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Contemporary Debates on Institutions: Governance, Governmentality and Power

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Abstract

Institutions, at state and local level, have been perceived as a mechanism of supporting the vulnerable within society. The processes of globalisation within an economic, political and social context have played a fundamental role in institutions. The 'State' that administers institutions has experienced involvement and adjustment by central government's policy of privatization and deregulation. The aim of this paper is to critically explore the current debates on institutions within British society. We frame the debates within Foucault's notion of 'Governmentality,' which highlights how government provides governance of 'action at a distance' in order to detract blame from government and its policies and place this blame onto individuals and communities themselves (1978, p. 33).

Key words: Community; Institutions; Society; Governmentality; Power

1. Introduction

Social scientists have always been involved with the functions that social institutions have within the local community. Understandably over recent years Britain's institutions have been at the centre of theoretical discussions on social science and consequently have generated much media interest. Institutions in society are perceived to be organisations that support individuals (Finlayson, 1994). Examples of British institutions range from: The National Health Service, Metropolitan Police Service and Local Government. The focus of this media interest has revolved around a number of recent institutional failings, most notably that of Rotherham and Rochdale's child abuse scandals and that of the public figures Jimmy Saville and Cyril Smith.

In a recent survey (2013) by the Economist Intelligence Unit it was revealed that there is a significant loss in faith in Britain's institutions. An article in the Daily Mail, which quotes the Economist Intelligence Unit report, notes that 'Over the past few years the British public's mistrust of politicians, and ruling institutions more generally, has had ample cause to deepen, amid a series of scandals ranging from parliamentary expenses and "cash-for-questions" to Libor-fixing and payment protection scams, phone-hacking and police cover-ups,' (Slack, 2013). Furthermore, there are a number of other cases, such as, sexual abuse cases (e.g. Rotherham, Rochdale, Jimmy Saville and Cyril Smith) and child abuse (e.g. Baby P; Hamzah Khan; Daniel Pelka) that resulted in a lack of confidence in institutions. Nushara Mansur, who works for the British Association of Social Workers, stated in October 2013 that:

"It is unprecedented to have so many cases where so many horrific details all come out at the same time. It leads to the general public feeling that more and more of these cases are happening and the authorities are failing. But it's not true. If you look at the actual figures then the number of deaths due to neglect and abuse are falling, and of those only a tiny proportion are known to social services" (Smith, 2013).

This debate on public institutions failing certain groups in society is nothing new as there are a number of other historical case studies of relevance; most notably the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and the aftermath following the public inquiry, which argued that the police were 'institutionally racist.' There are also the historical cases of the civil disturbances in the 1980s, such as the Brixton Riot (1981) Birmingham Riot (1985), Burnley, Bradford and Oldham (2001) and most recently the Summer Riots of 2011. It was felt by some social commentators and scholars that the reason why these civil disturbances took place was public institutions letting various groups down in society (Blackwell, 2015; Phillips et al, 2013; Hancock et al, 2012; Kalra, 2002).

The aim of this paper is to examine the debates surrounding public institutions and the impact that they have on society in a social and political context. The paper is divided into two sections. The first section will provide a historical overview of theories of institutions taken from a sociological perspective. In this section the authors have interpreted the term 'institution' from a public, voluntary and private stance. The second section will examine the contemporary theoretical debates on institutions drawing from Michel Foucault's (1978) and others conceptual interpretations of Governmentality. Overall, this paper argues that there needs to be recognition and acknowledgement of the power that institutions have on social groups within society. Furthermore, there needs to be an identification of which social groups use institutions more than others. Social research suggests that the most vulnerable people in society are more reliant on institutions in the voluntary and statutory sectors (Hortulanus et al, 2006). The authors have focused their work from a British public institutions perspective.

2. Understanding Institutions

"There is a growing consensus among economists and political scientists that the broad outlines of North's story are correct: the social, economic, legal, and political organization of a society, that is, its 'institutions,' is a primary determinant of economic performance" (Acemoglu and Johnson, 2005, p. 950).

One of the most prominent contemporary scholars on institutions, with a fascination for economic history, is the American academic, Douglass C. North. In 1993 he was jointly awarded, with Robert W. Fogel, the 'Sveriges Riksbank Prize' in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel. This prestigious award was in recognition 'for having renewed research in economic history by applying economic theory and quantitative methods in order to explain economic and institutional change' (Noble Prize, 2014). The American Economic Review in 2010 described North as being 'at the forefront of several revolutions in economics.'

