The Governance of Rural Areas: Some Emerging Research Issues and Agendas

Mark Goodwin

Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Wales, Aberystwyth SY23 3DB, UK

Abstract — There has been an increasingly noticeable silence at the centre of contemporary rural studies concerning the ways in which rural areas are governed. This is in sharp contrast to other areas of the social sciences, where issues of governance have recently assumed major prominence. This paper sets out to explore this rather curious neglect, initially by examining the governance literatures now found across the social sciences, and then through using these to identify and delineate some important research questions for those concerned with understanding contemporary rural change. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

Introduction: the curious neglect of rural governance

There has been an increasingly noticeable silence at the centre of contemporary rural studies concerning the ways in which rural areas are governed. This is in sharp contrast to other areas of the social sciences, where issues of governance have recently assumed major prominence (see Jessop, 1995 and Stoker, 1995 for reviews). This paper sets out to explore this rather curious neglect, initially by examining the governance literatures now found across the social sciences, and then through using these to identify and delineate some important research questions for those concerned with understanding contemporary rural change.

It is now accepted that the ways we employ to ‘govern’ an area, in the broadest sense of the term, are crucial to its economic and social trajectory. The act of ‘governing’ touches all aspects of our lives, from pre-school education to employment training, and from child care to health care for the sick and the elderly. It concerns the provision of housing and the provision of jobs, as well as planning and environmental issues. If 18 years of neo-liberalism in Britain have proved anything it is that left pretty much to its own devices, the market cannot guarantee economic or social development. The debate has shifted from whether old-style public intervention is better than the free market, or vice versa, to one in which the major questions now concern the ways in which state and market can be integrated to provide the most effective co-ordination. Tony Blair and New Labour were swept into power in 1997 on the promise of following a ‘third way’ — a route which side-steps old battles between state and market in favour of marrying together a market-led economy with a redistributive social policy. The search is on for an efficient and effective blend of governmental and non-governmental forces which can achieve such a marriage. Structures of economic and social development are increasingly emerging which have shifted away from the typical post-way bifurcation of market and state — these are what we have recently labelled as the new structures of governance (see Jessop, 1997).

The term governance is now widely used and accepted across a variety of academic and practitioner circles. Put simply, it ‘refers to the development of governing styles in which boundaries between and within public and private sectors have become blurred’ (Stoker, 1996, p. 2). Thus the term governance is not simply an academic synonym for government. Its increasing use signifies a concern with a change in both the meaning and the content of government. As Rhodes puts it (Rhodes, 1996, pp. 652–653), the term is now used to refer ‘to a new process of governing, or a changed condition of ordered rule, or the new method by which society is governed’. Where government signals a concern
with the formal institutions and structures of the state, the concept of governance is broader and draws attention to the ways in which governmental and non-governmental organizations work together, and to the ways in which political power is distributed, both internal and external to the state (Stoker, 1995). In the words of Jessop, the term governance signals a shift to ‘a broad concern with a wide range of governance mechanisms with no presumption that these are anchored primarily in the sovereign state’ (Jessop, 1995, pp. 310–311).

The reluctance of rural scholars to engage with these emerging debates on new forms of governance is especially surprising when we consider the scale of the changes that have recently occurred in the governance of rural society. The substance of these ‘new processes of governing’ has been well charted in the emerging literature on local governance (Cochrane, 1993; Goodwin and Painter, 1996; Stoker, 1995). Much of the literature refers, almost uncritically, to new forms of ‘urban governance’, as if this were solely an urban phenomenon (witness the exclusive prefix in ‘urban regime theory’, or ‘urban growth machines’, or the ‘new urban politics’. See Judge et al. (1995) for a review of each of these). Rural areas, however, along with all those who live and work in them, have also been deeply affected by these new ways of governing. At the local level the institutional map of rural local government has been transformed into a system of governance which involves a range of agencies and institutions drawn from the public, private and voluntary sectors. New structures and processes of governance in the economic sphere include Rural Challenge, LEADER Action Groups, Rural Development Boards and Development Areas, Training and Enterprise Councils, Enterprise Agencies, Economic Partnerships and Fora of various kinds, and Local Enterprise Companies. In the social and community fields the new structures include Housing Associations, Health Service Trusts, and Voluntary Agencies of various kinds. Formal local government in rural areas has also been reformed, partly through the introduction of quasi-markets in service delivery and partly through structural changes which include the introduction of single-tier rural authorities.

