Comments on Kevin Stenson's 'Governing the Local: Sovereignty, Social Governance and Community Safety'

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It is a challenging time to be a social scientist. Many of the concepts and categories we took for granted have been revealed as temporally and geographically specific. It is now widely accepted that the nation-state is no longer the sole container for economic, political and social processes, if indeed it ever was. This is where Kevin Stenson begins his paper. He traces the re-ordering of both state and nation, highlighting recent discussions about the unbundling and rescaling of the state and outlining how increasing ethnic and cultural diversity challenge homogeneous conceptions of the nation. In Stenson's account these are largely empirical processes that are the basis for the important questions he raises about changing understandings of publics and social order, and their implications for the local governance of community safety. He contrasts two alternative positions; the 'universal human rights position' which refuses to privilege the interests of majority populations, and a more 'communitarian and nationalistic position' which he argues is most likely to be deployed by right wing politicians and interests groups. Drawing from extensive research in the Thames Valley region of the United Kingdom, he shows how these two understandings have both shaped the local policy response to crime and disorder.

In and of itself, this is a very interesting paper. The difficulty for me, however, is Stenson's attempt to develop what he calls a 'Realist Governmentality' perspective, which he can then apply in a 'grounded way' to his empirical research.

Stenson is, of course, not alone in turning to governmentality for intellectual inspiration. As increasing numbers of scholars try to make sense of the qualitative changes that have reshaped economic, political and social life over the last two decades, so too have they begun to recognise that these changes do not just involve the 'rolling back' or 'withering away' of the nation-state, nor can they be grasped by focusing on the severing of the relationships between nation and economy, nation and state, nation and society. Rather greater attention is being paid to how economies, states and societies are being re-imagined and re-constituted in particular forms. For example, we now recognise that the conception of the economy that underpinned development strategies during the second half of the twentieth century was a specific understanding of the economy based on a territorially defined set of economic relations that was only made statistically measurable and nationally regulated during the 1930s and 1940s (Mitchell 2002).

There is a parallel discussion in state theory which underlines how the 'state effect' is constituted from an assemblage of discourses, institutional forms and practices. Rather than seeing the state as having an a priori conceptual or empirical form, these accounts show how 'the state' came to be understood as a centralised authority ruling over a territorially defined

polity (Hansen and Stepputat 2001). Finally, sociologists have highlighted the shift from the singular and univeralising conceptions of society that characterised the post war formations of keynesian welfarism and developmentalism, to the multiple and heterogeneous conceptions of community that inform contemporary forms of social governance (Rose 1996). Such accounts have helped social scientists recognise that the understandings of economy, state and society that dominated academic and political life during the second half of last century were historically and geographically specific.

Governmentality has been a useful approach for scholars interested in these issues because it is not necessarily wedded to analyses at the level of the nation-state, even though this is where it has been most often used (Larner and Walters 2004). In the analyses inspired by this literature de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation take multiple forms and require careful empirical tracing. The emphasis is on identifying the knowledges and techniques through which diverse authorities govern in different sites, and in relation to different objectives. Governmentality provides an analytical tool box (giving us concepts such as problematisations, rationalities, technologies) that has allowed the analysis of shifting economic, political and social understandings without presupposing the forms that governmental spaces, objects and subjects should take, and the political effects they might have. Finally - as the term itself suggests - it is a literature that focuses on govern-*mentalities*. Analysts in this field emphasise that it is not just that the world changes, but also how we know the world changes and that this has important implications for analyses of governance, politics and power (Dean 1999).

This literature has reshaped social science scholarship in wide range of areas. Rose, O'Malley and Valverde (2006) identify the government of economic life, technologies of risk, postcolonial studies, histories of sexuality and cultural studies as fields that have been significantly re-shaped by governmentality. In my own work I have found it useful to analyse globalisation not as a political economic process, but as a govern-mentality, as a way of both imaging and constituting the 'irreal' (Rose 1999) spaces of clusters, regions, flows, chains and networks. Closer to the terrain on which this paper is situated, numerous social policy and urban studies scholars, including Stenson himself, have built on Rose's observations about the new significance of community as a governmental category to show the ways in which this has re-inflect fields of social governance such as urban planning, social welfare, social work, healthcare, community development and criminology.

As this literature has developed, it has become increasingly diverse and concepts from the governmentality literature are now used in conjunction with a wide range of other theoretical approaches, including neo-Marxism, actor-network theory and feminism. There is also a longstanding discussion in this literature about the relative merits of focusing on problematisations and governmental rationalities, versus the benefits of developing more sociological accounts in which contestation and counter-governmentalities feature centrally (Rose 1999; O'Malley, Weir and Shearing 1997). Finally, there are debates about the extent to which governmentalities are aligned with actually existing political projects; for example, are advanced liberalism and neoliberalism interchangeable terms? How should we understand the relationships between neoliberalisms and neo-conservatisms? While scholars are differently positioned in these debates, there can be no doubt that over the last two decades the governmentality approach has inspired a generation of analyses that have considerably enhanced our understanding of both historical and contemporary governmental domains, including important work on local governance and community safety.

Where does Kevin Stenson's current paper sit in relation to the broader governmentality literature? Stenson argues that a 'realist version of Governmentality theory' (pg 1, caps in the original) requires a move beyond discourse. He frames his analysis through three steps; identification of the political economic shifts in the region, analysis of local governmental responses to these shifts, and recognition of how these responses are shaped by local political cultures. His aim is to emphasise the role of politics, culture and habitus in the restructuring of the community safety initiatives he is analysing. In particular, he is concerned to trace how political interventions premised on the problems associated with increasing ethnic and cultural diversity are being negotiated by crime control professionals.

