large part on the valorization of practices upon which the status quo depends. I am concerned with the ways in which the contemporary politics of ascetics as they are specifically related to knowledge and culture are practices of governing.

My inquiry into ascetics begins with Foucault’s question, asked in a 1982 lecture: “How is the relationship between truth-telling (veridiction) and the practice of the subject established, fixed, and defined? Or, more generally, how are truth-telling and governing (governing oneself and others) linked and connected to each other?” My argument that the contemporary ascetics of knowledge production are significant to contemporary politics stems from this recognition that those involved in the production of knowledge (savoir) are simultaneously involved in the production of the self and also in the production of the ontological and epistemological bases for constructing subjectivity as a target of governing. This is to say, “labor performed in order to know” is ascetic labor, but it also produces ascetics that are in turn valorized by those institutions charged with legitimating knowledge.

Foucault argued that politics today is a question of politics of the self. If the politics of the self originate in the production of knowledge, then it is especially important to politicize the practices and techniques of knowledge-producing selves. Foucault’s keen insight into the relationship between knowledge production and technologies of the self helps me to understand the relationship between knowledge and governing.
In a 1978 interview with Duccio Trombadori, Foucault asks: “ Couldn’t a science be analyzed or conceived of as an experience, that is, as a particular relationship that is established in such a way that the subject itself of the experience might be altered? To put it another way, in scientific practice, wouldn’t the subject as much as the object of knowledge be constituted?” This question is not exclusive to Foucault’s work; the relationship between knowledge and the subject was central to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s 1944 argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a fact that Foucault recognized:

As far as I’m concerned, I think that the Frankfurt School set problems that are still being worked on. Among others, the effects of power that are connected to a rationality that has been historically and geographically defined in the West, starting from the sixteenth century on. The West could never have attained the economic and cultural effects that are unique to it without the exercise of that specific form of rationality.

In their investigation into this form of rationality – enlightenment rationality – Horkheimer and Adorno provide a foundation for investigation into the ways in which governing depends upon the practice of knowledge: “What appears as the triumph of subjectivity, the subjection of all things to logical formalism, is bought with the immediate subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand.” In Adorno’s 1968 lectures, published as *Introduction to Sociology*, he further explained:

If the subjects were different, or if they were ‘mature’, as it is often, and not incorrectly, termed today, this society could probably not survive as it does, despite all the means of compulsion available to it . . . The more completely subjects are embraced and determined by the system, the more the system survives not simply by applying compulsion to the subjects, but through the subjects themselves.

Foucault would likely balk at the notion of a “mature” subject. However, for each of these scholars, knowledge functions through subjects. Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of enlightenment thought can be interpreted in ascetic terms: enlightenment thought governs the production of knowledge and also encourages a form of knowledge that governs the subject. Enlightenment rationality, which Horkheimer and Adorno discuss in terms of domination, functions ascetically by
appearing to be “predetermined”: “It is not an existence that is without hope, but knowledge which appropriates and perpetuates existence as a schema in the pictorial or mathematical symbol.”29 In the contemporary moment, enlightenment knowledge functions as the basis for action.30 As Ben Agger argued of positivism, it “is more than a form of knowledge; it is also a way of life inuring people to their alleged fates in late capitalism . . . texts, books, and articles are a moment, a factor, in domination.”31

The recognition that knowledge is realized as a way of life is basic to Foucault’s distinction between savoir and connaissance:

I use the word ‘knowledge’ (savoir) [in order] to distinguish it from a knowledge (connaissance). The former is the process through which the subject finds himself modified by what he knows, or rather by the labor performed in order to know. It is what permits the modification of the subject and the construction of the object.32

This distinction is further reflected in Foucault’s discussion of ancient ascetics, in which he distinguishes between paraskeuē, askēsis, and mathēsis. To start, mathēsis, like connaissance, refers to “knowledge of the world”;33 for example, geography and astronomy. Askēsis, like savoir, refers to “exercise of self on self.”34 In other words, through what practices does one govern one’s self? If one accepts the contemporary science of health and the contemporary economics of health care, one engages in daily exercise. The paraskeuē “is the structure of the permanent transformation of true discourse, firmly fixed in the subject, into principles of acceptable behaviour . . . [it] is the element of transformation of logos into ethos.”35 The paraskeuē is made up of logoi. Logos is a materialized discourse that “states the truth and prescribes what we must do at the same time.”36 Logoi “bring about not only conviction, but also the actions themselves.”37 They are “inductive schemas of action” that “when present in the head, thoughts, heart, and even body of someone who possesses them, that person will act as if spontaneously . . . These material elements of rational logos are effectively inscribed in the subject as action.”38 Thus, “the function of ascesis is to form a paraskeuē [so that] the subject constitutes himself.”39

