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PUTTING EXPERTS IN THEIR PLACE: THE CHALLENGE OF EXPANDING PARTICIPATION WHILE SOLVING PROBLEMS

Thad Williamson*

ABSTRACT. This essay critically examines possibilities for expanding democratic participatory governance in light of Mark Bevir's treatment of the subject in his book *Democratic Governance*. The essay argues that a theory of participatory governance should retain an explicit role for expert analysis, and that the appropriate scope given to such analysis will vary by policy area. The essay also argues that the present organization of capitalist economies mandates a heavy reliance on experts, and that a full-blown account of expanding participatory governance thus must be paired with an account of how to achieve a more democratic political economy. Such an account should also specify how democratic-minded public officials can contribute to greater public participation in policymaking.

INTRODUCTION

Mark Bevir's *Democratic Governance* offers both a nuanced account of and a robust challenge to prevailing theories of governance. Bevir offers an excellent critique of market-oriented New Public Management theories of government reform, and also quite properly takes to task those political scientists who are willing to dilute democracy in order to justify the status quo. Perhaps more controversially, Bevir also offers a critique of the dominant alternative to the New Public Management paradigm, the new institutionalism, as well as the reform program it inspired in Tony Blair's New Labour

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Government starting in the late 1990s. Finally, Bevir tries to show that a serious alternative to expertise-driven theories of governance, one that takes seriously the radicalism of the basic democratic idea that ordinary people should rule, is both desirable and plausible. *Democratic Governance* does not do enough to flesh out what the radical democratic alternative might look like in a variety of policy areas, and in my view the book does not do enough to identify the enduring obstacles to more participatory arrangements. Nonetheless, Bevir makes a major contribution by laying the intellectual groundwork for such a radical alternative—not just by theoretical reflection, but by detailed engagement with the specifics of policy and governance, with wide-ranging examples drawn from numerous advanced democracies. The work of forging alternatives necessarily begins with a critique of the status quo, and this is what Bevir has provided with this book.

This essay focuses less on the theoretical basis of Bevir's arguments—in particular, his advocacy for an “interpretive social science”—and more on their implications for democratic policy making, although some discussion of the theoretical issues is unavoidable. I wish to develop four key points. First, I show how Bevir's arguments might be enhanced by a more robust insistence on the primacy of democratic theory as a guide to what governance should look like. Second, I argue that Bevir has over-stated the efficacy of ideas in his account and under-stated the role of power, and in particular the enduring political power of corporate entities and the impact this has on debates about governance. Third, I provide a brief defense of giving “expert” knowledge a privileged role in at least some public policy debates, taking as a case study local, state, and national policy responses to climate change. Fourth, and drawing on the previous points in this essay, I argue that in practice, an effective alternative to market-oriented paradigms should not rely exclusively on participatory approaches to reform, but rather strengthened participation in conjunction with leadership from pro-democratic public officials and judicious use of expert knowledge.

THE PRIMACY OF DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Bevir's central argument in *Democratic Governance* involves a critique of social science and its presumed expertise. The standard model of representative democracy involves elected representatives

making policy, informed by expert guidance about policy outcomes. The basis for this expertise is often social science research purporting to show how policy interventions impact outcomes (with outcomes often being understood as human behavior). Bevir charged that the standard social science model presumes that interventions will have "certain effects more or less irrespective of local cultures and local circumstances." (p. 244). He continued by showing how this presumption can lead to absurd and even counter-productive results in the case of police reform, which often has been experienced by on-the-beat officers as an unwelcome and unhelpful intrusion by outsiders who simply do not understand the pressures of the job and the pragmatic judgments officers must make every day.

Bevir argued that the social science expert paradigm often produces unintended consequences, precisely by ignoring local circumstances and the role of "contingency" in human affairs. I believe he is correct that many policy researchers invest too much faith and effort in employing sophisticated statistical techniques that purportedly offer "proof" of not only statistically significant correlations but of underlying causal relationships, and not enough effort in thinking carefully through how such findings ought to impact public policy. The temptation is to leap from a finding that (assuming a certain causal story) a change in variable X is associated with some percent change in variable Y to the assumption that a particular policy intervention designed at increasing or reducing X will in fact lead to corresponding changes in Y, ignoring the complicating considerations. Potential complications include variations in local conditions, the possibility that *how* changes in X come about may impact its relationship to Y, and the possibility that increases in X may also have impacts on other variables besides Y significant enough to be of public concern.

