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Title

Deconstructing governance: Perspectives in post-positivist thinking

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Short bio

Andrew Wilkins is Reader in Education Policy and Director of Research in the Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Associate Regional Editor (Europe) for Journal of Education Policy. He is a policy sociologist with research interests in education policy, comparative education and education governance. His recent books include Modernising School Governance (Routledge 2016) and Education Governance and Social Theory (Bloomsbury 2018).

Introduction

In this chapter I demonstrate the application of using different theoretical approaches to frame meanings and practices of governance. While there are clear overlaps and synergies in the development of these approaches given their shared post-positivist orientations, they are nonetheless distinctive through making possible different kinds of analytical and political work. Therefore, each theoretical position is discussed separately in order to make explicit their epistemological and normative commitments. These approaches are discussed in turn and include:

    i. A Gramscian approach to governance (Davies 2012);

    ii. A state-centric approach to governance (Pierre and Guy Peters 2005);

    iii. A deliberative-interactive approach to governance (Kooiman 2003).

    iv. A interpretivist-constructivist approach to governance (Bevir and Rhodes 2006); and

    v. A governmentality approach to governance (Millar and Rose 2008).

In what follows I discuss the role of governance as a meta-narrative in education research. Following this I describe the historical context for the emergence of the concept of governance and its relationship to globalisation. In the final section I use applied theory to show how governance can be conceptualised from the position of different analytical orientations and normative commitments. I conclude by outlining

the aims and benefits of deconstructing governance from the perspective of different theoretical positions.

Meta-narratives

A defining feature of the 'postmodern turn' is the rejection of modernist narratives that attempt to explain the history of things according to certain metaphysical ideations and indefinite teleologies, namely European and Enlightenment narratives that presuppose either a 'universal subject' or an incremental view of social change that conflates scientific progress with the increasing 'rationalisation' of societies. Against these 'meta-narratives' and the search for 'truth' and 'origins', postmodern approaches favour 'de-centred' and 'genealogical' analyses that reveal the contestability of things as the serendipitous outcome of historically contingent struggles and conflicts. However, there is a tendency among some postmodern and poststructural researchers to occupy a hybrid position that involves commitments both to nominalism and elements of soft determinism.

Education researchers share a similar tendency. This is evident when they denounce essentialist or structuralist claims while at the same time integrating meta-narratives into their analyses in order to comfortably navigate and explain messy social realities. In this respect, meta-narratives serve different cognitive and conceptual functions. On the one hand, they provide education researchers with essential meaning-making tools for narrating unstable social realities and coping with

complexity. This includes rendering social realities amenable to capture by different and unique systems of signification. On the other hand, meta-narratives help education researchers to make explicit the connections between agency and structure, namely the influence of wider structural formations on individual action including hegemonic projects, governmental rationalities and socially circulating discourses. While many education researchers acknowledge that meta-narratives should only be used provisionally as loose approximations for capturing social reality, it is also likely that some meta-narratives come to be naturalised as all-encompassing theories for explaining everything.

The appeal of some meta-narratives is that they are consoling and give coherence to specific grievances and discontents. This includes providing researchers with a constitutive outside against which they can position and elevate themselves and others morally and politically. 'Neoliberalism', for example, has a very complicated intellectual history and relationship to different political, cultural and economic projects, from authoritarianism to neoconservatism and Third Way social democracy. On this account, neoliberalism is a mobile adaptive force that changes according to historically contingent modes of articulation and recontextualisation. Yet despite these instabilities, neoliberalism is often used to support different structuralist narratives and claims that reduce complex phenomena to expressions and functions of market determinism or financialisation. Hence the structuralist orientation of some postmodern research is that meta-narratives are used to produce deterministic accounts of social change in which agency is reduced to a residual effect of structural power.

