Foucault’s prolific work on the operation of modern power has influenced various academic disciplines such as sociology, political science, philosophy, public governance and management. His method of interpretive analytics opened up new ways of conceptualising discourses and modalities of power. With the exception of his later work on governmentality, Foucault’s methods of archaeology and genealogy have often led to a displacement from one form of power towards another newer (e.g. from sovereignty to disciplinary power) and thus also to bipolarity (Foucault, 1991). Dean’s new book focuses on this subject matter. It shifts our focus away from a dichotomous approach to power towards a view that appreciates the interrelation between seemingly opposing power forms.

The book is organised in eight chapters. The first chapter focuses on the contested nature of power and sketches out the dual ways in which power is typically conceptualised (e.g. as a capacity versus as a possession). The argument that underpins the next three chapters is that Foucault’s method on the ‘how’ of power, although rich, remains incomplete. The author explains that Foucault’s work displays discontinuities, leaving little room for exploring the sameness in the operation of power. Specifically, the author shows how Foucault, falls throughout his work back on (perhaps disguised forms of) sovereignty despite or indeed because of his attempt to find a new form of power (chapter 2). He also explains how the operationalization of governmentality through an apparatus (‘dispositif’) entails reshuffling of disciplinary power and sovereignty that reproduces bipolarity (chapter 3) and discusses the shifts that take place in Foucault’s work from territory to population and from sovereignty to government (chapter 4).

In chapters 5 and 6 Dean discusses Foucault’s study of power together with Schmitt’s work on sovereignty. The author identifies points of divergence and convergence between the two scholars specifically in relation to the origins and implications of liberalism. Where Foucault departs from sovereignty, Schmitt seems to attribute a transcendental power to it. Chapter 6 departs from the view that sees the legitimacy of modern power as lying to its novelty and newness and accounts for how modern conceptualisations of power come from secularised versions of a theological discourse. Dean places the genealogy of the art of government before the debate on modernity and secularisation drawing from a political theology. In doing so the author shows how sovereignty becomes present in the art of government.

Chapter 7 discusses the thesis ‘the king reigns, but he does not govern’ drawing from Agamben’s work. Economic theology and its conceptualisation of economy, order and providence suggest the necessity of sovereignty in liberal/economic governing. In chapter 8 Dean discusses how sovereignty manifests as glorious power that transcends its ceremonial character and becomes operationalized through material practices. He also shows how liberal government enacts a juridical power through appropriation, accumulation and exploitation. In this way, he manages to show the new forms that sovereignty may take within a liberal government.
Dean’s book navigates the reader on a journey throughout which signature -as a kind of passport- allows the reader to move across a dynamic and diverse field of conceptualisations of power. This journey does not entail displacements and oppositions in the study of power. The book encourages a different way of thinking about power; one that is not intended to address the signature of the power, as if it were an issue of concern, but to embrace it, capturing its poles and dispersed forms in which it manifests itself.

The author criticises, often even corrects, Foucault’s binary approach to power as he discusses it together with Schmitt’s political theology and Agamben’s economic theology. It does so in a delicate manner, that respects Foucault’s genealogical method. The book focuses mostly on Foucault’s work on neoliberal governing and much less so on his later work on the care of the self. Governmentality is therefore discussed in this book as a ‘technology of power’; its ethical implications as a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault, 1988) are not equally discussed.

The book makes a conceptual contribution to the study of governmentality by analysing how different modalities of power (legal/sovereign, disciplinary, economic) come into play in modern governing. The discussion of Schmitt and Agamben is very enlightening in this respect. In drawing upon economic and political theology the book also makes a methodological contribution to an analytics of power by illustrating the material practices that accompany the operation of sovereignty. Dean’s book is strongly recommended for all those who study power relations across disciplines. It will be a reference point for Foucauldian studies.

References