The signs are that these tangled hierarchies’ (Jessop, 1995, p. 310) which increasingly govern rural areas in a complex web of interdependence, are now the favoured mechanisms for rural policy formulation and service delivery at each level from the local to the European. Official policy statements, at all levels, emphasize the role of partnerships and networks beyond the formal structures of government. The Cork Declaration (European Conference on Rural Development, 1996) for instance, talks of ‘mobilising the synergies between public and private funding’ and of a rural development policy ‘based on partnership and co-operation between all levels concerned (local, regional, national and European)’. The 1996 White Papers on Rural England, Scotland and Wales all stress the importance of partnerships which involve a range of agencies and organisations. The White Paper on rural Wales stated that the official government view is that ‘Welsh Office, the economic and conservation agencies, the voluntary sector, the private sector and local communities all have important parts to play to achieve a working countryside’ (Welsh Office, 1996, p. 8). Given the official policy blessing, and its likely impact on rural areas, the issue of governance is one that should be taken seriously.

As Stoker succinctly pointed out, ‘the value of the governance perspective rests in its capacity to provide a framework for understanding changing processes of governing’ (Stoker, 1996, p. 4). Yet despite huge changes in the processes and structures of rural ‘governing’, academic debate in the rural literature has steered clear of any serious engagement with what we might term the ‘governance perspective’. It is true that there has been a variety of work looking at the changing nature of individual policy areas (see for instance Milbourne (1997) and Gallent (1997) on housing; Winter (1996) on environmental policy; Moseley (1995) on LEADER initiatives; Murdoch and Marsden (1995) on planning; Woods (1997) on local government), but the last systematic attempt to theorise the conditions and structures of rural government was made almost a decade ago by Cloke and Little (1990). They drew heavily on a local state literature largely written in the late 1980s, and the diverse volume of literature on governance that has been produced elsewhere in the social sciences in the meantime seems to have slipped by almost unnoticed (although see Murdoch and Ward (1997) for an attempt to apply Foucauldian notions of governmentality to the statistical manufacture of Britain’s ‘national farm’). The rest of this paper is concerned with examining the main components of this literature to see if they can be used to set up some new research agendas in the rural sphere, in the hope of yielding fresh insight into the changing practices of rural governance.

The rise of the governance perspective

The concept of governance has recently gained widespread currency across many of the social sciences (see Jessop, 1995 for a more detailed review). Its parallel emergence in institutional
economics, international relations, organizational studies, sociology, public administration and political science owes something to the fact that each of these disciplines was, at the same time, struggling to analyse broad sets of changes in the hitherto established relationship between state, market and civil society 'the conceptual trinity which has tended to dominate mainstream analysis of modern societies' (Jessop, 1995, p. 310). In institutional economics the notion of governance led to a growing interest in forms of economic and corporate co-ordination which cross the divide between state activity, pure markets and corporate enterprises. In international relations the focus is on the global governance of disparate nation states through new forms of international co-ordination, which Stoker describes rather neatly as 'managing a nobody-in-charge world' (Stoker, 1995, p. 4). In organizational studies the focus brought by a concern with governance has again been co-ordination, this time of inter-organizational relationships, but there has also been a concern with the self-organization of organizations, especially through a study of organizational intelligence and learning. In sociology, theorists have drawn on Foucauldian inspired notions of governmentality and discipline to examine the intersections between the technologies of power and the 'technologies of the self', introducing an individual and subjective stance into the debate on governance.

It is perhaps the explicit policy focus of the political administration and political science literatures that offers the most promise to those interested in the changing nature of rural governance. These examine the inter-connections between government, civil society and the economy, and acknowledge that governing an increasingly complex world requires a growing interdependence between a wide range of actors each bringing specific sets of skills and resources into the partnership. There is also a recognition that the policy world is now made up of diverse, overlapping and integrated networks, often operating beyond effective control by the formal structures of government. In Stoker's words the governance perspective recognizes that 'government is not just changing its tools, it is changing its meaning' (Stoker, 1995, p. 5).

