# Governing the Local? A Response to Kevin Stenson

*John Clarke*, *The Open University, UK*

Kevin Stenson's article offers a powerful argument for examining governmentality in particular local configurations rather than as relatively abstract and text-centred studies of changing mentalities and rationalities of rule. I think this is an important endeavour, partly because more situated analyses of governmentality are necessary to enrich the analytical (and political) significance of the perspective; and partly because the view from governmentality has a capacity to enrich our understandings of governance, policy and practice. Kevin's own discussion of community safety in the Thames Valley area demonstrates just how much such a situated analysis might add to an understanding of liberal rule in England in the 21st century. Let me highlight four points that I think are absolutely central to that analysis:

1. His article avoid the somewhat vague specifications of time and place that are often at work in what he calls the 'dominant versions of the approach' (although I think their dominance is uneven – both geographically and in disciplinary terms). Instead he offers us an analysis of the discourses, relations and practices of governing in a specific time/space conjuncture.

2. By turning to questions of governing (rather than a mode or phase of governmentality) he makes visible processes, relationships and practices that try to shape the 'conduct of conduct' in practice. This attention to how the business of community safety is constituted in practice is illuminating, drawing attention to how it is construed in practice (and in a somewhat angular relationship to its specification by central government) and to the networks, alliances and forms of agency through which it is being organised.

3. He places 'the local' at the centre of this analysis. The local both defines the object of his analysis (community safety through local partnerships, networks, etc) and points to something distinctive in the changing spatial and scalar organisation of governing. He implies, I think, that we should be attending to governing the local because the politics of governing have made the local a particular site of governance practices.

4. He poses a profoundly troubling set of questions about how the social is composed in these changing scales and forms of governing. What sorts of distinctions, divisions, identities and solidarities are in play in the articulation of the local, the social, the national and the global in this conjuncture.

I think the first of these points – the careful specification of time and place – is a fundamental obligation of social analysis. It is often evaded in looser generalizations about advanced liberal governmentality, neo-liberalism or globalization. Such generalizations tend to deal in

large –a nd singular – trends and tendencies, obscuring the real movements and alignments traced in Kevin's article. I am also concerned that such generalizations often try to universalise a more specific set of processes or experiences as though they are general – and given the dominance of English as an academic language, these generalizations often project from US and/or UK examples or experiences. This is, I think, both unhelpful and unhealthy. The good news is that this view of being attentive to the particular space/time conjuncture is increasingly widely shared – for example, in anthropology and geography where people engaged in studying governance, governmentality and the social are producing thought provoking analyses of governing in particular forms in particular places (e.g. Li 2007; Painter 2006; Sharma forthcoming).

This attention to the particular connects powerfully with the interest in processes, relationships and practices – in part because these can rarely be identified at very abstract levels. Li (2007: 27) reminds us that, for Foucault, the study of the genealogy of incarceration (in *Surveillir et Punir/Discipline and Punish*) was a different matter from exploring the 'witches' brew' of what takes place inside prisons (Foucault 1991: 81-2). Stenson makes a potent case for why we should be attending to such witches' brews in the agencies through which the social is being governed. Otherwise our studies tend to be limited to texts and discourses. These certainly tell us much about dominant mentalities and their strategies, techniques and desires (for a well-ordered social). But strategies do not always deliver their intended outcomes, techniques may fail and we do not have to be Freudians to know that desires may be unfulfilled or frustrated. But Freud would certainly tell us of the dangers and risks that may accompany frustrated desires – although that would be another story. What matters here is the discovery of the disorderliness of governing in contrast to the grand designs of governing mentalities.

One of the critical issues revealed in this study of community safety concerns the behaviour of agents. Much work derived from Foucault has tended to focus on the ways in which particular subjects are constructed, located and empowered in specific ways. In some respects, this has been one of the most powerful contributions of Foucault's work to the study of policy (see, for example, MacDonald and Marston 2006; McKee and Cooper 2008; Shore and Wright 1997). But this view of subjectified agents needs to go alongside an exploration of whether people identify themselves in the prescribed terms and enact their positions in the intended way. Work on citizens-as-consumers with colleagues at the Open University demonstrated that both staff and users of public services largely rejected such identifications and desired other relationships, practices and positions (Clarke et al. 2007a). A concern with how particular sorts of subjects are imagined, enabled and empowered as self-directing subjects needs to allow the possibility that they may behave as if they are self-directing subjects – and act in other ways. Active citizens may become activist citizens or, as Stenson demonstrates, governmental agents may follow other logics than those set down in the dominant discourse. All sorts of agency – organizations, occupations, groups and individual actors – may prove unwilling, reluctant or just sceptical about governmental prescriptions, expectations or solicitations (Clarke et al. 2007b).

I think the article points us to three further issues. First, there is the question of how to grasp the implications of many 'locals' for studying governance. Do we need to accumulate many local studies in order to understand how the social is being governed, given the many processes and relationships that impact upon governing the local in any particular place? Second, how do we think about the relationships between different scales or levels of governing – not least, how is the national being translated into local practices and what

consequences do such local practices have for national strategies? There are also governance discourses, networks and agencies beyond the national level. This points towards the possibility of developing what anthropologists have called 'multi-sited ethnography' towards what might be multi-sited and multi-scalar ethnographies (see Stubbs 2002 and 2005). Other possibilities include greater attention to thinking about nation-states as something other than coherent and unified blocks (e.g. Sharma and Gupta 2006; Painter 2006). Third, there are questions about how translation works – processes of interpretation and invention in relation to policy discourses (Lendvai and Stubbs 2007; Newman 2007). In examining how policies are translated in specific settings, there are difficult questions about how particular sites create or constrain the possibilities for translation – translation cannot just be treated as an act of imagination.