This notion by North implies that institutions have a fundamental influence on people in society. Overall, institutions according to Groenesegeen et al (1995, p. 467) 'refer to a framework of behaviour: institutions direct, channel or guided behaviour.' In challenging the concept of Institutions in 1991 he

provided a unique definition which is frequently used in the social science discipline. North (1991, p. 97) defined institutions as:

“Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights). Throughout history, institutions have been devised by human beings to create order and reduce uncertainty in exchange.”

Whilst we explore Foucault’s concept of Governmentality in depth as applied to institutions, the super macro term Globalisation is a popular term in social sciences. Within the context of institutions the concept of globalisation cannot be ignored. Globalisation is the complex relationships of social, economic, cultural and political processes. Munck (2002, pp. 51-52) has noted that globalisation is the ‘buzzword’ of the moment and that ‘it is a most labile term, fluid and slippery in its meaning and its political implications.’ The work of Manuel Castell has argued that the process of globalisation has had a profound effect on how institutions operate in society. To justify his argument Castell (2010) has used the characteristics of ‘information capitalism’ (Informationalism) and this rise of inequality, social polarization and poverty. To quote Castell (2010, pp. 166-167):

“Informationalism does create a sharp divide between valuable and non-valuable people and locales. Globalisation proceeds selectively, including and excluding segments of economies and societies in and out of the networks of information, wealth, and power that characterize the new, dominant system. Individualization of work leaves workers to each one of themselves, to bargain their fate *vis-à-vis* constantly changing market forces. The crisis of nation-state, and of the institutions of civil society constructed around it during the industrial era, undermines institutional capacity to correct social imbalances derived from unrestricted market logic.”

Hence this notion by Castell is that globalisation is not only shaping the way people live but more importantly how institutions function. This argument has been substantiated by other scholars. For example Aoyama et al (2011, p. 170) have noted that ‘institutions create unequal distribution of economic opportunity within and between regions’ and ‘within regions, institutions can also create and sustain socio-economic inequality.’ To justify their arguments they used the work of Ray Hudson. Ray Hudson is a British Economic Geographer at the University of Durham, he has had a long interest in the process of uneven economic development and the relationship between the state and the private sector. In a paper (2004) and a book (2005) he argued that economies are ‘socially constructed’ and ‘instituted by rules and understanding about proper behaviour and conduct’ (Aoyama et al, 2011, p. 170). Hence, it is this school of thought that theorises that ‘institutions often discriminate against members of society based on gender, class, race and/or ethnicity’ (Aoyama et al, 2011, p. 170). Hudson (2005, p. 6-7) maintains that:

“...institutions lead to complex specialities of governance and regulation. These combine the diverse spaces and spatial scales of state organisations and institutions within civil society. Systems of governance and regulation are now more multi-scalar (Brenner et al, 2003) but national states retain a critical role within them (Sassen, 2003).”

Moving on from the theoretical conceptual framework of institutions there is also a discussion surrounding ‘anti-institution.’ This debate has been stimulated from the ideas of ‘anarchism.’ By using the work of Woodcock (1978) in Cook (1991, p. 13) it is noted that the development of ‘anarchism is the doctrine which contends that government is the source of most of our social troubles and that there are viable alternative forms of voluntary organisation.’ Hence the development of anarchism has created a sense of ‘anti-institution.’ Punch (1974) has argued that the sociology of the ‘anti-institution’ is motivated by social groups in society. The encouragement that certain social groups have on ‘anti-institution’ and as Punch (1978, p. 312) points out ‘Some social groups, however, set out deliberately to combat the innate tendency to ‘dynamic conservatism’ and form what we call anti-institutions.’ The ideas of anarchism will become more apparent in the next section of this article when the paper explores the role of the state in society, framed within Michel Foucault’s influential work on Governmentality and the relationship of this to care institutions as an exemplar.

3. Theorising Institutions, Governmentality and Power: the case of the Care Institution

“The modern, obsessively legislating, defining, structuring, segregating, classifying, recording and universalising state reflected the splendour of universal standards of truth.” (Bauman 1992, p. xiv).

Despite the plethora of theoretical models, the most compelling epistemology in recent years comes from the works of Michel Foucault. His work is one of the first to take to task the British State and its actionable distance of its populace vis a vis former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s attempt to ‘roll back the frontiers of the State’ when she came to power in 1979. Much theorization has centred on Marxist and Feminist works which have essentialized ‘class’ and ‘gender’ as master narratives of State Power. This is too macro oriented and misses the nuances of the micro dynamics of modern British society, especially institutional power.