This changed meaning has emerged through three interconnected processes which individually and collectively served to question the established ways of governing society. First, there has been the crisis of the post-war Keynesian welfare state, and its associated modes of economic and political co-ordination. These modes, summarized by Jessop as 'tripartite macro-corporatism' (Jessop, 1995, p. 312), had become established and entrenched through the bipartisan politics of the British post-war settlement. By the late 1970s, this settlement was coming under pressure both fiscally and politically. In rural areas, these broad changes were given a particular inflection where the general decline of the post-war Keynesian welfare state was coupled with a more specific decline of agrarian-based economic and political power. New forms of public sector support emerged to bolster agricultural markets and production, and the hegemonic political power of landed elites was challenged increasingly by a competing set of cultural and political discourses based around diverse issues such as development, conservation and lifestyle (see Woods, 1997). The established order, and the established way of doing things, both came under question. The 'ordered rule', in Rhodes' words, was beginning to change as the old landed elites operating through an established national and local government structure, came under political, cultural and economic pressure.

A second strand of explanation for the growing attention paid to issues of governance lies in the rise of new right political ideology. In Britain its liberal and conservative adherents combined to produce a politically effective critique of state activity, which swept Mrs Thatcher to three successive terms of office. Once in power, however, the ideology turned from a rolling back of the state to a search for new forms of intervention and control. These often centred on what might be termed 'government at a distance'. New civil service agencies were created in the case of training, employment and social security to deliver services from the centre. In other cases new non-elected agencies were funded from the centre to provide services previously delivered through local government. In particular, quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations, or quangos, mushroomed to take over many areas of state activity. Some of these quangos are appointed directly by central government, others are self-governing in the sense that they appoint their own boards. Examples include Higher and Further Education Corporations, Housing Associations, District Health Authorities and Health Trusts, City Technology Colleges and Urban Development Corporations. These and others like them are now responsible for over £40 billion of public funds, a figure not far below the sum spent in total by elected local authorities, and the institutional map of local government in this country has been transformed beyond recognition.

Thirdly, political actors at the local level have themselves formed a number of coalitions and partnerships which have also transformed the institutional structure of government. Some of these have been promoted by higher tiers of government, at both national and supranational level. In rural areas,
LEADER initiatives sponsored by the European Union have promoted new coalitions, as have the Rural Challenge schemes promoted by national government. In other cases the partnerships and coalitions have been voluntarily promoted, often with an increased role for local business interests.

The academic interest in governance thus reflects developments in the practice of governing contemporary societies. Looking at things from a 'governance perspective' draws our attention to a range of new research issues. Theories of governance are united across disciplines in their concern with identifying and analysing a wide range of modes and mechanisms of co-ordination. They are concerned with the ways in which disparate but interdependent social and economic agencies are co-ordinated to achieve specific goals and objectives. By examining this co-ordination we immediately raise issues concerning the distribution of political power both internal and external to the state. The next section examines these issues in more detail.

Governance as theory — some research issues and agendas

Stoker (1996) has recently codified these types of research questions into five propositions, each of which sets a framework for further research. These frameworks shift our attention to new research questions and lead us to identify the sets of structures and processes which are worthy of attention and study. I will examine these in turn in a general sense, before looking in more detail in the next section at how they might be used to inform new research agendas in rural studies.

Stoker claims that the governance perspective works 'if it helps us identify important questions' (Stoker, 1996, p. 4). He attempts to identify these by setting out five major propositions which present different aspects of governance for our consideration. These are as follows (Stoker, 1996, pp. 4–15):

1. governance refers to a complex set of institutions and actors that are drawn from but also beyond government;
2. governance identifies the blurring of boundaries and responsibilities for tackling social and economic issues;
3. governance identifies the power dependence in the relationship between institutions involved in collective action;
4. governance is about autonomous self-governing networks of actors;
5. governance recognises the capacity to get things done which does not rest on the power of government to command or use its authority. It sees government as able to use new tools to steer and guide.

