



## **Beyond Kantianism - Response to Critiques**

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I am flattered and privileged to have received four such astute critiques of my work from an international cast. I will reflect at length about many of their points in future work but to respond fully would require a very long article and so I will highlight some of the more salient issues. The authors share misgivings about my commitment to a realist version of governmentality theory so I will try to articulate a bit more clearly how it is different from two major alternative perspectives highlighted by the authors: what I term a `discursive` governmentality perspective (Stenson 2005), and the neo-Marxist regulationist school of political economy. However, deeper normative questions are raised, for example by Wendy Larner, about what it means to be progressive or critical within the broad terrain of liberalism (which can include neo-liberals and neo-conservatives) in the wake of the collapse of communism and much of the power of western labour movements, the rise of the new emancipatory and environmental social movements and varieties of religious fundamentalism.

As social scientists and university intellectuals we usually argue that our work differs from journalistic reportage or ideological polemics that gather supportive evidence through selective fact gathering. This is because we dig beneath the flux of events and surface appearances and debates to uncover the deeper structures of thought and social relations that shape our experiences and the flow of events. And we also engage with contrary evidence that troubles our truth claims. This is the work of theory. I accept that theory plays a vital role but argue for a more grounded approach rooted in empirical research using a variety of methods and data sources. Hence I adopt a more cautious approach to conceptions of the `deeper structures` we uncover. At best we can only know them through provisional heuristic modelling and it is best not to reify them.

### **Two approaches to noumenal reality**

Many progressive social scientists have turned to the neo-Marxist regulationist, school of political economy (associated with Jessop, Peck et al) and the post-Foucaultian governmentality (associated with Rose et al) schools in trying to make critical sense of great changes. These are associated with what in shorthand terms are labelled as globalisation, the apparent triumph of market neo-liberalism, the transformation of the state and the apparent declining power of and faith in `big government` (whether in the US legacy of the New Deal or European and Australasian versions of social democratic welfare states) to provide universal public services and safety nets for the vulnerable and weak. The other authors here, particularly Fabian Kessl and Nadia Kutscher and Robert P. Fairbanks II, seem keen to integrate elements of these perspectives. Yet though many of the seminal articles in each tradition have appeared in the same journal, *Economy and Society*, curiously, there has been limited exchange between these perspectives. Hence, their dominant tendencies have tended to follow different paths.

At the risk of oversimplifying a complex story I suggest that the neo-Marxist, regulationist political economists, using a rhetoric that emphasises objective, 'material' factors and 'realism' in constructing models of economic relations, claim to identify the deeper material structural tendencies and forces. They provide causal explanations of the institutional shifts we experience, including visible political struggles and new patterns of governance in what are described as post-Fordist political economies. Incidentally, like engineering and mathematical micro-economics, this sphere seems to attract mainly male practitioners. By contrast, leading governmentality theorists (who include more women) have focused on debunking notions of fixed realities and hence are sceptical about perspectives described as realist. The article by O'Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997) to which Larner refers crystallised a particular critical edge to governmentality work. In my recollection as a participant in the previously influential History of the Present seminars at the LSE the political allegiances of governmentality intellectuals crossed the ideological spectrum – indeed provided a refuge for those weary of formulaic and censorious leftism. Indeed O'Malley et al's intervention is part of an attempt over the last decade to rewrite the history of governmentality studies (Rose et al. 2006). This has created a 'history of the present' which has attempted to define governmentality studies narrowly in terms of tenets and protocols that I have termed discursive governmentality theory. While Foucault would have understood the power/knowledge relations involved I think the old iconoclast would have groaned to see himself cast as the father of an orthodoxy. The critical, discursive perspective of O'Malley et al, while eschewing large scale programmatic politics aligned with the ideological concerns of feminist and other new social movement – championing the needs of women, sexual and ethnic minorities and so on. In my view this is based – perhaps implicitly - on the values of cosmopolitan universalism. From this position they provided a framework for rendering problematic dominant legal and state defined conceptions of what is normal and real.

Without resorting to a narrow individualist philosophical idealism, those who have followed this path emphasise the protean, ever shifting nature of the social world. Instead of looking for the basis of stable truth claims in external reality they prefer to focus on uncovering the shared mental patterns – the mentalities or political rationalities - that underpin claims to knowledge and make populations and areas thinkable and measurable for the purposes of governing them. These governmentality perspectives provide essential tools for analysis and belong broadly to the social constructionist tradition of social science. As Larner and John Clarke emphasise ethnic identity, for example, is not fixed and there is a danger of realist approaches avoiding examination of, in Clarke's terms, the 'dynamics of construction, articulation and assemblage..'. Larner sees the function of critique as 'denaturalising' truth claims about the reality of governance, hence I am at fault for apparently accepting the reality of phenomena like 'white flight', the effects of immigration, the objectivity of regional maps and so on. These are viewed as situated governmental social constructions, intelligible principally in terms of the political rationalities that underpin their construction.

The implication is that we should focus our attention on the activities of the mass media, politicians, policy makers and lobbyists in uncovering these governmental constructions. They are right to remind me of this. Likewise, Fairbanks II reminds me that racialised (and we should add ethnicised) and class groupings are also problematised and constructed for the purposes of governing them. Though I have explored some of these issues elsewhere and they are rightly on the agenda for future work, in a short article I did not have the space to unpack the genealogy of all these phenomena simultaneously. I use these problematic terms as shorthand expressions for complex, shifting phenomena not static realities, but I reject the

notion that they are intelligible principally as discursive constructions made up by political and moral entrepreneurs operating outside the life worlds of the people centrally involved in these issues.