Another much-cited meta-narrative in education research is the term 'governance'. Unlike heuristic tools and theories which are reflexively engaged as tendential accounts of unstable social phenomena, governance tends to be used loosely to describe the formal and informal means of securing power and authority over something or someone, usually for the purpose improving efficiency, affecting behaviour change or enhancing accountability and transparency. Such everyday use is evident in the language of supranational organisations and national governments who articulate governance in a strictly normative sense to describe strategies for achieving specific policy goals and outcomes. This not only leads to indiscriminate use but insufficient critique of the governance-politics relationship, namely the ways in which power and claims to knowledge are inscribed in the implicit norms and values shaping governance discourses and processes. The risk here is that the political and conceptual dimensions of governance are either overlooked or misunderstood and governance becomes just another detached signifier for articulating and condensing a wide variety of social, political and economic changes.

A new orthodoxy

During the 1980s and 1990s many political and social scientists turned their attention to documenting the technological, economic and cultural effects of globalisation. The focus of these investigations ranged from the local to the transnational, from micro-qualitative studies looking at the mediation of human relations through

communications technology to macro-quantitative studies looking at the transformation of national economies through trade liberalisation and capital mobility. Yet despite the promise of new modes of transnational capital accumulation and technologically driven social connectivity, globalisation created new kinds of economic risks and ontological insecurities. By subordinating national economies to new global patterns of competition and flexible, deregulated labour, globalisation undermined local labour markets and labour movements in many developing and developed countries. The rapid acceleration of interconnections and flows between diverse localities across the globe also worked to challenge national imaginaries, including the idea of the nation state as a bounded ethno-cultural and political entity. Increased migration, tourism and hyperconnectivity opened up unique possibilities for the emergence of transnational political action and new ethic identities and multicultural spaces, for example. In response, national governments under globalisation were forced to rethink economic and cultural processes as multi-causal or multidimensional and develop strategies for coping with the diversity and complexity flowing from these processes.

In response to these new spatial and ontological arrangements, the term governance gained popularity as a key concept for understanding changes in the development of political and economic systems under globalisation. More specifically, social and political scientists became interested in the role of the nation state in the global political economy and therefore turned their attention to the impact of international organisations and relations on the changing formation of state practices and citizenship. The rise of global corporations, supranational organisations and international political and economic unions (from the OECD to the European Union)

meant that politics and authority could no longer be studied from an autotelic logic of structures that included a single vantage point or isolated entity such as the nation state or government. The complicated and uneven distribution of power made possible by new international arrangements forced a shift in focus towards conceptualising social change through a networked logic of flows characterised by spontaneous self-organisation or 'heterarchy'. Here governance is used to describe the movement away from hierarchy and top-down government and its substitution by new flexible modes of governing defined by plural and dispersed forms of power.

Governance is also used in a normative sense to capture the changing nature of state practices under globalisation and their strategies and rationalities for governing complex societies. During the 1970s for example many countries experienced severe economic stagnation and high inflation owing to impact of globalisation on their national economies. In response, different nation states supported a new vision of government, one where economic and social policy was disciplined by fiscal responsibility, global competition and intense marketisation and privatisation. These reforms to economic and welfare planning were rolled out by different right-wing governments and military dictatorships during the 1980s, from Pinochet in Chile and Regan in the US to Thatcher in England and the National Reorganization Process (NRP) in Argentina. A key strategy of these reforms was to sell off publicly owned assets to private companies as well as expand the role of non-state actors and organisations in the management and delivery of welfare services, in effect to displace the role of traditional structures of government as the principal overseer of the economy and welfare.

It is important to note however that these reforms were not about conceding power so much as conceding ownership or management in most cases. All governments have a political-strategic interest in maintaining some control of the constituent parts of its system through designing rules and regulations that help them to realise different policy goals and outcomes. In education and other public services, for example, governments can concede responsibility to run services while at the same time shaping the possibilities for self-governance through changes to legislation, law and funding agreements. These indirect methods of governing may include the use of performance monitoring, quality assessment, good governance guidelines, and professional standards of conduct to incentivise or punish specific behaviours. Governance, therefore, describes both the absence of direct government rule and the continued work of government in summoning and compelling different behaviours and orientations, albeit imperfectly and indirectly.

