



**HAL**  
open science

## Comments on 'Democratic governance'

Patrick Le Galès

► **To cite this version:**

Patrick Le Galès. Comments on 'Democratic governance'. Comparative European Politics, 2012, 10 (5), pp.608-615. 10.1057/cep.2011.31 . hal-01024592

**HAL Id: hal-01024592**

**<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01024592>**

Submitted on 16 Jul 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

---

## Symposium

# Comments on ‘Democratic governance’

Patrick Le Galès

Sciences Po Centre d'Etudes Européennes, Paris 75006, France.

**Abstract** The article provides a discussion of Mark Bevir's important book on 'Democratic governance'. It first discusses the conceptual part and in particular the categorisation in terms of 'modern social science'. It disputes the analysis of neo institutionalism. Second, it stresses the UK case, which is the base of Bevir's analysis and suggests that the author relies far too much on policy networks. Hierarchies are still very strong at the same time in the United Kingdom, a factor that limits the claims of the book.

*Comparative European Politics* (2012) **10**, 608–615. doi:10.1057/cep.2011.31; published online 17 September 2012

**Keywords:** governance; networks; New Labour; modernism

---

The opportunity to discuss Mark Bevir's important book 'Democratic Governance' is very welcome. Mark Bevir has established himself over the past decade as one of the important and innovative thinkers and as a leading authority on questions of governance, as seen, for instance, by the various edited books published about governance including the recent Sage handbook of governance, in his research on New Labour or his work on governance and the state as cultural practices with Rod Rhodes.

This new book by Mark Bevir is an ambitious one, pursuing many interesting intellectual avenues, based on robust normative statements and categories (contrasting new and old, for instance), and very clear methodological propositions and tables to contrast different models. The purpose of the book is precisely set in the introduction, that is, to analyse the relations between forms of knowledge, the impact on new theories of public policy, the state, governance and their impact and use in public policy, using the British case as the example. In other words, as mentioned in the preface, 'New theories of governance have contributed to the rise of new worlds of governance ... and democratic action has lost out to scientific expertise'.

This comment is written from a perspective that is not social theory, political philosophy, from someone who is not a constructivist or who does not use



interpretative social science as his main intellectual tool, and hence some note of scepticism despite a great interest and a lot of sympathy for the approach is necessary.

The first part of the book deals with the emergence of modernist social science and the modern state, and then the main theories of governance related to modernist theories. The second part develops the analysis of reforms under New Labour. The conclusion comes back to the issue of democracy and the importance of interpretative approach that 'replaces economic and sociological concepts of rationality with one of local reasoning'. The book is radical, even messianic sometimes in promoting one clear defined interpretative approach and a particular method, radical historicism and case narrative and by contrast systematically attempting to eradicate what is called modernist social sciences. This argumentative strategy also makes the book enjoyable to read.

Chapter 1 'Interpreting governance' is an excellent analysis and presentation of interpretative analysis, which can be used for pedagogical purposes. The presentation of the method is crystal clear, emphasising radical historicism, nominalism and contingency over developmental historicism or positivism, rejecting all forms of reification. Mark Bevir synthesises the anti-modernist argument in social science, concluding that 'human action are inherently particular and contingent', (p. 7) and should be interpreted in wide contexts of meanings. He then explains the method associated with that intellectual current and the role of cases and genealogy, in this case the genealogy of a cultural shift. The aim is clear that 'this historicist explanation of current patterns of democratic governance is ... a genealogy. I try to offer a bold, sweeping and provocative argument that relies on historical narrative and illustrative cases to change the way we see current ideals and practices' (p. 10). Bevir is at his best when explaining the intellectual project of the book and the method he uses.