Indeed, the several works of Michel Foucault have significance for understanding institutions and power relationships. The key aim of Foucault’s work has been “to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture human beings are made subjects” (1982, p. 208). In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) and *Madness and Civilization* (1967), Foucault utilizes the distinctive methodology of archaeology for these studies that aim to provide a “history of statements that claim the status of truth” (Davidson, 1986, p. 221).

Foucault's later work, *Discipline and Punish* (1977) focuses on the techniques of power that operate within an institution and simultaneously create "a whole domain of knowledge and a whole type of power" (p. 185). This work is characterized as genealogy and examines the "political regime of the production of truth" (Davidson, 1986, p. 224). For example, Powell and Biggs (2000) highlighted how medical narrative discourses have attempted to colonize "truthful" definitions afforded to residential experiences within care institutions. Coupled with this, Powell and Biggs (2000) have illustrated how professional power has dominated social relationships with patients.

Professionals, who are pivotal interventionists in social relations and in the coordination of social arrangements, pursue a power to classify and pathologize with consequences for the reproduction of knowledge and maintenance of power relations in care homes. Techniques of surveillance are so sophisticated, argues Foucault, that "inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is everywhere" (1977, p. 195). Foucault points here to the means through which power is exercised. He places the processes of discipline, surveillance, individualization, and normalization at the centre of his analysis. These processes were key elements in the genesis of public welfare agencies from the instigation of the welfare state in 1945 in Great Britain. For example, institutions of power, such as care homes were part of a strategy that extended "control over minutiae of the conditions of life and conduct" (Cousins and Hussain, 1984, p. 146). Within this discourse the professional became "the great advisor and expert" (Rabinow, 1984, pp. 283–284) in the utilization of scientific-medico insights in constructing services in care homes for patients.

From the 1980s the British State emerged based upon minimal intervention and regulation via a rolling program of privatization, deregulation, and contraction of services. Within the mixed economy of welfare in the UK, there has been the social construction of a market-oriented, consumer-based approach to the delivery of care and the role of older people as consumers. This has startling continuities with the Big Society: as Powell (2014) claims, the British State is being reorganized to include a retention of a strong centre to formulate policy but the dissemination of responsibility for policy implementation to a wide range of private, public, and informal modes.

How do we rethink this? The concept of Governmentality makes fundamental connections between structural processes and agency and has been used to characterize features of contemporary, neoliberal government (Rose and Miller, 1992) in the United Kingdom. A core element of neoliberal governance is an emphasis on enterprise as an individual and corporate strategy and on its concomitant discourse of marketization much exemplified by the genesis of private care homes, which embodies value for money and transference of public expenditure to new areas of private welfare pluralism for welfare subjects. According to Foucault in Burchell et al (1991) governmentality comprises three tiers: it is the result of transformations within the modern British State; it is a tendency to institutionalize a particular form of power; and it is the "ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections calculations and tactics" (Burchell et al, 1991 pp. 102-103) that

enable the exercise of power directed towards the regulation of a population using various care institutions of “security”.

Coupled with this, Mitchell Dean (1999) elaborated an analytics of government through which the ever-changing rationalities and technologies governing advanced liberal societies could be diagnosed and contested. With the ideal of the welfare state receding, neo-liberal principles and objectives were becoming ascendant, prompting many to take an interest in Foucault’s lectures on the history of governmentality and emergence of neo-liberalism; but Foucault left no extended methodological commentary on genealogy and its application to the study of governmentality. Much of the importance of Dean’s early work on Governmentality, then, resided in the fact that it was among the first comprehensive and systematic attempts to advance the conceptual tools and dimensions of analysis needed to perform this type of study focusing on ‘practices’ of governmentality – in this instance, the practices of institutions and the conduct of conduct.

Indeed, Dean (1999) is heavily influenced by Foucault’s (1978) work on government, and the concern with the practices of ‘conduct of conduct’. The latter work of Dean and Villadsen (2015) develops this theme further. They draw extensively upon the work of Foucault to argue for the necessity of the concept of the state in political and social analysis. In so doing, it takes on not only the dominant view in the social sciences that the concept of the state is outmoded, but also the large interpretative literature on Foucault, which claims that he displaces the state for a de-centered analytics of power. This is an important point. The State still retains its importance in the governing of modern life but does so in contradictory ways: that may facilitate its power but use rationalities of government to create a partnership with civil society.

