



## **A Critical Response to Kevin Stenson's *Governing the Local: Sovereignty, Social Governance and Community Safety***

*Robert P. Fairbanks II, University of Chicago, USA*

In his compelling case study of local governance and community safety in the UK Thames Valley, Kevin Stenson makes several important contributions to the field of governmentality studies. While the paper's merits are far-reaching, to this reader's assessment they can be summarized in the following key areas: 1) Empirically, the article enhances our knowledge of the political economic transformation of a region otherwise overlooked in social science research<sup>1</sup>; 2) Conceptually, Stenson offers several theoretical and analytical refrains that, while becoming increasingly commonplace, are nonetheless still germane and rightly oriented to offer push back against otherwise totalizing, reified accounts of roll back/roll out neoliberalism. A welcomed new approach is offered as a corrective, The *Realist Governmentality* perspective, which emphasizes the interrelated and co-constitutive nature of politics, local culture, and *habitus* in processes related to the restructuring of social governance; 3) Methodologically, the paper makes a pitch for the ways in which finely grained, nuanced, mixed-method/ethnographic analyses have the potential to further problematize and recast a field of governmentality studies far too often dominated by discursive and textual approaches.

This much is an achievement. But the paper does other important work, namely in "setting the table" not only for Stenson's own conceptual and analytical advances, but also for the debates on the relationship between governmentality and political economy approaches. The introductory section, whereby Stenson aptly maps our analytical terrain, reads as almost an obligatory tribute by now. But the sign posts, or "greatest hits" of post-Fordist transformation – the devolution of state authority, deregulation, privatization, the fostering of self governance, the "hollowing out" of the secular nation state and its associated transformations in citizenship, social governance, welfare states, and so on - are essential building blocks that are laid out deftly and cogently here as the foundation for debate.

The paper is also on to a more pressing imperative, the importance of which has been duly noted by political economists of all stripes. Here I refer to the ubiquitous call for historically specific, contextually embedded, multi-scalar approaches to policy research. Stenson's is a strong voice in this now veritable chorus calling for empirical attention to the ways in which neoliberalism must always "forge alliances on the ground"(Clarke 2004) while contending with "institutionally inherited landscapes"(Brenner 2003). And yet still, despite the groundswell represented by Stenson's critique, after a roughly coincidental 25 year run, the literatures on governmentality and regulation theory remain – to borrow a phrase from Clifford Geertz - theoretically muscle-bound yet empirically anemic. Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Cochrane's work on Milton Keynes seems a notable exception.

ethnographers have been largely absent from this conversation, at least outside of the discipline of anthropology. Stenson rightly points out that gaining an appreciation of the nuanced processes of regulatory restructure requires a scalar shift beyond that which is prominent in the literature – i.e. from the National to the urban. It requires attention to augmentative shifts – not just from the urban to the suburban and the rural, but from the formal to the informal, from above to below, and from the institutional to the “shared emotional and cognitive dispositions” of the everyday. These are the levels at which ethnographic methods are particularly germane.

But to this reader's eyes, Stenson's cautionary theoretical tales – borne out of much needed attempts to recast the stylized and totalizing tendencies of an overwrought globalization convergence thesis - are themselves now in danger of becoming hackneyed, overwrought and stylized. In other words, has all of our attention to the contextually specific, unsystematic, and “un-finished ness” of neoliberalism become simply a matter of ritualistic scholarly framing? Or, as I will try to drive home throughout this essay, *are there real analytical stakes at play here?*

I will try to clarify my point by raising three central arguments. The first has to do with clarifying the stakes, or purchase if you will, of our contemporary obsession with concepts such as unevenness, contingency, and negotiation. I will argue that the analytical valence of these concepts is underdeveloped in this paper, as it is in the fields of governmentality and political economy more generally. The second point, in many ways related to the first, has to do with the ways in which Stenson's case misses key insights ripe for the taking under the auspices of older and decidedly less-fashionable sociological concepts. Here I refer to the good old concepts of race and class. My comments are intended to shore up Stenson's argument and to elucidate the stakes of geographical unevenness by calling attention to processes of re-stratification, re-regulation, and re-racialization. Perhaps, as many have argued with respect to gender (and as many critical race theorists and neo-Marxists have argued), Foucault needs to be racialized, and infused with a class analysis. In particular, such a move could serve to bring out the political economy side of this story more convincingly. My third point, also evolving from its predecessors, has to do with asking questions about what the agonistic nature of liberalism (and in some respects the age old question, *and what of resistance?*) tells us about the “work” that is performed by the many interactions, negotiations, and unsuccessful (or partially successful) “hailings” that we are now so taken with in our analyses. I will try then to consider how Foucault's notion of the “agonism,” complicates and possibly recasts our attention to sites of analysis that muck up the works<sup>2</sup> (or, what Polanyi might call in a separate analytical tradition, institutions that “slow the rate of change”(Polanyi 2001)).