This is both an important and timely topic. As a recent immigrant to the United Kingdom myself, I regularly find myself aghast at both media and popular constructions of immigrants and the problems we are purportedly causing. In my view the governmentality literature provides a useful conceptual apparatus through which to denaturalise assumptions that nation-states were once ethnically homogeneous, challenge claims that the emergence of new racialised 'problem populations' is an empirical phenomenon that can be explained by increased immigration, and underline the social imaginaries that lead politicians to think that the targeting of poor ethnic communities is an appropriate political response to increased levels of crime and social disorder. This literature would also encourage us to pay careful attention to the more politically palatable forms of intervention; to denaturalise the 'social' forms of universalism that characterise the 'liberal' community safety initiatives discussed in the final section of this paper, revealing the rationalities and techniques these forms of social governance make manifest.

In this paper, however, Stenson struggles to detach himself both conceptually and empirically from a set of naturalised assumptions about the terrain he is analysing. He identifies the shift towards increasing cultural and ethnic diversity, the decline of bridging social capital, and the growth of transnational identities as symptomatic of the loss of particular forms of nationhood and the decline of 'we-ness' that a welfare state requires to work. But rather than seeing this through a governmentality lens as a specific problematisation, which would explore him to explore the ways in which new populations are being imagined and constituted, how social capital is being conceptualised and measured, the political narratives assembled through and against these governmental processes, and the programmes that ensue, Stenson not only underlines this problematisation he (unwittingly) contributes to it.

Governmentality would encourage us to ask questions such as: How is immigration being governed today? What forms of knowledge and expertise are involved in the identification of immigrants as comprised of particular cultural, ethnic and class groupings? How are these translated into techniques for managing these populations? How are these contested and by whom? What are the implications for the content and form of the community safety programmes that ensue? Instead what we have in this account of the Thames Valley region are terms like 'knowledge economy', 'welfare dependency', 'white flight' and 'communities at risk' (to give but a few examples) being used as self-evident descriptors of the terrain being analysed. Yet these are terms that governmentality (and other) scholars, including Kevin Stenson in his earlier work, have shown to be associated with particular economic, political and social formulations. These terms bundle together a set of presuppositions about the nature of the region, the causes of the problems that need to be solved, and the capacities of the subjects involved. They need to be denaturalised, made specific, and their governmental implications revealed.

Perhaps even more troubling is the blurring of the categories and experiences of poor white communities, visible ethnic minority communities and immigrant populations (all these labels are also worthy of further attention). It is precisely this blurring that underpins the 'moral panic' around immigration in the UK, with recent arrivals taking the blame for the overall strain on public services (as well as increasing house prices, under- and un-employment and particular forms of crime) rather than these being seen as experiences that poor immigrants share with poor British people from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds.[1] Moreover, in this paper immigrants are represented in particular ways. They are seen as culturally different, reclusive and marginalised. It is they who are the challenge to universalistic conceptions of nationhood, not their unwelcoming and discriminatory neighbours, nor the market citizens of their new country who argue for tax cuts rather than increased social spending. Again, my point is not that to deny that these formulations of immigrants are politically powerful, rather it is to point out that governmentality provides analytical resources to expose them as partial and contingent, and as doing particular governmental work.

Similarly, the technologies through which poor and racialised people are known and governed are not questioned. How do population profiles, standard measures of deprivation, censuses, and referral registers (all of which feature in passing in this paper) recognise and categorise the populations they count? How do particular populations become classed, cultured, ethnicised, and otherwise identified as being 'at risk'? How does this shape the problems (and solutions) of community safety in particular ways? While the paper notes that the collation and presentation of data is a political issue, it is striking that it is not identified as a governmental issue. Nor are other techniques featured in the paper analysed as governmental. How do the pilot benchmarking schemes used by the Thames Valley Police work? How do they know and compare the capacities of problem solving, intelligence-led policing and gender sensitivity? What implications does this have for the spaces and subjects of community safety?

Finally, there are some taken-for-granted political assumptions in this paper, notably the dichotomy drawn between the 'cosmopolitan universalistic ideologies of the liberal professional elites and the communitarian and nationalist ideologies deployed by politicians of the right' (pg 1). On what basis do we know that universalism is necessarily progressive and communitarianism is by definition right wing? On the one hand it is often argued that increased acceptance of 'communitarian' cultural specificities by liberal professional elites - for example in areas such as dress and diet - might help build civic solidarities. On the other hand there are 'progressive' examples, such as early intervention programmes targeted to 'at risk' families and communities, that draw on communitarian discourses. The broader point is that governmentalities are not political ideologies; they involve economic, political and social imaginaries that can underpin governmental projects of both the 'left' and 'right'.

So in the end what I think we have here is a very interesting political sociological analysis that draws attention to the discourses, institutions and political cultures of community safety in the Thames Valley. However, despite the apparent recourse to the governmentality literature, it is an analysis that tends to underline familiar ways of thinking about social governance rather than opening up new possibilities. In my view governmentality is not simply a realist description of changes in governance, rather it is an approach that aims to denaturalise governmental rationalities, strategies and technologies. Because Stenson focuses

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[1] Nor are immigrants often recognised for the contributions they make to the staffing of public services (particularly in health and education).

on the former rather than the later, his work unintentionally normalises the very understandings he wishes to contest. It also re-inscribes liberal cosmopolitan universalism as the model of social governance to which we should aspire. And in the end we learn very little about his preferred form of social governance. In what ways does cosmopolitanism universalism differ from the (purported) universalism of welfarism and developmentalism? How does this particular form of liberalism govern? What assumptions does it make about the ethical and the governmental? Who are the subjects of cosmopolitan universalism? And what would unpacking these questions tell us more generally about changing understandings of society, welfare and community safety?

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