Related to this then, neoliberal British government is especially concerned with inculcating a set of values and objectives orientated towards incorporating people as both players and partners in a marketized system within civil society (Dean and Villadsen 2015). In the UK, people are exhorted, indeed expected, to become entrepreneurs in all spheres and to accept responsibility for the management of risk (Beck, 1992); people then govern themselves. For neo-liberalism theory and care homes are an extension of such philosophy in practice in Great Britain, residents and patients are very much cast as social actors in the market place, mobilizing selectivity of services in the light of care managerial assessment of services for care institutions.

Coupled with this, British sociologists Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller argue that we must investigate political rationalities and technologies of government, “the complex of mundane programmes, calculations, techniques, apparatuses, documents and procedures through which authorities seek to embody and give effect to governmental ambitions” (Rose and Miller, 1992, p. 175). Technologies of government consist of complex devices and practices through which social groups, such as, professional care managers attempt to operationalize, following Rose and Miller (1992), their program of tailoring ‘packages of care’ for residents in care institutions. This could include care

assessment and professionalization (care management) and by implication, the elaborate paraphernalia of contract services of care institutions in the UK. Such technologies, Rose and Miller (1992) suggest, articulate and deploy political rationalities, and thereby enable action at a distance. There are a number of distinguishing but paradoxical aspects of neoliberal government in the UK. First, while there is increasing dependence on professional expertise, there is also a drive to make, for example, older people active participants in their own rule via empowerment (Ney, 2005). One of the ways of facilitating both is the representation of issues as non-political so that expert knowledge becomes dominant in rendering the complexities of modern social and economic life knowable, practicable and amenable to governing.

Marketization thus entails the simultaneous encouragement of consumerism and dependency, the expansion of budgeting and managerial discourse, and structures of accountability in which care management expertise is problematized in new ways. Such technologies of government in the UK displace earlier forms with new rationalities of contracts and competition whereby professionals participate in governmentality yet, at the same time, are themselves subject to intensified forms of regulation and control: care institutions are part of this ambiguity. Enterprise is still a dominant discourse of government and it has permeated innumerable policies spanning from social welfare to health from the 1980s to 2015. Moreover, it has combined two interlinked developments: a stress on the necessity for enterprising subjects or what Powell (2014) terms 'responsibilization' (2014, p. 29) and the resolution of the British State control with individual and organizational autonomy through service provision, each of which has redefined previous patterns of social relationships within welfare agencies and between those agencies and their customers/clients. However, while acknowledging the introduction of neoliberal policies to stimulate market modes of action, it is important to recognize, as Powell (2014) points out, that the implementation of a care policy is varied, highly contingent, and uncertain.

Consequently, there are reasons to examine and recognize varying patterns and contingent outcomes of social policies. In doing this, we may arrive at a less all-encompassing, deterministic, and antireductionist conception of governmentality. While some commentators claim that Foucault rejected monolithic images of the British state (Smart, 1985), characterized neoliberal government technologies as pluralizing, and conceptualized discipline and power as forms of domination in which subjects are active, governmentality as an analytical construct remains a highly abstract metaphor for a complex and heterogeneous series of interrelated social practices and institutional structures.

As a methodology, the use of an archaeological method explores the networks of what is said and what can be seen in a set of social arrangements in institutions: in the conduct of an archaeology there is a visibility in "opening up" statements. For example, the work of Powell (2014) can be shown to illustrate how residential care in the UK, as a form of visibility, produces statements about "old age" while statements about "aging" produce forms of

visibility which reinforce residential care. Such visibility and discursive configuration is consolidated by resource allocation.

Archaeology can be used to attempt to chart the relationship between statements and the visible; describe “institutions” which acquire authority and provide limits within which discursive objects may exist. There are two key issues to explain this. Firstly, the attempt to understand the relationship between statements and visibility focuses on those set of statements that make up institutions such as residential care – instructions to care workers, statements about time-tabling of activities for residents and the structure and space of the care institution itself. Knowledge is composed of statements and visibility. We need to attend to both what is said and what is visible (building, corridors and singular rooms). The crucial point is that a Foucauldian approach can draw our attention to the dynamic inter-relationship between statements and institutions. Secondly, the attempt to describe “institutions” which acquire authority and provide limits within which discursive objects may act, focuses again on the care institution which delimits the range of activities of discursive objects – it is at this point that an exploration of the architectural features of the care institution would be used to understand spatial arrangements. In a similar context, Goffman (1968) wrote about how spatial arrangements of “total institutions” (prisons) operate to provide care and rehabilitation at an official level and capacity, underneath the surface, however, such institutions curtail the rights of its prisoners:

“Many total institutions, most of the time, seem to function merely as storage dumps for inmates ... but they usually present themselves to the public as rational organizations designed consciously, through and through, as effective machines for producing a few officially avowed and officially approved ends” (Goffman 1968, 73 quoted in Powell and Biggs 2001, p. 8).