Theoretical approaches to governance

A popular view of governance among some academics and many policy makers is that decentralised welfare planning through public-private partnerships are innovative and democratic since they undermine vertical relations of power and enable the conditions for genuine trust building and spontaneous interaction and cooperation to develop between different stakeholders. Such a visionary view of governance is not shared by everyone, however. For Davies (2012), it is important to capture the governance-politics relationship, namely the ways in which 'governing

networks may be ensnared in the dialectics of hegemony domination and resistance' (Davies 2012, 2698). Against a typical postmodern reading of governance as self-referential, reflexive and plural, Davies (2012) adopts a *Gramscian approach to governance,* one that demonstrates how governance develops through the persistence of rule-bound hierarchies and hegemonic powers.

For Davies (2012, 2694-5), governance is 'integral to neoliberal hegemonic ideology and strategy' since it derives its legitimacy from upholding the dominance of different kinds of enforcement mechanisms, namely regulatory or administrative practices that actively work to exclude certain people from participating in governance networks. On this understanding, trust is not sufficient to governance since 'coercion remains the indispensable condition of social order' (Davies 2012, 2687). Moreover, Davies (2012) views government as indispensable to governance since it creates forms of meta-governance or meta-policy that condition the possibilities for its development and non-development. Davies (2012) therefore disputes the government-governance dualism in favour a Gramscian view of governance that views strategies of governing through networks and public-private partnerships as elements of a restorative project designed to reproduce specific forms of capital accumulation and class power that maintain the regulative ideal of late capitalism.

Similarly, Pierre and Guy Peters (2005) challenge the now popular concept of 'governing without government' through their adoption of a *state-centric approach to governance.* For Pierre and Guy Peters (2005), governance is a reconfiguration of state power rather than an expression of its diminution. Pierre and Guy Peters

(2005) acknowledge the degree to which the state under globalisation disperses power outwards and downwards towards institutions and agents as a condition for self-governance. However, like Davies (2012), they highlight the continuing importance of the state to governance within modern societies, namely the extent to which the state functions to regulate interactions between systems and institutions. Also, like Davies (2012), Pierre and Guy Peters (2005) challenge the idea that networks or partnerships function effortlessly as sites for enabling bargaining, interaction and trust building to develop between stakeholders. For Pierre and Guy Peters (2005), such a view overestimates the rational capacity of networks or partnerships to govern effectively or fairly in the interests and norms of others.

Against this utopian view of governance, Pierre and Guy Peters (2005) argue that political and bureaucratic mechanisms are an essential feature of a sustainable, democratic state given the inability of loose networks and partnerships to effectively coordinate forms of conflict resolution and coherence within increasingly complex societies. According to Pierre and Guy Peters (2005, 68), networks 'do not have the capacity to perform many of the tasks required for governance and especially for democratic governance'. On this account, Pierre and Guy Peters (2005) concur with Davies (2012) that governance operates within the shadow of the state, albeit Pierre and Guy Peters (2005) share strong normative commitments to maintaining the regulatory power of the state.

In contrast to Pierre and Guy Peters (2005) who question the capacity of networks to operate effectively as mediating spaces for conflict resolution or trust building,

Kooiman (2003, 33) employs a *deliberative-interactive approach to governance* that stresses the spontaneous and self-organising capacity of networks or partnerships as 'mutual, interactive learning' environments. For Kooiman (2003, 9), governance develops through the inter-subjective production of truths made possible by different actors engaging in strategic-rational use of selected 'images, instruments and actions' to arrive at mutually influencing sets of goals and interests. From this perspective, sometimes called a 'cybernetic' or 'system-based' theory of governance, Kooiman (2003) moves beyond any exclusive focus on the state to demonstrate the constitutive and enabling effects of communicative reasoning as the normative basis for human interactions and governance or governing more generally.