Bevir's critique might be made more nuanced by greater acknowledgement of the degree to which (at least some) policy researchers are self-consciously cautious and humble in making claims about the presumed effectiveness of particular policy interventions. Academic policy researchers spend a lot of time worrying about questions of self-selection, reverse causality, proper measurement of outcomes, and other common problems in both establishing correlations and trying to distinguish correlations from causality within complex systems (Byrne, 2011). They also are

increasingly mindful of how causal processes may differ from one context to another. (This is not to say that policy advocates, who perhaps have had the most practical impact on public policy practice, are always similarly cautious.)

Bevir might reply that while many policy researchers are aware of these difficulties, typically they are seen as impediments or complications in the assumed task of finding a “universal” causal relationship that is thought to underlie the local variations, an aspiration that stands at odds with Bevir’s interpretive social science. But the commitment to generalized explanations that dominates the field of policy research is unlikely to evaporate. Nor is it clear that it should. Studies of, for instance, the impact of education, race, gender, and geographical location on life outcomes (employment, income) and on political behavior can be highly illuminating and form the basis for a critique—indeed a radical critique—of American society (and others), even when they fail to capture (or even attempt to capture) the underlying meaning of the actions being studied. For a good example (see Wright & Rogers, 2010) Byrne (2011) has similar aspirations for an “emancipatory” social science that is also rigorously empirical. Citizens and activists in localized policy disputes often draw on such studies to bolster their claims and challenge existing local practices. Without access to “authoritative” knowledge of this kind, activists have few tools with which to challenge the claims of public officials.

Consider then this alternative approach, which shares the view that policy researchers often should adopt a more humble relationship to actual politics but preserves a key role for social science knowledge. Instead of conceiving of policy research as offering authoritative guidance on the best policies to pursue, it might be conceived as offering relevant input into democratic deliberations over policy directions (Anderson, 1993; Gutmann & Thompson, 1997). And indeed, democratic publics deliberating policy alternatives will have good reason to seek out expert knowledge. Does raising the minimum wage really cost the economy jobs? Do cities benefit economically when they provide subsidies to build stadiums? What is the best way to preserve affordable housing in cities undergoing rises in property values? The answers to these questions are important, and ordinarily almost all citizens will be

reliant on access to expert knowledge to form a defensible view on these matters.

The examples provided above all deliberately involve economics. Put more precisely, they involve questions of how a change in one part of an inter-connected system (understanding "the market" as both a set of institutional rules and a set of individual and collective behaviors in response to those rules) will affect activity in other parts of the system. The answers to such questions are rarely visible to the naked eye, and rarely obvious as a matter of a priori theory. Indeed, good empirical work on these questions can capture precisely those unintended or countervailing effects unanticipated by theory. Insofar as the quest of much public policy is to intervene into or re-write the rules of market systems so as to produce socially desirable results, maintaining an important role for expertise seems essential—even if it is agreed that such expertise should play a subordinate role in policy deliberations.

Bevir's argument, that social science expertise as the basis for policy fails because it overlooks unintended consequences, is thus not fully convincing. Social scientists can reply that policymaking uninformed by policy research would create even more unintended consequences, and that well-designed empirical research can capture how actual policy interventions fare in the messiness of the real world. Indeed, one might argue that the real struggle is not overturning social science's role in policymaking, but in using social science to challenge ideological or highly theoretical conceptions of the way markets work in practice. And in some circumstances (particularly at the local government level), research or simply the provision of basic facts can provide an important check on elite claims on matters such as economic development policy. In practical political terms, I suspect that the crucial issue is whether policy researchers view themselves and their work as allies to democratic publics and democratic social movements rather than servants (or holders!) of power, not whether they are practitioners of modernist or interpretive social science.

Bevir might have instead developed a stronger argument for decentering social science expertise, drawn not from claims about its effects on policy but from democratic theory. Simply put, conventional social science research often treats persons as subjects to be manipulated, not as fellow citizens with their own agency. The

policymaker is placed in the position of attempting to manipulate the behavior of other people so as to produce desired outcomes. This is particularly problematic when the subjects of these interventions are other public agents, such as police officers (Bevir's example) or schoolteachers (another highly pertinent example), and when such agents are given little or no effective voice in shaping policy reforms. Discussion of public education reform in the U.S., for instance, rarely gives prominent place to the views of actual teachers (let alone students!), compared to policy scholars or policy entrepreneurs. Likewise, the common model of urban school reform in the United States is top-down, both at the local level (the hard-charging superintendent given the power to "clean up" the status quo) and at the national level (making testing regimes the basis for urban education).

