

To participants in the seminar in moral, political, and legal theory

As I age, I have less faith and less interest in making abstract philosophical arguments. I am drawn more to performing and narrating those arguments. So, despite superficial appearances to the contrary, my work on governance is motivated by philosophical interests and commitments. In case you are more like my younger self, though, I thought it might promote discussion if I made explicit some of the theoretical claims that are enacted and/or implied by this paper.

1. Philosophers should spend less time on abstract arguments and more time telling stories. I'd defend that claim not only in terms of rhetorical efficacy but also by a meta-ethic according to which moral intuitions are less stable than facts and require a historical story to justify them.
2. Social science makes the world at least as much as it describes or explains it. So, even when a social theory captures facts, it can be a mere self-fulfilling prophecy.
3. Modernist social science is philosophically flawed, and there is a tension between the flawed explanations of social science and the principles of deliberative democratic theory. Much of the "empirical turn" in deliberative democracy verges on being theoretically incoherent.
4. Genealogy is not inherently critical. Although the genealogy in the first part of my paper could be parsed as a critique, the main critical work is done by the section on resistance.
5. Much of the governmentality literature is philosophically flawed. It neglects agency and treats patterns as if they explain instances of themselves. It thus depends covertly on functionalism.
6. We live in a post-neoliberal world, not a neoliberal one. Policymakers draw less on neoclassical economics than on mid-level social science. Critical theorists get around this problem only by offering caricatures of neoliberalism and (cf. point 5) replacing genealogy with reifications.

Thanks for reading the paper. I look forward to discussing it with you.

Best,
Mark

A New Governance: Hierarchies, Markets, and Networks, cc. 1979-2010

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Mark Bevir is a Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. He is the author or co-author of The Logic of the History of Ideas (1999), Interpreting British Governance (2003), New Labour: A Critique (2005), Governance Stories (2006), Key Concepts of Governance (2009), The State as Cultural Practice (2010), Democratic Governance (2010), The Making of British Socialism (2011); Governance: A Very Short Introduction (2012), and A Theory of Governance (2013).

Abstract

When governance refers to changes in the state, it surely captures one of the major trends of recent times. Many social scientists, especially those who work on public administration and local government, argue that the leading forms of public organization and action have shifted from hierarchic bureaucracies to markets and networks. Debates rage about the extent of this shift: bureaucratic hierarchies clearly remain widespread and arguably the most common forms of government. It is clear, however, that successive governments have introduced wave after wave of public sector reform in their attempt to promote markets, contracting-out, networks, and joined-up government. This paper focuses initially on the intellectual sources of the transformation of the state and its relation to civil society, highlighting the role of modernist social science, with its reliance on formal explanations based on either economic models or sociological correlations. So, modernist social science informed the main narratives of the crisis of the administrative and welfare state in the 1970s and modernist social science also inspired the two waves of public sector reform that responded to this crisis. In Britain, the first wave of reform was most prominent under Thatcherism, at which time an economic modernism inspired marketization and the new public management. The second wave of reform was most prominent under New Labour, at which time a sociological modernism inspired joined-up governance and networks. The second half of the paper shifts the focus from the sources of the reforms to their impact on practices. It relies on a series of short ethnographic stories to illustrate some of the complex ways in which public servants now juggle the competing demands of bureaucracies, markets, and networks.