**Assembling the local/governing the local.**

For me, one of the most important features of Kevin Stenson's analysis is the way it focuses in the 'local' as a site of governing. Although he locates this in terms of larger changes of scale and space, I think his analysis underplays two important aspects of the local. The first involves what might be called the 'politics of scale' – what is going on in the dispersal of governing policy, practice and responsibility to local level (communities, neighbourhoods, localities, etc)? As the introduction to his article indicates, this is much discussed in a variety of forms – whether in political science's interest in multi-level governance or political economy approaches to new combinations of scale, space and states (e.g. Brenner 2004; Hooghe and Marks 2003). But these also tend to a realist view of both spaces and scales of governing – and thus underestimate the processes by which such 'locals' have to be brought into being, rather than being pre-existing terrains that are occupied by governmental agencies.

This is banally obvious in terms of community safety policies in the UK where the territorial boundaries of police organization have rarely mapped onto other governmental arrangements (local government, for example). The Thames Valley force at the heart of the article spans a multitude of local authorities, to say nothing of the different boundaries of health provision, regional government agencies and so on. So the governmental communities addressed in community safety arrangements have to be brought into being. I do not mean that communities are just invented anew – rather such governmental communities have to be assembled out of existing and new elements, including established local governance arrangements and vernacular understandings of the local. Allen and Cochrane (2007) have recently written about how regions are assembled – and the same analysis seems relevant to other governmental spaces and scales.

The process of assembling these sites of governing matters for the second critical point – the shifting alliances and contestations that take place around these sites. The article points to some of these – the negotiation of central government policy by local agents; the construction of networks and alliances among different organizations and occupations, and the relationships between such governmental agencies and local populations. The recruitment of 'communities' to processes of governing is a central concern of public participation and engagement yet can be politically and organisationally unstable in practice – given that communities are themselves only weakly bounded and can be difficult to 'fix' in official processes and arrangements (Cochrane and Newman 2009). They are also contested in terms of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, especially around questions of belonging and ownership (Clarke 2009; Cooper 1998).

I will take up the social dynamics of imagined communities in the last section, but here I also need to point to the troubled politics of locality in relation to policing. A recent report on the future of policing in England and Wales (Flanagan 2008) wrestled with questions of the local accountability and control, finding a variety of organisational, managerial and especially, political reasons for doubting most of the models of local accountability. In this view the local is understood as potentially unstable and vulnerable to capture by 'political' interests (Newman and Clarke 2009).

**Imagined communities: solidarities in the age of diversity**
Kevin Stenson locates his analysis within a set of vitally important debates about contemporary contestations of the nation and national identity. These have foregounded questions of migration, ethnicity and diversity not least in arguments that ethnic diversity undermines the forms of social solidarity that have provided the foundation for social democratic or welfarist states. These are troubling issues in both analytic and political terms and, as the article, recognises they bear heavily on imagined communities both at the national and local level. There are three brief points that I think are worth some attention.

First, some of the core scholarship sustaining these arguments derives from the USA (see Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Putnam 2007). These tend to project US experiences as universal or generalisable: for instance, Putnam treats the US as merely an exemplary 'modern society'. But if we are to take time/space as serious dimensions of social analysis, we need to recognise the 'peculiarity' of the USA: it is not simply modern. Rather it has been a settler society and a slave society before it became a society of 'immigration' – its patterns of racial and ethnic formation are therefore distinctive rather than general (see also Banting 2005). Attending to specific patterns of national formation – and their articulations of race and ethnicity – is critical when the academic and political conversations entangle themselves around 'diversity versus solidarity'.

Second, such issues have also developed a distinctive 'local' character in arguments in England at least about communities and community belonging. The recent study by Dench, Gavron and Young (2006) of London's 'new East End' points to powerful antagonisms between the 'white working class community' and the 'Bangladeshi community'. While denying that these are antagonisms are racialised, the authors themselves compound vernacular and academic discourses of race and place such that the 'white working class' become recognised as the 'Bethnal Greeners', and the Bangladeshi community remains Other. Lacking any history or class identity, Bangladeshis can never properly 'belong' (and by implication they should not be able to exercise ownership or membership rights, see Clarke, 2009). This study is part of a wider rediscovery of the 'white working class' in academic and political life in the UK – usually in ways that avoid questions of how nation and colonialism, and classed and racialised positions and identities, are intertwined.

Finally, this brings me to my doubts about a 'realist' perspective on governmentality. While I share Kevin's desire to escape from the dominant models of governmentality, I think the route via realism leaves some problems. In the debates about identity, division and nation, the categories of majority and minority populations, for example, need to be treated more as contingent constructions than as 'real' distinctions. Ethnic identities (centred on whiteness or otherness) are mobile not fixed – for example, in the UK the last few years have seen complicated shifts around 'old' versus 'new' migrants (who may be 'Other whites' from Eastern Europe, for example); and around place, culture and religion as the articulating principle of ethnicity (e.g., the British conflation of Asian, Pakistani and Muslim). In the end,

I think realism tends to avoid the difficult, but vital, dynamics of construction, articulation and assemblage – whether about populations, peoples and publics; about sites, spaces and scales of governing; and, not least, about the contested politics of antagonism and solidarity.

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**Author´s Address**:
Prof John Clarke
The Open University
Faculty of Social Sciences
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA UK
United Kongdom
Tel: ++44 1908 654542
Fax: ++44 1908 654488
Email: john.clarke@open.ac.uk