The important point to take from this discussion is that the relationship between mathēsis, askēsis, and paraskeuē transformed over time. In 1982, an attendee at one of Foucault’s lectures asked whether “[a truth] that belongs purely to the realm of knowledge (connaissance) and a truth that involves the subject’s work on himself [involves] the
same truth?” Foucault responded by identifying three transformations in the “progression” to modernity:

[First] the transformation concerning what I call the condition of spirituality for access to the truth. Second, the transformation concerning what I call the condition of spirituality for access to the truth that takes the form of knowledge (connaissance) with its own rules and criteria. And finally, third, the transformation of the notion of truth itself . . . to have access to the truth is to have access to being itself, access which is such that the being to which one has access will, at the same time, and as an aftereffect, be the agent of transformation of the one who has access to it . . . The notion of knowledge of the object is substituted for the notion of access to the truth. I am trying to situate here the enormous transformation that is, I think, really essential for understanding what philosophy is, what the truth is, and what the relationships are between the subject and truth, the enormous transformation.40

The transformation of the relationship between the subject and truth is the transformation of ascetics. As Joseph J. Tanke observes in his nuanced reading of Foucault’s discussion of askesis in the Hermeneutics of the Subject lectures, “It is this intersection of truth and the practices of the self that is contrasted with the modern paradigm of truth as self-evidence. . . . In the modern period, truth becomes knowledge, where the fulfillment once attained is transformed into the indefinite accumulation of facts and figures.”41 It is here that we can see the intersection with Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis: “Enlightenment’s program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge . . . Knowledge obtained through such enquiry would not only be exempt from the influence of wealth and power but would establish man as the master of nature.”42 Yet, Horkheimer and Adorno argued that enlightenment thought began to function in the same way as the mythology that it sought to displace.43

My investigation into the production of ascetic ideals as a practice of governing draws not only from Horkheimer and Adorno and Foucault, but also from Max Weber and Timothy W. Luke.44 Although their theoretical approaches diverge in significant respects, if one reads these authors with an eye toward the theme of secular ascetics, rather than reading for linear or “pure” schools of thought,45 a powerful critique emerges, which facilitates an interdisciplinary treatment of the production of culture and knowledge as it relates to governing. In a 1984
Interview Foucault specifically positioned his approach to ascetics in relationship to Weber’s, indicating that practices of the self are

what one might call an ascetical practice, giving the word ‘ascetical’ a very general meaning, that is to say, not in the sense of abnegation but that of an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one’s self and to attain a certain mode of being. I am taking the word ‘asceticism’ in a wider sense than Max Weber, but it is much along the same line.46

Foucault shares with Weber the central question of how ascetics relate to governing.

In his 1904 study, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber understood asceticism in terms of practices according to which present economic relations are framed as something toward which we ought to aspire.47 Not only Protestantism but “the whole ascetic literature of almost all denominations is saturated with the idea that faithful labour, even at low wages, on the part of those whom life offers no other opportunities, is highly pleasing to God.”48 In its focus on ascetics as a critical element in the production of compliant dispositions toward the present,49 Weber’s analysis anticipates later studies of subjectivity and governing.50