This is not to say that policy can ever entirely avoid the manipulation of human behavior by some government actor or institution. That is what laws and rules involve. Much public policy revolves around questions of pricing and incentives, with the assumed view that people will respond to changes in prices and incentives in fairly predictable ways. There are two difficulties here, however. The first is with assuming that more complex forms of human behavior (beyond buying decisions) can be well-modeled or predicted with economic assumptions. The second is with assuming that the predictions of accumulated social science research necessarily should trump the deliberations of democratic publics. Policymaking might be better conceived as citizens reasoning together about the content of the laws they wish to live under, understanding this as a multi-layered process in which judgments about what prices and what incentives citizens judge as appropriate are necessarily intertwined with judgments about values (social justice), local goods (what is important for this particular culture), and aspirations (what kind of community we want to be).

Conventional policy research can make a vital contribution to this process, so long as it is presented as input for public discussion, not the authoritative basis for public policymaking. Bevir in fact articulates—but does not fully develop—a position of this kind in his discussion of public policy making in Chapter Eight, in which he allows that "there is no doubt some value" in consulting expert opinion in shaping policies, but that "[A]fter the experts voice their opinions,

there has to be a free argument about which policy citizens want to adopt." (p. 195). This is an attractive picture, and Bevir's arguments for re-casting the interplay between "experts," public officials, and citizens could be made both more concrete and more persuasive by fleshing this account out in future work.

THE NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT: WHAT'S REALLY BEHIND IT?

Bevir did an excellent job deconstructing the ideology of the New Public Management and showing how inappropriate it can often be to organize public functions so as to mimic markets. What Bevir did not do is examine in any depth the connection between New Public Management ideas and the broader ideology of free-market conservatism that has come to play a hegemonic role in (especially) the U.S., or the relationship between either of these ideologies and capitalism as such. Indeed, while Bevir did provide a fine account of British socialist and social democratic thought as a backdrop for understanding New Labour thinking on issues of governance, he did not engage capitalism as such. Consequently, Bevir's focus was almost entirely on how government is organized, and not on the role private interests play in shaping government activity.

This is problematic for four reasons. First, the New Public Management is not merely a theory of how to reform the state so as to be more efficient. It is also an ideological attack on the public sector itself, and on the idea of a democratic public using public power to promote public ends (Box et al., 2001). At stake here is the question of whether government has the capacity to regulate and steer capitalist economic arrangements so as to achieve desired social goals. The presumption of neoliberals is not only that modern states do not have that capacity, but that they should not, because markets are inherently a more efficient form of social organization than government. Bevir is spot-on in his critique of this neoliberal ideology, but does not adequately spell out who stands to gain from it: powerful corporations who are thereby less constrained in their capacity to pursue profits, as well as the wealthy, who have less to fear in the way of redistributive taxes from a weak, discredited state. The rise of New Public Management theories are only partly a story about pro-market ideology applied to the public sphere. It is also a story about the relative distribution of power between the public and private sector, about the distribution of income and wealth, and often

(as recently seen in Wisconsin) about weakening the bargaining power of public sector workers.

Second, partly because Bevir's primary case study is New Labour government in Britain, he did not call sufficient attention to the degree to which public policy and the public sector has (especially in the United States) in many cases effectively been captured by private interests. This is most clear cut in the cases of privatization of not only government services but government infrastructure itself, thereby creating new profit opportunities. It is also quite evident in the symbiotic relationship between private contractors and suppliers and the expansion of the prison industrial complex, as well as the ongoing (and rarely challenged) military industrial complex. And it is evident in the tax code and often in the ways regulatory agencies create, interpret, and enforce rules. Yet Bevir at no point in the text discusses corporate "capture" of governance functions by business interests as one of the fundamental problems facing a constructive theory of democratic governance.