The book has, however, one major ambiguity. The author claims to make a general argument and the case he uses is Britain, which he knows best and which he has studied. Here is the illustrative case. Although he mentions at times that the argument also makes sense or is illustrated in other cases, he tends to assume that it is legitimate because interpretative social science does not care about the classic positivist views about choice of cases. However, I would argue that the whole book relies on various conceptions, which are based on the British case. There is a gap between the general discussion about social science and the illustrative case, and the articulation between the two is eloquently justified but not convincing. The title of the book should have included 'Democratic governance in the UK'. First, one is surprised when modernist new theories of governance include neoliberalism and the Third Way. The Third Way? In his previous excellent work on New Labour, Bevir has indeed made a distinctive argument explaining the rise of the Third Way and New Labour in relation to new theories of governance based on the

proliferation of networks. Because he concentrates on the production of ideas and theories to influence or explain different public policies, Bevir was bound to take the Third Way very seriously. However, it is possible to argue that the Third Way was not so much a new governance theory even though there were some elements going in this direction. Does it really make sense to put on the same level neoliberalism (not very clearly defined here) and the Third Way? Not sure at all. If it was supposed to be a new theory, let us notice its quick disappearance and nearly complete failure to get some influence between Britain, except for a very short spell.

Second, most analysis of the decade of New Labour government have rather concluded that the Third Way was a convenient frame for New Labour leaders looking for new rhetoric and argument, but that was abandoned more or less completely after 3 years. If one accepts that the Third Way was a set of ideas and proposals and not a proper theory, and that it played a role in the making of New Labour and the restructuring of policies and the British state, one could argue that this role was strong at the beginning, but not much<sup>1</sup>. The point here is not to invalidate Mark Bevir's general thesis, but to stress the fact that emphasising too much on the Third Way as a proper theory rather weakens his argument and is not convincing when used in that sense.

The third point is very puzzling. Mark Bevir's conception of governance is basically determined by the research programme developed by himself, Rod Rhodes, David Marsh and Martin Smith in the 1990s, which aimed at demonstrating that there was no more Westminster model but just policy networks. The whole conception of governance is built around policy networks. It may be a case of stretching a good idea too far. Empirically speaking, there was an ongoing debate in the United Kingdom about the importance of policy networks. It is difficult to conclude, but my own view and empirical research is far more nuanced. There is far less hierarchy than before in the United Kingdom, less hierarchic government old style and far more market. We all agree on this. However, the rest is not just policy networks. There are some policy networks that have developed over time. However, in my view, Mark Bevir is wrong to assume a decline of the bureaucracy. What we have seen in the United Kingdom, as shown in particular in Christopher Hood's research programme, is the proliferation of a new form of bureaucracy, the auditing and controlling bureaucracy that is not just based on public choice, although it is an important part of it. The rise of regulation agencies is also another phenomenon partly influenced by public choice. This is probably more important as a long-term change than the rise of policy networks.

It should also be added that there is strong evidence of the multiplication of policy actors, NGOs and various interests groups. However, in many cases, empirical research suggests that those are often NOT organised in policy networks of various sorts. The statement according to which 'the new theories of



governance have rethought the state not as a formal unity but as a complex pattern of networks' (p. 62) may not be so accurate. The first part of the phrase is of course fine, but not the second. I would argue that all this literature has underlined the fragmentation of the state and many different phenomena (agencification) including, among many other things, overlapping networks and some policy networks.

Therefore, there are more policy networks and they play a role in the making of new forms of governance. However, I would rather conclude that they are not the dominant form in the United Kingdom, but very far from it. It follows that the conception of governance developed by R. Rhodes's seminal book and by Mark Bevir may be far too influenced by the role given to policy networks. Again, if one goes beyond the United Kingdom, there has been some solid research about policy networks showing both the interest and the limits of both the approach and of their empirical importance. All in all, of course the UK case is illustrative but the whole conception of supposedly modern theories of governance is far too dependent upon an important but narrow and limited body of research mainly in the United Kingdom. Those limits are becoming serious weaknesses when the author addresses some European questions and it does not work. The argument put forward often reflects the debates in the first years of the New Labour government and the search for alternatives and new ideas, many of which became sidelined or are not implemented. Surprisingly, the lack of reflexivity about the UK influence on the argument and about the UK case altogether is probably one of the disappointments of the book.

In such a rich and sophisticated book, there are some tensions and ambiguities in the intellectual project, which make it both interesting and less convincing at times.

The radical angle of the book is very strong when the author explains more or less that all modern theories are positivist and bad, new governance theories are derived from them and from the crisis of the state, hence the problems for democracy. Bevir is very clear in the conception of governance; his main original point in the first section of the book is to show 'the broader historical shift in knowledge production from developmental historicism to a modernist social science based on formal economic and sociological concepts of rationality. The new governance is in large part about the rise of new forms of knowledge and expertise' (p. 18).