So to begin, Stenson rightly calls attention to the ways in which discursive rationalities remain platonic until reaching a point of interface: “In political and policy-making processes, key discourses unfold in the interplay between talk and text” (Stenson 2008, p.6). Or, to select another exemplary quote: “there is no mechanistic link between the nature of the local economic, demographic, and social patterns and diverse local political cultures. These filter perceptions of social problems, the local interpretation of central government policy, and local policy responses” (Stenson 2008, p.9). We would be remiss to assume some type of seamless transfer of political rationalities in social policy implementation, as the imperatives of central

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<sup>2</sup> In some respects these sites and processes can be referenced in short hand by invoking Gramscian notions of counter-hegemony, even though the concept is not mentioned here.

government erode inevitably and inexorably, only to be made and re-made when rubber meets the road in local context. The refrain here has to do with the now popular emphasis on an ever-present *breakdown*<sup>3</sup> in policy transfer, whereby concepts like unevenness, negotiation, incompleteness, discretion, contingency, and even “chance” endlessly rework and maybe even exhaust the logic of central policy rationalities. Stenson’s intention is to highlight the myriad ways in which the objectives of neoliberal state-building are refracted, contested, resisted, and transformed in context. He also seeks to situate highly localized processes of governance within the wider dynamics, logics and counter-logics of state restructuring. While we should question how social science ever arrived at a place where these types of insights carry such weight (did we ever really lose sight of spatial and temporal specificity?), the take home point is that such processes related to breakdown are core analytical imperatives. This point is well taken, if nothing else simply as cold comfort to help some of us keep the faith. Roll out neoliberalism is not quite the all-encompassing mega monster that we make it out to be.

Or is it? And can we know if the analytical task stops at simply showing the unfinished, incomplete business of neoliberal reform? Perhaps, as Foucault envisaged, unfinished ness, or failure, is precisely *how it works*, rather than how it doesn’t. This latter issue will be taken up as my third and final point, but let me first get to my second argument. In my foregoing, first section of critique I have tried to raise the question, “what are the stakes” in this analytical imperative to render the breakdown in empirical terms. I could add to this by asking, how does such an imperative tell us anything different than Polanyi was able to show so long ago? I.e., that market liberalism produces an inevitable response – institutional, cultural, social - to protect [society] from the market, thereby restricting the full capacity of economic liberalism to function (Polanyi 2001). Or, to invoke a more contemporary text, how is this different than Michael Lipsky’s decidedly more flat-footed but nonetheless brilliant analysis of the banal interface with the discretionary “street level bureaucrat” (Lipsky 1980)? In Lipsky’s framework, this interface not only “hold(s) the keys to a dimension of citizenship,” but also embodies and encompasses the age-old dilemma of liberalism concerning the proper size and scope of government (not to mention its role in facilitating the limitless capacity of this dilemma to reconfigure the relationship between citizen and state). I invoke these seminal texts to drive my second point, which is perhaps more of an assertion. The time has come to pull out the significance of the *breakdown* more forcefully and effectively in the fields of governmentality studies and political economy. The fact is, I do believe there is much more at stake under the gaze of Foucauldian analysis, but only if we are more deliberate and precise about the meaning, or stakes, of breakdown “in the interplay between talk and text” (Stenson 2008, p.6).

I will try to illustrate an example by exploring a set of findings remain underdeveloped in this article. In this case, my comments are meant to shore up the political economy side of the story in the UK Thames Valley. Stenson aptly shows how “three overlapping networks (local government officers, progressive police, and the Thames Valley Partnership) powerfully carried and reproduced liberal, universalistic, ‘social’ ideologies and helped insulate against conservative, communitarian, nationalist moral agendas in the Thames Valley area” (Stenson 2008, p. 10). The analysis here shows the types of gains that can be made when taking Jamie Peck’s cautions to heart: “the realities of welfare state restructure are infinitely more complex than stylized readings of processes such as de-regulation, re-regulation, privatization, and

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<sup>3</sup> For purposes of conceptual expediency, I am taking the liberty to lump concepts like negotiation, incompleteness, and discretion – all of which are highly nuanced processes - into the notion of what I am calling a *breakdown*.

neoliberal 'hollowing out' suggest." (Peck 2003, p.223). Indeed, in so far as regulatory restructure is taking place in the Thames Valley, Stenson illustrates how it has entailed a series of non-trivial shifts in political rationality, the dynamics of which are seemingly contradictory. Certainly there is the contradiction between the liberation of markets and the emergence of disciplinary regimes, leading to the types of zero tolerance strategies and skyrocketing incarceration rates mapped by Loïc Wacquant's concept of the "carceral assistential" state. But Stenson suggests how the state also insinuates itself into a set of kinder, gentler, and more empowering forms of statecraft, or what he calls in this instance, the "soft tactics" of a more progressive police force.

The addition of nuance here – there is far more to contemporary restructure than prison, punishment, and revanchism - is important. But I think there is something more here that has to do with a certain re-stratification, or re-racialization process that needs to be further explored, in regulatory terms. Stenson ultimately argues that we are seeing a "dominant neoliberal approach to economic policy (that) has allowed a rapid, Darwinian form of economic growth, with minimal help from central government or the EU, for losers in the game" (Stenson 2008, page 11). In this case, this is because the otherwise affluent region fails to qualify for the types of funding necessary for our more punitive forms of policing that emerge in the contradictory advance of neoliberalism. Rather, and quite significantly, a more progressive form of policing prevails that is perhaps fortuitously "sculpted from financial necessity".