For Bevir and Rhodes (2006), governance is the product of contingent regularities and connections flowing from historically situated and culturally specific contests over meaning. Here governance is conceptualised at the level of 'meaning in action' (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, 3) which refers to the 'the interplay and contest of the beliefs or meanings embedded in human activity'. From this perspective, governance cannot be understood exclusively from a systems theory or institutionalist perspective of systems and their path dependencies because institutional relations and logics function only as proxies and aggregate concepts for the interplay and contests of meanings among social actors. In this sense, Bevir and Rhodes' (2006) adoption of an *interpretivist-constructivist approach to governance* closely resembles Kooiman's (2003) deliberative-interactive approach with their shared emphasis on the relational constitution of governance through social interaction. However, Bevir and Rhodes (2006) refute the idea that governance can be reduced to a communicative model of action that presumes either a standard

rationality or some ideal of perfect knowledge, namely the idea that all social actors share the same capacity to translate their interests into pragmatic forms of social action that are agreeable or acceptable to all.

Moving beyond a deliberative-interactive focus on the convergence of meaning through social action, Millar and Rose (2008) adopt a *governmentality approach to governance* to rethink governance as productive spaces and relations for the cultivation of particular modes of participation and self-governing among citizens. This includes a focus, again, on the governance-politics relationship, the ways in which power and claims to knowledge are inscribed in 'practices of governing' (Millar and Rose 2008, 20). Similar to a Gramscian analytic framework, a governmentality approach views governance as modes of power for administering, managing and intervening upon the behaviour of others, albeit it lacks any strict focus on these modes of power as class-based hegemonic projects. It is also similar to a state-centric analytical framework in that it emphasises the fundamental importance of power and politics to governance, especially the role of political rationalities and bureaucracies to the formalisation of experts and of expert knowledge and the specification of 'problems' and their 'solutions'. However, it moves beyond analyses of governance with 'the state as locus, origin or outcome' (Millar and Rose 2008, 20), and therefore differs from the above approaches too.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have deconstructed governance from the viewpoint of different theoretical positions in order to make explicit its polyvalence as a contested concept and emergent and situated practice. In doing so I have presented a multi-dimensional perspective that challenges the prevalence of functionalist accounts of governance and the epistemological basis for those accounts. From a functionalist perspective, governance is a space of rationalist planning aimed at the calculation and management of choices and costs in ways that can predict and optimise efficiency and effectiveness. This includes the application of a universal or standard rationality against which 'governance failure' can be measured, evaluated and improved to meet agreed policy solutions and public interests or strategic and operational priorities. Similar functionalist accounts can be traced to the research and policy documents produced by supranational organisations like the World Bank and the OECD. Here governance is used to mean improvements to the quality of regulation, namely the development of specific forms of 'hard' and 'soft' regulation (compliance checks, high-stake testing and performance benchmarking and appraisal) that enhance the steering capacity of different funding and regulatory authorities to hold organisations to account for specific social arrangements and policy outcomes. But the concept of governance is far more slippery than a functionalist definition allows for.

Through deconstructing governance from the vantage point of different theoretical positions, this chapter is an attempt to de-naturalise governance and challenge the dominance of 'functionalism' as the default expression for framing meanings of governance. This includes using theory to highlight possibilities for engaging in different kinds of analytical and political work, including the study of the governance-

politics relationship and the role of governance in the cultivation of particular forms of self-governing among citizens and the creation of different publics, be it consumer publics or democratic publics. This also means moving beyond an evaluative or functionalist concern with producing strategic knowledge in the service of governance and instead asking critical questions about the role of power and knowledge to governance, namely the ways in which power and claims to knowledge are inscribed in models of 'good governance' or 'effective governors'.

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