In his study of ideology and Soviet industrialization, Luke, whose early work draws extensively on both Weber and Foucault, demonstrates the critical potential of ascetics as a lens through which we can understand the production of culture as a practice of governing. Luke extended Weber’s analysis of the relationship between the Protestant ethic and capitalism to Bolshevism’s employment of political documents and cultural technologies – including “films, and journals for child and adult education . . . literature, art works, theatrical productions for cultural education”51 – in order to embed a secular ascetic in service of industrialization in the Soviet Union. Luke’s study, conducted c. 1980, approached cultural politics as a tool of governing. He argued that “any accurate analysis of the economic development process first must account for the non-economic factors, such as cultural values, political practices, psychological expectations and social institutions, that are assumed by and required for staging effective economic change.”52 In taking this approach, Luke extends Weber’s view of governing ascetics from religion to culture, demonstrating how ascetics are transmitted through secular messages, such as those conveyed in the production of knowledge.
The production of culture as a governing technology is a theme that runs throughout Luke’s work. In his 1989 book, *Screens of Power*, he analyzes the technologies of the self conveyed through television, including “Fondaism,” so called “after Jane Fonda’s well-known and widely imitated rational programs of comprehensive, individually tailored ‘workouts’ that use specially designed, video-communicated diet, exercise, and mental-discipline techniques to manage one’s mental, emotional, and physical assets rationally.” In his later work on museum politics, Luke points out that many museums – secular ascetic-producing institutions – “were founded in the nineteenth century as vital outposts for the civilizing mission of that time’s ‘pedagogical state.’” Museums were viewed as a space to “cultivate the scientific outlook and cultural sensibility needed by modern industrial democracies . . . By the end of the twentieth century, museums came to be widely regarded as modern scientific society’s ‘secular cathedrals.’” This is a critical point: We can think of institutionalized culture, like institutionalized knowledge, as a potential site for the production of ascetic knowledge. In 2002, Luke argued that museums “serve as ontologues, telling us what reality really is. Their often sophisticated narrative indirection orders social and personal behavior from below by steering inclinations tacitly or implicitly through amusing diversions.” I focus specifically on the contemporarily valorized practices that govern the institutionalized production of knowledge in relationship to ontology.

I am not interested in a particular ascetic as an ideal; I am interested in how ascetics become ideal and how this relates to subjectivity as it is situated in the production and subsequent practice of, or resistance to, dominant ontologies. This is to say, I am interested in the politics of ascetics, which involves ontological assumptions and valorized practices. The key point that I take from these theorists is that ascetic ideals – be they transferred through religion, culture, or enlightenment knowledge – sanction or rebuke particular practices of the self and, through valorization of highly visible judgments of such practices, facilitate the continuation of present governing relations. As John O’Neill has argued, in spite of their divergent conceptions of social rationality, both Weber and Foucault are concerned with “the techniques by which man has subjected himself to the rational discipline of the applied human sciences.” This is a theme that runs throughout Horkheimer and Adorno’s work as well.

Weber, Foucault, and Luke specifically discussed ascetics in the context of governing; I constitutively interpret Horkheimer and Adorno’s work on culture for its potential contribution to understanding the
production of ascetic knowledge. They argue that the “countless agencies of mass production and its culture impress standardized behavior on the individual as the only natural, decent, and rational one. Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures.”\textsuperscript{58} This is the sense in which I understand ascetic knowledge and its contribution to governing. Further, we can read Adorno’s observations of the schema of mass culture as a critique of the production of ascetic knowledge. Culture becomes ascetic to the extent that it “[prevails as a canon] of synthetically produced modes of behavior. The good manners which the system teaches them presupposes all this. Anyone who fails openly to parade their freedom, their courtesy, their sense of security, who fails to observe and propagate the established guidelines, is forced to remain outside the pale.”\textsuperscript{59} My method of politicizing these “established guidelines” is to focus on the ways in which these valorized practices of knowledge encourage a particular conception of the self and society and a particular set of practices that correspond to these conceptions.

For example, we can read Adorno’s essay on “free time” as an analysis of an ascetic that governs labor practices. Adorno argued that free time “must not be posed as an abstract generalization . . . Free time is shackled to its opposite.”\textsuperscript{60}

The question which today would really do justice to the phenomenon of free time would be [the] following: what becomes of free time, where productivity of labour continues to rise, under persisting conditions of unfreedom, that is, under relations of production into which people are born, and which prescribe the rules of human existence today just as they always have done? . . . free time is tending towards its opposite, and is becoming a parody of itself.\textsuperscript{61}

Like the Protestant ethic in Weber’s analysis provided justification for labor relations and profit-making, in Adorno’s analysis, one’s use of free time becomes an ascetic practice that falsely promotes the necessity of institutionalized unfree time.

The difference between work and free time has been branded as a norm in the minds of people, at both the conscious and unconscious level. Because, in accordance with the predominant work ethic, time free of work should be utilized for the recreation of expended labour power, then work-less time, precisely because it is a mere appendage of work, is severed from the latter with puritanical zeal.\textsuperscript{62}
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