A fundamental difference between Goffman and Foucault’s interpretations of institutions would be, however, that whereas Goffman sees total institutions as an aberration, untypical of society as a whole, Foucault’s critique assumes that the carceral element of institutional life encapsulates a core feature of social life.

When examining institutions from a British perspective the Welfare state is one of the oldest public institutions. The ethos of the welfare state was motivated by the findings of the Beveridge Report (1942) which argued for a support system for the vulnerable groups in society. As Powell et al (2002, p. 29) have stated ‘The Beveridge Report of 1942 is often seen as a historical moment of wartime reconstruction and the blueprint of the welfare state.’ It has been argued by the main political parties that the welfare state must be ‘free at the point of delivery.’ The welfare state today has many different functions, such as, the National Health Service (NHS), Housing, Disability, Pensions and Income Support. The Welfare state in contemporary Britain is bringing ‘together a number of agencies and institutions to deliver a sustainable social welfare programme’ (Cook and Halsall, 2011, p. 21). Moreover, the welfare state is public funded and recent political debates have

focused on the investment in key services and on delivery. Hamnett (2014, p. 500) has argued that:

“The broad political consensus that has shaped welfare policy in Britain for most of the post-war period is now undergoing significant change. There is a shift from an inclusive welfare state to what has been termed a workfare state where benefits are being restricted and capped linked to the search work.”

According to the Institute for Innovation and Improvement (2015) the NHS is the fourth largest organisation in the world with 1.3 million people working for the service within a £100 billion budget. The NHS was launched on 5th July 1948 by Aneurin Bevan, the then Minister of Health. This institution has three core principles: (1) ‘that it meets the needs of everyone; (2) that it be free at the point of delivery’ and; (3) ‘that it is based on clinical need, not ability to pay’ (NHS, 2015). Throughout the 1980s to the present day there has been much political discourse on how the welfare state is run and how much it costs. Since the election of a Conservative Government in 1979 which ran to 1997; a Labour government from 1997 to 2010 and then the coalition government the debate has focused on privatization. Klein (1995, p. 154) noted that privatization in the political arena has always caused a ‘longevity’ argument and provokes ‘traditional reactions.’ Both the Conservative party and the Labour party have privatized parts of the NHS in the past. The principle behind this is to improve the service. The question here is if consecutive governments keep privatizing the NHS will the service experience improvements?

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored Foucauldian debates of institutions from a British perspective. Recent debates on institutional failings have been highlighted by central government, independent inquires and the media. There have been a number of historic cases in the past that have highlighted institutional failings. However there has been little academic discussion on institutional failings. This is comparable with the work of Cook et al (2015, p. 24) when they argue ‘that there needs to be a more critical focus placed on why institutions are failing the British public.’

The first part of the paper provided a contemporary definition of institutions and how the concept is framed within a social, economic and political context. As it was highlighted institutions have a profound effect on how society works. One of the key scholars on the subject, Douglas C. North, has argued that institutions are primarily determined by ‘economic performance.’ Furthermore, the concept of globalisation is another feature that has influenced institutional changes in society. Globalisation in many ways has caused an uneven ‘distribution of economic opportunity’ within the context of institutions. In the third part of this paper discussed the concept of governmentality and the structures of power. The authors have used the work of Michel Foucault to formulate their arguments. As it was argued the idea of governmentality is a distinguished theme of a modern neoliberal government.

Foucault's (1978) conceptual gift of Governmentality not only provides the most systematic and exhaustive account of a genealogical ethos underpinning it, but gives a sense of urgency to the creative task confronting the power of institutions in modern society: the future is open, so now is the time to make an intervention on our modes of thinking about government, to problematize and reformulate our understanding of the British Welfare State and institutions of power. In his very formulation of both 'governmentality,' and 'power' Foucault was doing just that.

The case study of the welfare state was used to justify this argument. The welfare state is going through a transformational period due to fiscal austerity. Hence, as Foucault argued in a lecture in 1976, power is central to society and in his own words:

“...the effects of the centralizing powers which are linked to the institutional and functioning of an organised scientific discourse within a society such as ours” (Gordon, 1988, p. 84).

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