Bevir then makes a remarkable rationalisation exercise that aims at bringing a great deal of western social sciences in three varieties of modernism, namely development historicism, and then modernism divided into two: government and the new governance. Each category is distinct according to four sets of criteria: concept of rationality, state formation, public sector and mode of accountability. For instance, in this framework, the new governance is characterised by a concept of rationality based on rational choice and new

institutionalism, a neoliberal and or network state, markets and networks for the public sector and performance accountability.

Bevir goes for it, and the book is in some ways a real *tour de force* as it attempts to present in a clearly argued way both the rise of modernist social science and the rise of the modernist state, the crisis of the state and the emergence of modernist governance theories. Some developments are particularly sharp such as what he calls the 'bureaucratic narrative' and the belief in rational expert government.

However, the sharp and synthetic style of argumentation also has its limits. The analysis of sociological rationality, for instance, is close to caricature at times because the category that is used may be questioned. Sociology is not limited to Durkheim and Weber (what about Simmel), and if there is a clear reliance on 'modernist modes of knowledge, ... classifications, correlations, and functions generate forms of explanation that reduce individual choices and actions to social facts ... modernists turned instead to formal patterns, regularities or models of action and institution across space and time' (pp. 23, 24). The critique is really addressed to Durkheim and Weber. Other currents of sociology have always focussed on agency, in contrast to Bevir's claims. Modernist social science is the enemy and the cause of many democratic problems here. The argument makes sense, but the level of generality and simplification is both fascinating and slightly unconvincing. Sociology has always been a very broad church, and debates about rationality not new. Is modernism a correct category here? This is a broad claim and many social theorists would disagree, but let us assume that it became a dominant conception in social science.

The reconstruction of the 'modernist' social science field mixes sophisticated arguments, brilliant insights with more debatable simplified statements. I found the critical discussion of institutionalism and neo-institutionalism particularly weak. Bevir first has a very selective reading of some of the work, and his presentation of various strands of neo-institutionalism is uncharacteristically imprecise, oversimplified or even inaccurate. He has clearly identified two enemies there and uses harsh words. Let us concentrate on new institutionalism. His systematic repetition of the 'amorphous' nature of the concept and its 'vagueness' rather reveals that he is not at ease in the discussion. To give one example, and by contrast to the claim made in the book, most new institutionalists do not consider institutions as actors. The whole conceptual differentiation between organisation and actors on the one hand and institutions on the other is central in the debate. In addition, some of the comments on the work of Renate Mayntz and Fritz Scharpf are a bit confusing and misleading in particular for the former. The discussion of regulation theory and rational choice is also pretty basic. It is difficult to accept the view that new institutionalism has been dominant in sociology and that agency was absent from sociological rationality, or even from new institutionalism. The whole



discussion of 'modernist theory' leaves the reader puzzled because of the brio of some discussion or the sophistication and clarity of the argument when Mark Bevir develops the interpretative framework and the simplification of the rest of the discussion or the conclusion he derives. The overview of 'modernist' theories remains puzzling, partial and one is left with the impression that the author is using a lot of energy to create the straw man needed for neatly defining his own argument.

Finally, for this section, although it is central in his argument, even if one is ready to accept the view that modernist social science has played a role in the making of the modern state, the argument is underdeveloped. The author briefly mentions a few key references in passing, but there is a solid literature that might have been useful both in the United States and in Europe.

The strength of the book is the attempt to show that 'the new governance is in large part about the rise of new forms of knowledge and expertise' (p. 65). The whole ambiguity of the book is about this 'large part'. A less constructivist scholar may also argue that those new forms were developed because of policy failures that had to be constructed and argued as such, but fiscal crisis or failing transport or health systems have also laid the foundations for paradigm shifts. Bevir systematically links any change to a set of ideas or a particular theory (new liberalism and rational choice, for instance); this radical line proves more or less convincing, rather more in the pages about the first Thatcher-led wave of reforms, rather less after this, that is, the second wave reforms supposed to be explained by 'new governance', including joined-up networks and public-private partnership. Bevir rightly brings in some sceptical and critical arguments, but the discussion, without any data, is vague 'at times'. There is a feeling that the author is becoming close to tautologies at time because it becomes difficult to disentangle what the new governance narrative tells us from what the government tells us. The argument has its logic, 'the new theories and new worlds coalesce in a governance narrative' (p. 81). This is an exciting argument, but the demonstration, even understood with the author interpretative framework, is not so robust. The identification of the second wave of reform as the new worlds is particularly debatable as, at the same time, Britain was characterised by a remarkable wave of centralisation and the incredible investment and beliefs in performance indicator. One wonders as to whether the author only looks for trends that are within his framework and whether he has been a bit carried away by the New Labour rhetoric. There is no trace of one of the dominant characteristics of the New Labour government, namely illeralism, paternalism and authoritarianism at times, that do not fit well with the new governance narrative.