Third, Bevir's account does not give sufficient attention to the degree to which governments in capitalist nations are constrained by the need to keep capitalist economies well-functioning, that is, constantly growing. That constraint in itself has powerful implications for how much democracy is possible in economic policymaking within capitalist systems. If the health of the state and social order depend on a constantly growing economy, then it is natural to conclude that the economy is just too important not to be left to experts, and for the levers of economic policymaking to be tightly controlled in institutions such as the Federal Reserve. At the sub-national level, states and localities are typically constrained in public policy by the need to attract or retain mobile capital investment in order to maintain the health of local economies. This in turn means public policy at these levels are typically biased towards the interests of corporations, not only because they often have greater capacity and incentive to influence policy than ordinary persons but because they possess a threat power—the threat to shift investment elsewhere—that local and state-level politicians must take very seriously. Indeed, in many localities, it never occurs to public officials to consider deviations from the standard menu of pro-business policies (holding labor costs down, providing subsidies to economic development projects, keeping tax rates low, streamlining regulations). This analysis in turn

suggests the enduring importance of concepts like "social class" and the "social logic attached to capitalist development" in understanding the obstacles to a more participatory democracy—concepts that Bevir's interpretive social science would have us eschew as principal explanatory tools (pp. 58-60).

These points feed into my fourth observation. If the above observations have merit, the implication is that capitalist economic arrangements place substantial if not severe limits on the amount of radical democracy that states can responsibly adopt. Participatory arrangements may be possible in discrete, localized areas such as local budgeting, police oversight, and school administration. But to broaden participation to the most fundamental questions of economic policy would require not only a new approach to governance but an account of what a substantially reformed political economy would look like. Indeed, the fact that contemporary capitalism seems to require centralized, non-transparent control of policymakers at the head of central banks and other monetary institutions, and that the policies adopted are typically heavily shaped by the views of economic elites, should count as a major argument against existing political-economic arrangements. Put another way, the problem of democratic governance cannot be detached from the fundamental question of how the political economy itself is to be organized.

IN (PARTIAL) DEFENSE OF EXPERTS

Indeed, Bevir sided with those who would prioritize democratic process over "social justice." This prioritization is offered as a critique of those within the Labour Party who claim expert knowledge about how capitalist economies work and envision making that knowledge the basis of policy. As already suggested, I am not convinced of Bevir's dismissal of the need for expert analysis of modern capitalist economies. To make a modern capitalist economy run well and deliver an acceptable distribution of goods is no easy task. To understand the contemporary financial crisis in more than trivial or moralistic terms requires a serious analysis of capitalism's longer-term trajectory, which requires serious effort. I certainly do not think that it is beyond the ordinary citizen to have a sufficiently detailed knowledge of macroeconomics to make an informed judgment about policy direction, but it is also the case that many citizens in the U.S.

and elsewhere lack such understanding and are prone to thinking about the macro-economy in terms of patently inappropriate metaphors (i.e. "we have to pay our own bills, government should as well.") A Labour government with a failing macroeconomic policy likely will be a failed government, full stop. It is certainly possible to envisage much, much greater public participation and deliberation regarding questions such as what kinds of social investments society should undertake, but again, this requires thinking carefully through how a democratic economy might be organized (Wright, 2011; O'Neill & Williamson, 2012).

Now consider a second major area of public policy in which expertise is unavoidable: climate change and environmental policy more generally. It should not require detailed argument to show that a polity that combines participatory formation of climate-relevant policy with widespread scientific illiteracy will not choose wisely when it comes to climate change. The policies such a polity will choose will not honor principles of social justice or respect the prudence of the precautionary principle. Instead, they will tend to be inadequate, unjust, and ultimately self-destructive. The picture gets bleaker still when we remember the role of organized interests (i.e., big oil) in debates about climate policy and their capacity to stir up doubt and skepticism about scientifically valid evidence.

Again, this is a policy area where the obvious diagnosis seems to be that we need a greater rather than lesser role for experts in shaping policy. Bevir might argue that this represents a special sort of case, but such a rejoinder would not be convincing: if climate change scientists are correct, then almost *all* of our public policies need to be re-assessed in terms of the need to dramatically reduce carbon emissions as soon as possible. Likewise, if climate change scientists are correct, the need to assure uniform, system-wide compliance with carbon-conserving rules should trump concerns about respecting local conditions, and the need for rapid action should trump concerns about achieving deliberative consent to such action. Moreover, the substance of much climate change policy will involve deliberate attempts to steer human behavior in some directions rather than others, by increasing the price of fossil fuel use and ending or reversing subsidies for carbon intensive residential and travel patterns. Achieving coordinated action on a national basis implies that all localities must adopt common standards, rather than allow

some localities to try to gain a short-term economic advantage by having less exacting environmental standards than other localities.

