

Abstract

Natures of Conduct explores the rationalities, practices and techniques of government processes in the Danish West Indies in the period between the late eighteenth century to the end of Danish colonial rule in 1917. In doing so, it engages Michel Foucault's concepts of governmentality and the 'dispositif' in the analysis of technologies of rule in the colony.

The dissertation shows that in the formulation of governmental interventions – in terms of novel legislation, institutions, and organizational forms – a gradually greater emphasis was given to conceptions of 'population', 'society', and 'economy' as 'natural' and autonomous processes. Equally, greater weight was being given to the 'natural' preconditions of colonial subjects in the design of governmental techniques, which produced an ethos of progress and development.

However, these conceptions of 'naturalness' produced a highly ambiguous project of colonial rule that, in terms of governmental technologies, blurred the boundaries between despotism and liberalism, coercion and freedom. Hence, the dissertation questions the efficacy of applying general labels of governmental and political rationalities – e.g. liberalism or despotism – to specific historical contexts, as well as applying preconceived notions of a teleological movement towards more liberal modes of government.