This said, the summary of the argument developed in the previous publication is excellent and clear and the deconstruction of the unitary state narrative is powerful, but as argued before the emphasis on policy networks is debatable.

When Bevir develops his own analysis of decentred governance narrative, the pages are illuminating and fascinating. He does a great job at showing the limits of the vision of the state as unitary and rational.

The second part of the book deals with the attempts made by governments to reform bureaucracies and constitutions in order to ‘enhance the democratic credentials of governance’. The construction of the chapters is sometimes difficult to follow between critical discussion of good governance, representative government and Bevir’s insistence to put all his arguments in nice clear tables. He has a mind for rationalising and creating nice typologies. For instance, he contrasts the bureaucracy model to the New Public Management and the newest New Public Services defined by contrast and based on the new theories (p. 102). However, of course, there is a slight ambiguity there as bureaucracies were well identified and studied, NPM also, up to a point and New Public Services is an alternative possibly in the making. However, this is challenging and this search for alternative narratives is a strong point of the book. Chapter 5 is both very rich and full of interesting points about the consequences for democracy in terms of accountability. However, there is a sense that the identification of the problem very much relies upon the construction of the author.

In Bevir’s argument, the interaction between theories and worlds is central. The rest of the book develops the reform put forward by the New Labour government, the Constitution, devolution, the judicial, public policy, police and their interpretation. He provides a very robust interpretation of the New Labour governance relating New Labour reforms to institutionalism, bringing to the fore the role of social science ideas and theories in government and contrasting various narratives.

In a different section, he develops his critique of the New Labour governance narrative and the world it created by emphasising the limits of accountability, the role of experts and the democratic dilemmas emerging from this new world. The democratic critique is extremely interesting and well argued.

This style of argument stresses change. The book is full of the ‘new narrative’ of the ‘new world’ of ‘new Labour’ and ‘new theories’. The author has a very strong analytical mind and he develops categories, typologies and rational narratives succeeding over time. One wonders whether he does not do too much of this. The table is a good example of this where Mark Bevir comes back on the characterisation of modernism and after modernism where social science theory goes from rational choice and sociological institutionalism to interpretative theory, where policymaking is not about markets and networks anymore, but dialogic (p. 258). In other words, and that is what is so interesting in the book, Mark Bevir develops a new narrative that he hopes will be performative.

The final chapter, bringing together the different parts of the discussion, shows the potential of interpretative social science in contributing to the





making of a new narrative, which has the potential to enhance democracy in governments and to promote dialogues between citizen within networks, emphasising agency and localism. This is innovative, interesting and promising.

Despite the nuances expressed in this comment, the fact remains that the book is impressive and that the originality of the method does bring in crucial insights to the understanding of states, public policy and governance. His intellectual project allows Bevir to be sharper than most in underlining the democratic limits of governance and in identifying interesting alternatives. Even if one is not entirely convinced that interpretative social science should become fully dominant 'after modernism', Mark Bevir eloquently brings to the fore the strength and the insight of the theory and the method.

### About the Author

**Patrick Le Galès** is CNRS Research Professor of Politics and Sociology at Sciences Po Paris, Centre d'études Européennes, Paris 75006, France. He is a corresponding Fellow of the British Academy and a former Editor of the *International Journal of Urban and regional Research*. His research deals with (i) the comparative sociology of the state and public policy; (ii) governance and social transformations of cities; and (iii) the making of market societies in particular in the United Kingdom.

### Note

1 One could mention a long list of books, apologies for mentioning my own work with Florence Faucher King, 2010, 'The New Labour experiment', Stanford, Stanford University Press.