Each proposition raises a number of research issues. The first challenges formal understandings of systems of government which focus heavily on the constitutional structures of central and local government. By drawing our attention to the complexity of modern governance, the first proposition also points us towards the highly differentiated polity which makes up contemporary Britain. It asks questions about how this polity is differentiated spatially — with many linked organizations operating at local, regional, national and supranational levels, and functionally — with governance responsibilities now shared between a range of private, public and voluntary sectors, operating through a variety of structures.

The messiness and scope of this complexity raises further questions concerning legitimacy and power. Already there are widespread concerns about the operation of unaccountable and unelected quangos, and about the difficulty in many of the new governance structures of separating policy and operational matters. As Stoker points out (Stoker 1996, pp. 7–8) this is more than a normative concern about where power should and should not be held — it also raises the very practical problem that to be effective in the long run, holders of power need to have legitimacy. This lies at the root of the current debate in Britain over devolved and decentralized government, but it is an issue which runs through the new processes of governance from the local to the European level. The complexity and nature of the emergent system lacks the 'simple' legitimacy of elected democracy and accountability, and it remains to be seen whether the new structures can be given an effective cloak of legitimacy that they currently lack.

The second of Stoker’s propositions points not just to the complexities of modern government, but to the ways in which these shift responsibilities away from the state and more towards the private sector and to what might broadly be termed civil society. This shift can be summed up by recent concerns with the ‘active citizen’ and the ‘responsible corporate’. The former draws our attention to the wide range of voluntary or third sector agencies, estimated to employ some 400,000 full-time equivalent workers, which now operate in the so-called ‘social economy’ around services such as housing, social and community care, child care and environmental issues. To state this is to point out more than the explosive plurality of all those groups which now seek to influence government — it is also recognition of the fact that many of them now perform
what were once seen as the traditional tasks of formal government. This is also the case with private sector corporations as well as the non-profit organizations of the third sector. The best known cases are obviously the private companies which now run the privatized utilities, but private enterprise is now responsible for delivering a number of traditional government services from emptying dustbins to caring for the elderly. Stoker points out (Stoker, 1996, pp. 9–10) that with such a blurring of responsibilities comes considerable scope for blame avoidance and scapegoating. There is what at times seems like an endless circle of responsibility which can never quite be closed — each agency blames the other and the public can never quite manage to point the finger of blame in the right direction when things go wrong. This raises issues of how the public experience, and respond to, the delivery of services by the new structures of governance.

The third proposition concerns the power dependence involved when a range of institutions come together collectively. Put simply there is a divergence between the wish for effective and swift action and the lack of co-ordination which inevitably follows from dependence on others. Yet the dilemma is that no single actor, public or private, has the knowledge or capacity to tackle problems effectively. Governance as an interactive process between a range of organizations draws attention to the difficulties of negotiating shared goals and agendas, and to the acceptance that many intended actions will not match eventual outcomes. This again gives potential for disillusionment and resentment, as stakeholders may well fail to recover their original investments (whether social, political, cultural or economic).

The fourth proposition focuses our attention on the emergence of self-governing networks often functionally- or issue-based. In the current urban politics literature the popularity of regime theory serves to demonstrate the force of this attention. Regimes are defined here as informal yet relatively stable coalitions (or partnerships), composed of elites drawn from the public and private sectors. A regime is formed when a variety of local interests mesh together to form a relatively stable governing coalition, and involves a number of groups co-operating behind a certain set of policies to achieve their own ends (which may well vary from one group to another). Attention is paid to the more informal arrangements that surround and support the official workings of local government, and to the ways in which the interests of different members of the regime are realized. Often regimes have been directed at securing competitive advantages for particular urban localities, as local actors seek collective arrangements that will promote their locality in an increasingly competitive global economy.

By coming together in this way the members of a regime are blending different resources and skills within a long-term coalition which can collectively provide a capacity to act that is beyond the scope of any individual member or institution. Much of the work in this tradition has focused on the ways in which different types of regimes are established in different urban contexts. Reviewing this work, Ward (1995) identifies 13 types of urban regimes ranging from those that simply wish to protect the status quo to those which are concerned with longer term transformative change.