In at least two major policy areas then—economic policy and environmental policy—there are, in my view, very strong reasons for continuing to give expertise a privileged role in the policy process—indeed, arguably a more privileged position than is currently the case. It is exceedingly unclear how a more participatory form of economic policy might be devised, at least in the absence of a corresponding account of a radically reformed, democratic economy. It is also exceedingly unclear how nations can respond to the urgent realities of climate change without quite a lot of dependence on old school, Westminster-style coordination of policy actions defined at the center and implemented in top-down fashion. There may be as many good ways to reform schools or monitor the police force as there are localities in the United States, but the same is not true with respect to minimizing carbon impact as soon as possible.

COMBINING PARTICIPATION WITH POWER AND EXPERTISE

These considerations lead me to argue that we should not look to more participatory institutions alone in rethinking a form of democratic governance capable of meeting the dramatic policy challenges of the 21st century. First, advocates of reform need to provide a taxonomy of what sort of policy areas are most amenable to radical democratic arrangements, and which policy areas will necessarily be informed in large measure by either social scientific or scientific expertise. Such a taxonomy should further distinguish between cases in which the role of expert knowledge should be merely to provide evidence, when it should provide advice on actual policies, and when experts should be allowed or requested to actually craft the policies themselves. This last scenario should be more the exception than the rule. The presumption should be in favor of expanding the role of public participation and citizen judgment—drawing on dialogue with experts who supply information and alternative perspectives, but do not decide the matter—whenever this is feasible. Second, advocates of reform need to identify clearly the political obstacles to achieving more democratic forms of governance, including most especially the role of private interests (and the “expert” knowledge they deploy.)

Third, some account needs to be given of the role public officials can play in instigating democratic reform. As Richard Box has argued, public officials can play a major role in calling public attention to issues and putting democratic, participatory processes into motion (Box, 2005). They can also develop strategies for how to cope with the obstacles to implementing policies favored by democratic publics. Most importantly, perhaps, they can recognize the systemic biases embedded in contemporary governance processes which favor the well-resourced and well-connected over those excluded from the policy process, and think proactively and creatively about how to counter those biases.

In short, I am convinced by Janet and Robert Denhardt's insistence (described by Bevir) that we cannot do without truly publicly minded public servants, who see their role not as implementing wise policies in top-down fashion but in calling attention to and helping mobilize actions around critical issues (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011). While systemic reform to create new radically democratic structures is desirable in many policy areas, we should not overlook or neglect the critical role pro-democratic public officials can play, even within traditional governance structures, in making government accessible to citizens and in showing why engagement is worthwhile. Indeed, democratically-minded public officials and citizen movements can have a potentially symbiotic relationship: increasing participation and deliberation can help build legitimacy for more extensive, proactive public sector policy action that makes it more likely public officials can implement desirable policies; having access to power and to decision makers similarly lends a credibility to grassroots groups, indicating that their voices will be more than just heard, but will in fact help shape policy.

CONCLUSION

Re-legitimizing strong public sector action must be a central aim of both advocates for greater democracy and participation and advocates for social justice. I concur with Bevir's view that radical, participatory alternatives in which citizens weigh evidence, deliberate over possible outcomes, and help shape policy provide a potential advance over conventional modes of governance. Likewise, while I have defended preserving a significant role for "expert" knowledge in public policy debates in this essay, Bevir's basic idea that thinking

about the policy process in terms of dialogue and storytelling opens the door to much wider participation by citizens than conventional expert-centric models is compelling. But much careful thought is needed to distinguish between what policy arenas should be constructed on a more participatory model and which must retain a strong and on occasion decisive role for appropriate kinds of expertise. Likewise, careful thought must be given to which policy areas can be safely distributed among many different local governments acting on the basis of local knowledge and which policy areas necessarily require uniform policies regardless of local conditions.¹ (Here I assume that the lower the scale of government at which a decision is made, the greater scope there will be for extensive public participation and for individuals and small groups to have a tangible impact. This is not to say there is no scope for expanding participation at higher levels of government). Finally, an account of reform must both identify the agents and interests likely to be opposed to such change, and develop a political strategy for either winning over, neutralizing, or side-stepping such opposition. I hope that Bevir and his readers will take up these tasks in future work.

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NOTES

1. "Local knowledge" is not to be confused with the very different concept Bevir introduced of "local reasoning," in which the term "local" does not have a geographic connotation but rather means "local to a web of beliefs" (Bevir, 2010, p. 262).

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