There is always the danger in social constructionist accounts of becoming lost in the fog of descriptive detail that favours ideographic over nomothetic analysis, but there is in the case of governmentality work also the danger, insofar as it focuses on mentalities and rationalities, of disconnecting the general from the detail. Despite interesting analyses at micro spatial and thematic levels, as Clarke and Fairbanks II observe, there is frustration with a shared tendency by these perspectives towards abstract grand narratives of change at the expense of recognising significant spatial and other differences, alongside the commonalities, in the way great social changes have unfolded. Though some may think that with the homogenising effects of globalisation we can see the world in a grain of empirical sand, clearly, those claims fail to convince and our challenge remains how to find the right balance between nomothetic and ideographic investigation and analysis. As Fairbanks II notes, in Geertz's wonderful phrase, both these approaches are theoretically muscle bound and empirically anaemic when making sense of general shifts. This may also point to a shared tendency for theorists in these different traditions to retreat from engaging with the experiential worlds of people beyond the universities and new social movements – the forms of life which are our comfort zones. As Roland Barthes is reputed to have remarked, 'reality is OK for a visit, but you wouldn't want to live there.' But at least, as researchers, we should spend more time in other people's worlds.

We can draw another point of comparison between the two broad perspectives, they are both rooted in Kant's metaphysical distinction (perhaps going back to Plato) between a noumenal, objective reality and the phenomenal world of appearances. Materialists find noumenal reality in the deeper structures of the external world whereas those of a more idealist bent, like discursive governmentality theorists, find it in the deeper structures of mind and thought. By contrast, I am more drawn to David Hume's cautious, Scottish materialist empiricism that avoids hard distinctions like noumenon and phenomenon and recognises that what we know is mainly drawn – cautiously and provisionally - through sensory experience in combination with our imagination. This is more compatible with the ethos of the English, Scottish and Dutch traditions of liberalism and their distrust of overbearing authority of any kind (Stenson 1998: 338-9).

### **The dialectic of governance from above and below**

My critique of O'Malley et al was rooted in a defence of broad, programmatic social democratic politics against the politics of the margins advocated by them. It also involved a plea to recognise the centrality of politics and culture, the importance of sovereignty, nationalism and communitarian ethics and mobilisation, the dialectic between governance from above and below – involving folk, oral forms of biopolitics, and the interdependence of liberalism with these phenomena (Stenson 1998). This remains my position now. Hence my sketch of the political economic shifts in the Thames Valley does not belong in the noumenal world of regulationist theory and determining forces in the last instance. I am more influenced by a tradition of political economy that can link Max Weber, J.M Keynes, J.K. Galbraith and Joseph Stiglitz today. Markets, commercial, regulatory and other institutions are culturally shaped, involve human choices and sensibilities, and (sometimes self fulfilling) fashions of thought at every stage, and are influenced by subtle social psychologies beyond the imagination of mechanistic political economic modelling of neo-liberals on the right and Marxists on the left.

Furthermore, the need to recognise the dialectic between governance from above and below means that it is not enough to view ethnic and racial conflict at local level as primarily as the product of discursive governing strategies or media fuelled 'false consciousness', or even through the prism of majority/minority relations. In very diverse, poorer areas the struggles between social groups, including ethnically defined ones, over jobs, housing, street turf, employment, illegal economies and so on are only too real. They are reproduced by local, folk categorisations of individuals and groups that are not simply imposed by regulatory agencies outside the area. There may be heartening examples of people bridging across social divides, but there can also be much distrust, fear, hostility and cultural misunderstanding. Moreover, apart from a few brave souls, middle class, liberal cosmopolitan families tend not to live in such neighbourhoods, and avoid sending their children to schools there. To uncover these relations requires difficult primary social investigation, inaccessible through policy texts. Larner can discover this very near to where she works at Bristol University, just as earlier generations of social scientists discovered this near to Fairbanks II's University of Chicago. These social clusters on all sides often deploy what could be seen as folk versions of particularistic, communitarian logic. And Larner is right to query whether progressive politics is necessarily identified with cosmopolitan universalism or some form of communitarianism. Social movements for resistance, defence and change usually involve a degree of fraternity (one of the three French revolutionary principles) which embodies communal, solidaristic bonds as E.P Thompson and other socialist historians have emphasised.

Finally, to turn to social/welfare work and the new politics of security, I was fascinated to read Kessl and Kutscher's analysis of the re-territorialisation of welfare in Germany and hope they develop this empirically and discover more about how official attempts to govern the poor and marginal interact with their efforts not just to resist authority but also to develop and manage their own – probably orally structured – agendas for coping with and managing their lives beyond the purview of authorities. This took me back to my own doctoral research (supervised by Nikolas Rose) in which I linked a genealogy of social work knowledge and expertise with empirical analysis of interactions between social workers and (predominantly poor) clients (Stenson, 1993). The governing strategies of the social workers (linked with other regulatory authorities) attempting to get 'clients' to behave in ways more acceptable to a normatively defined liberal citizenship were filtered not just by strategies of resistance to authority but by very different oral mind sets among clients, linked with a very different cultural world to that inhabited by the social workers and other professionals grounded in text-based liberal Enlightenment values and cognitive styles, backed by a panoply of national sovereign, legal sanctions. To capture these subtle dialectics and coalitions it is very welcome, therefore, that Clarke advocates the inclusion of anthropological methods in our toolbox for the study of governance.

## References

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