Although the concept of regime has been used most extensively in the urban politics literature, there are other fields where the formation and performance of self-governing networks are the focus of research. Interestingly, one has involved work on small-scale agrarian and fishing communities, and the ways in which they negotiate access to common yet finite resources by setting up self-organized systems of participation and control which are seen as more effective than government imposed regulation (Ostrom, 1990). A common research question across all these studies is that of accountability, since regimes, by definition, come together and are driven by the self-interest of their members. This may of course be incompatible with the public interest, or certainly at odds with the interests of those excluded from the network.

The fifth proposition of Stoker concerns the ways in which the governance perspective recognizes that the capacity to achieve policy goals does not rest simply on the authority of formal government. Indeed, there is a strong sense in the governance literature that government itself has recognized this, by ‘re-inventing’ itself and developing a capacity for management and steering, rather than always relying on direct intervention. The debates around the emergence of an ‘enabling government’ capture this new form of governing. The role for government is seen as one of identifying stakeholders and then developing the relevant opportunities and linkages for them to be brought together to act for themselves. However, even where government does succeed in identifying new operational parameters, there is no guarantee of governance success. All kinds of tensions and difficulties among partners and between different institutions may well cause governance failure. Indeed, Jessop warns that ‘the growing obsession with governance mechanisms as a solution to market failure or state failure should not lead to a neglect of governance failure. One should
avoid seeing governance as being necessarily a more efficient solution than markets or states to problems of economic or political co-ordination’ (Jessop, 1995, p. 325).

This brings us on to the critical point that it will be only through empirical research (albeit of a theoretically informed nature) that these questions can ever be resolved. The governance perspective may point us in the correct direction to ask the right questions. It will never, in an *a priori* manner, provide the answers. So far, the rural studies literature has been almost silent on these issues. Theoretically informed empirical research on rural governance seems to have been very thin on the ground over the past decade or so, as if the debates in the 1970s and 1980s around firstly paternalism, property and power, and secondly locals and incomers, had exhausted the conceptual possibilities. My feeling is that the governance literature now offers us new conceptual possibilities and it is to these new research agendas that I now turn.

**Towards a re-orientation of rural research**

If we take the above propositions as issues for consideration, they immediately problematize a number of crucial concerns in the contemporary countryside and point towards a series of new research questions. First, they make us look afresh at the old distinction between market, state and civil society and they guide us towards examining new dependencies and relationships. There is more involved in this than simply charting the emergence of new mechanisms and structures of governance, like Rural Challenge schemes or LEADER initiatives. We must be wary of letting the agenda become too descriptive, which is always a danger when novel forms of any kind appear. Indeed, as the distinctiveness of the state as a governing mechanism declines, we should be asking critical questions about those institutions and networks which emerge in its place. As a start we can seek to examine the purpose of the new form of governance, by asking how and why were the particular groups involved brought together. It was Lenin who supposedly said that the first question to ask of any social institution is ‘Who? Whom?’? Critical questions emerge over who has been involved in new forms of governance and who hasn’t, and why this is the case. The who and whom refer as much to agencies and institutions as they do to individuals. Indeed one of the points made by urban regime theory is that the members of any regime will usually have an institutional base with a particular domain of power and a particular social constituency to serve. In rural studies we have recently seen debates over the influence of the new service class and over the political and cultural effects of the gentrifying middle classes. The governance perspectives takes these a stage further by asking about the rationales and interests of the agencies and institutions on which these new groups might serve. The task is not simply to descriptively chart the emergence of these agencies, but to interrogate the reasons both for their emergence and for their outputs. What exactly do they do, and why?

These sorts of questions lead on to new research agendas about the structures and tissues of power in rural society. Drawing on the work of Stone (1989), we can reconceptualize power as being a matter of social production rather than social control. In contrast to many former studies in rural politics which focused on the social control of landed elites and paternalistic gentry (power over), the social production perspective is concerned with the capacity to act. As Stone puts it, ‘What is at issue is not so much domination and subordination, as a capacity to act and accomplish goals’ (Stone, 1989, p. 229). In other words we are concerned with power to, not power over. The new rural governance involves precisely this form of power, as actors and institutions attempt to gain a capacity to act by blending their resources, skills and purposes into a viable and sustainable partnership. Instead of taking the sites of (landed and middle class) power almost for granted, rural research needs to problematize the ways in which diverse social groupings come together to gain a capacity to act — a power to, not a power over.