But these processes are far from Darwinian, just as Polanyi showed with his timeless argument that "*laissez faire was planned.*" Older political questions of "who gets what and how" are still vitally important in this context. The affluent and the middle class in this case get "soft tactics" out of "financial necessity," while the poor, or the "losers" as it were, get "minimal help." But I would argue that it is important to expound more forcefully on the "help" that losers and winners *do* receive: in this case deregulated/low wage service sector jobs, a decidedly unprogressive form of policing, prison, and other experiences associated with the workfare offensive for the former; and progressive police tactics for the latter. These are social processes related to race and class that illustrate the ways in which market liberalism continues to rely on the making and remaking of social stratification. Certainly Stenson does not shy away from these processes, but the institutional mechanisms by which they are facilitated are underdeveloped in the analysis. As Ananya Roy contends, disembedding security entails a remapping of risk. This is hard work, the intricacies of which could be more clearly elucidated here.

Rather, we are left with two notions that tell only part of the story: 1) a redemptive "progressive" police force takes an alternative path; and 2) neoliberalism and the restructuring of governance unfolds unevenly in the case of the UK Thames Valley. I want to argue again that rather than an illustration of rupture or breakdown, this is precisely how the restructuring of governance works. And, by illustrating how these processes work not only on the principles of economic liberalism and "choice" but rather on the remaking of social categories of race and class – including most importantly the middle class - Stenson *could* deliver on the paper's claim that "Realist governmentality theory integrates political economy" in its analytical strategy. Breakdowns and failures effectively re-racialize state surveillance in class-specific ways (soft tactics for the well off, with graduated versions of harder tactics for spectrum of the less well off). It is in this sense the concept of "soft tactics" represents a moment along a continuum of reshuffling *across* the class strata. Forged on the basis of *social* grounds – race and class markers - these channeling practices stand very much in contrast to

neoclassical and neoliberal tenets of rational choice. Taken together, they amount to a new, *planned* and multifaceted system of governance that transfers, sediments, and adapts vestigial practices (including cosmopolitan/universalistic values of human rights) into a highly localized geography of social governance. Attention to these matters – the making and remaking of the rules of local labor markets, the spatiality of regulatory change, clarification of how it all adds up to a new mode of accumulation and regulation - could serve to clarify what's at stake with an analytical sensibility that privileges unevenness, contradiction, and negotiation.

And now to my third and final point, in which I try to rework the implications of Stenson's move to illustrate how "governance from above in the name of law and sovereignty interacts with government from below" (Stenson 2008, page 5). If, and perhaps this is a big "if," the move here is to problematize otherwise totalizing frameworks for the roll out of governmental restructuring, I am not so sure there is solace to be had in this equation. Stenson concludes by saying: "the broader context within which these political processes occur is fraught with ambiguities and tensions of the meaning and legitimacy of the nature, and contested cultural sources, of sovereignty" (p.11). This is most certainly true, but this reader interprets the findings less as a hegemonic break, and more as an instantiation of how liberalism works.

If nothing else, Foucault's work has shown us that power is only power when addressed to presupposed agents who are free to act, and free to choose. That is, as Colin Gordon notes, power "presupposes rather than annuls their capacity as agents; it acts upon, and through, an open set of practical and ethical possibilities" (Gordon 1991, p.5). Foucault spoke of this kind of power as an *agonism*, a reciprocal incitation and struggle that is in effect, the essence of liberal governance. Agonistic relations allow for continual reproduction of the foundational premise, "why must one govern?" (Foucault 1994). Thus accommodating the universally constant reflexive questioning of the proper scope (and rationale) of political power endemic to liberalism and allowing the state to reconfigure (and to leaven) its capacity to intervene at a particular site. In other words, "the external struggle for territorial dominance," which "happens even in the absence of a sovereign state" is less of a gap in the literature (as Stenson deploys it) than an instantiation of precisely how it works, even (or perhaps especially) when it fails. It becomes necessary, as such, to contend with the ways in which liberalism discards the "visible grid" of despotism in favor of what Gordon refers to as "the necessarily opaque, dense autonomous character of the processes of *population*" (Gordon 1991, p.21). I conclude by saying that a full realization of *realist governmentality* must contend with these points, not only to flesh out the analytical stakes of the uneven, the unfinished, and the contested, but perhaps more importantly, to carry forth on the imperative to illustrate how the multiscale restructuring of social governance unfolds in the interplay between talk and text.

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**Author's Address:**

Ass Prof Robert P. Fairbanks II  
University of Chicago  
School of Social Service Administration  
969 East 60<sup>th</sup> Street  
Chicago IL, 60637  
USA  
Email: [rpf@uchicago.edu](mailto:rpf@uchicago.edu)

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