



## Mark Bevir

### *Democratic Governance,*

New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010, ISBN 978-0-691-14539-6, 320 pp., £20.95

*Democratic Governance* is concerned with the challenge to democracy posed by the spread of new forms of governance. From the 1980s, the rise of New Public Management theories and practices have heralded a positivist approach to politics and policy that prizes scientific expertise and its apparent neutrality above all else. Bevir soundly argues that this has encouraged the promulgation of nonmajoritarian, and therefore non-democratic, modes of state organisation and public administration. At the heart of this critique lies a disparaging evaluation of the influence of modernist social science on today's public administration and a subsequent call for a new focus of analysis and practice in order to restore faith in democratic institutions.

Bevir's definition of new governance is composed of three principal aspects: firstly, the replacement of central bureaucracy with marketization, new public management and co-governance; secondly, the inclusion of new social actors in policy networks, policy communities and issue networks; and thirdly, a shift in theoretical outlook from developmental historicism to modernist social science. The originality of the argument of *Democratic Governance* is the positing of this final aspect as a factor that constitutes the previous two. Modernism and positivist social science have had an undeniable influence on today's political practice. Indeed, the relationship between academic ideas and political practice is nothing new, noticeable from the pamphlets of John Stuart Mill to the think-tanks and research institutions of contemporary society. Bevir is specifically interested in the way that the shift in knowledge production to modernist social science has inspired theories on public administration that have in turn inspired new policies and practices.

The spread of the analysis is wide-reaching and impressive, touching on issues of representative democracy, public administration and public policy through the lens of theories from politics, economics and sociology. The book is divided into nine chapters spanning across three sections. The first, *The New Governance*, offers a theoretical background in the form of an historical review of modernist theories of governance. Here the argument outlines the way in which rational choice theory and new institutional theory have fed into reforms of political practice. On the one hand, in the 1980s the New Public Management reforms introduced the marketization of public duties to the private sector in an attempt to lower costs through competition and raise efficiency through the setting of targets and rewards. This was fuelled by rational choice theory and the belief that the market constituted a collection of rational individual interests. On the other hand, moreover, towards the end of the 1990s sociological institutional theorists argued that individual choices were constrained and directed by formal and informal institutions, rules, norms and practices. These theories inspired a second wave of reforms, in Britain associated with the rise of New Labour, that promoted networks and partnerships in an effort to rebuild an institutional framework that linked actors in



a way that was not previously possible. In this way new institutionalist theories had a direct bearing on more recent public reforms.

The second and third sections, *Constitutionalism*, and *Public Administration* examine, with the aid of a study of Britain's New Labour reforms and illustrative cases from the European Union and United States, how these theories have influenced the development of governance, constitutional and judiciary reform, public policy, and police reform. These chapters illustrate how the State today attempts to coordinate between a range of private actors in order to steer policies in a desired direction. Yet imperfect markets and long chains of command from principal to agent also mean that responsibility, accountability and legitimacy of public service providers are difficult to control. Rather than restore faith in unresponsive public administrations, these developments have limited the democratic nature of contemporary society. In response, Bevir advocates greater public participation in the processes of governance, rather than reforms based on institutional assumptions.

There is a set of theoretical, methodological and practical implications to be taken from *Democratic Governance*. Firstly, we are shown how political theories are more than simply academic visions, but that 'they are beliefs that have inspired political actors to remake the world in ways that have created the very worlds of governance to which they refer' (p. 121). Secondly, positivist knowledge is rejected in favour of a historicized account of governance which follows the development of beliefs over time and suggests that theories of governance, and their impact on democratic practices, are historically contingent. Thirdly, the author promotes a plural, participatory brand of democratic governance that does not simply rely on expertise and the apparent truths of modernist social science. The argument suggests that 'once we recognize that governance consists of contingent, changing and contested practices, we may rethink democratic ideals and practices' (p. 269).

However, there are methodological shortcomings that should be noted. Bevir employs an interpretive, historical approach to analyse the beliefs behind New Labour's reforms. Yet at times he simply highlights correlations between ideas and beliefs held by party members in the past and the present. Where do these ideas come from? And how have past ideas and beliefs gained relevance in the present? There is nothing to suggest that the present must necessarily be like the past, and so when correlations do occur we should assess the context critically. For Marx ideas are rooted in human praxis. For Max Weber theories, ideas and institutions reflect a historically contingent legitimate order. An appreciation of how and why certain ideas are influential therefore requires an understanding of the social context in which they have gained dominance and legitimacy. Unfortunately, Bevir concentrates on the theories at the expense of taking them out of their socio-historical context. The consequence is a lean towards teleological reasoning, whereas a more truly interpretive methodological stance would perhaps offer a closer analysis of the development of ideas and their political relevance through the interplay of speakers, socio-political contexts, interests, and so on.

Generally speaking, *Democratic Governance* presents an original approach to the study of contemporary democratic practice and fits into a growing literature around the



concept of governance. The book is clearly written and will provide a solid theoretical background to students of democratic theory and public administration; although as an analysis of the influence of ideas on patterns of governance it falls short of being methodologically and empirically rigorous.

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