This in turn sets up new research agendas on the ways in which social, economic and political interests are articulated in rural areas. To pursue this would amount to searching for rural regimes — and there is no reason at all why regimes should be exclusively urban. Indeed, rural areas often offer excellent sites for the study of long established political elites — the key here is to examine the ways in which they are blending their political power with emergent economic and cultural forces. This would set up research questions concerning the adequacy of the new governance mechanisms to ensure the continued hegemony of local elites in the face of relatively turbulent socio-economic environments. It would also lead us to examine the ‘accumulation strategies’ which are emerging in different forms in different rural areas. These, according to Jessop (1997, p. 61), ‘define a specific growth model for a given economic space’ along with outlining its various extra-economic preconditions and the general strategies appropriate to its realization. The aim here, for instance, is to examine why some rural
spaces remain wedded to an agricultural economy, while others move towards tourism, leisure and consumption, and others become commuter spaces serving a metropolitan area — and to account for the role that the new structures of governance might play in such choices (if indeed there is any choice involved).

This brings us on to research questions concerned with the uneveness of rural development, and with the ways in which local governance responds to, and augments, these different geographical trajectories. There are undoubtedly still evolving spatial forms of accumulation and reproduction which are moving away from the post-war economic dominance of the nation state in two directions - upwards to a supranational level, rooted in discourses of globalization and Europeanization, and downwards to a local level, based around the discovery of flexible industrial districts, learning regions, innovative milieus and cross-border regions (see Jessop, 1997, p. 68). Jessop (1997) comments that ‘this dual reorientation has been reinforced insofar as local and regional economies have their own specific problems (indicating) the need for new measures to restructure capital in regard to these newly significant economic spaces and for new forms of urban (sic) governance to implement them’. The task of economic governance becomes one of seeking new routes out of decline through initiatives in reskilling, venture capital, training, innovation centres, information technology, industrial parks, food marketing, tourism, and so on. Many rural areas are currently taking the initial steps down these routes. The task for social governance becomes one of defining and delivering appropriate mixes of social welfare and social control to set alongside the particular economic trajectories being created, with the emphasis on the word ‘appropriate’. This is of course politically and socially defined, increasingly at the local level. What is appropriate in highly presurized rural areas such as Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, will not be so in more marginal places such as Northumberland and Cumbria. Research needs to examine the differently tailored mixes of economic and social development which are currently deemed appropriate in different parts of rural Britain, and look at the roles of the new mechanisms of government in both defining and meeting these targets.

Of course the phrase ‘deemed appropriate’ begs the question by whom? New work will also have to take place on the struggles and contestations which take place as people seek to resist as well as define the new structures and mechanisms of governance. These do not drop ready formed onto the existing institutional landscape. One research agenda in this area also concerns the roles and responsibilities of elected politicians in rural areas — local, regional (perhaps), national and supranational. As the legitimate scope of state activity is lessened through the rise of governance, issues of democracy and accountability come to the fore. There has already been a large debate over accountability and the growth of non-elected quangos, and we can expect more concern as individuals and communities seek some kind of meaningful participation as well as a notional partnership. Political talk and writing now stress notions of inclusion and empowerment, but given the paternalistic and ‘non-political’ traditions dominant in many rural areas, there may be a tendency to involve only key actors in the new structures of governance and marginalise the wider community. Empirical research on the new governance can help to establish whether the ‘new magistracy’ are simply taking over from the old, in the running of our rural areas.

This, and the other research questions presented above, have been simply sketched out to give some idea of the new agendas that might emerge if one employs a governance perspective. They are not meant to be comprehensive, and are by no means exhaustive. They are merely illustrative of the type of concerns which have (pre-)occupied many researchers in other fields for the past few years. It is not essential to bring them into the rural arena. My contention here is that if we do we open up new and fruitful avenues for research into what are an emerging set of critical issues in the contemporary countryside. The aim is not to prescribe a set and limited route for rural scholars, but to encourage an extension of current thought into new and rewarding areas.

References


