Report of the sixth Käte Hamburger Lecture

Rethinking State Power and Governance in a “World” of Complexity

with Professor Bob Jessop

27 June 2013, Duisburg
Delivering the Centre’s 6th Käte Hamburger Lecture, Professor Bob Jessop, Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of Lancaster and one of the key figures in contemporary critical international thinking, addressed the question of governance in today’s world of complexity.

Defining his key concepts, Professor Jessop said he considered governance to be a term of art with a generic meaning. In its broadest sense it meant the coordination of social relations characterised by complex reciprocal interdependence. The four forms of governance most commonly found in governance-theory, he said, were: governance as anarchy of exchange; governance as hierarchy of command; governance as ‘heterarchy’ of reflexive self-organization; and governance as ‘solidarity’ of unconditional loyalty-trust. Viewed through a Foucauldian lens, this fourfold typology could be read as a diagram of power and thus approached in terms of a critical discourse and dispositive analysis. This was the methodology chosen by Professor Jessop in addressing his topic. The term ‘dispositive’ denotes ‘historically specific totalities of discourses and practices’. Although a clear definition of it was lacking in Foucault’s writings, it could be understood as a configuration that embodied a general strategic line which no one had intentionally willed but which had emerged from opposing strategies and tactics in response to an urgence—a problem in the real world. According to Prof Jessop, a dispositive provides a particularly good entry-point to the analysis of governance.

Having clarified both the basic meaning of governance and his own approach to the topic, Prof Jessop asked why governance had become such a central term in political science in recent years. ‘Governance’, he said, was a long-established metaphor for the exercise of authority within institutions and as part of state-craft, but it had undergone a renewed rise in importance since the 1980s, replacing other terms such as ‘regulation’. The reason for this shift, he thought, was that the state, the market, and governance alternated as forms of coordination and since the market and the state were currently viewed as deficient, we found ourselves in a ‘governance’ phase. Hidden patterns of governance—in other words of guided negotiation among stake-holders—had been

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rediscovered because more attention was being paid to how markets and states fail.

Prof Jessop then turned to the more specific question of what it meant to govern complexity. He pointed to a number of processes that led to our living in a complex world, which in turn resulted in the need for new modes of coordination. First, there was a functional differentiation of world society that necessitated a de-centred form of context-steering. Second, the world economy was becoming increasingly integrated, which, in the absence of a supra-national equivalent to national governments, made it harder for the latter to steer their economies. Third, the organisation of social relations across time, territory, place, and scale, had become more complex, necessitating more flexible and adaptable forms of coordination. Fourth, new social movements had emerged which had led to a multiplication of socially relevant identities, necessitating the inclusion of new stake-holders in coordination processes. Lastly, society had transformed into a number of more ‘organisational’ or ‘network-like’ societies that eluded commodification and hierarchical control. This all meant that we did not need to determine whether or not the world had become more complex; we knew that it currently was complex and that it therefore needed governance as a crucial mode of coordination.

Along similar lines, and arguing with Niklas Luhman against more orthodox complexity theorists, Prof Jessop remarked that it was not world complexity as such that should interest us: instead of attempting to theorise complexity, we should focus on the problem of how complexity is reduced. Because the world is complex, said Prof Jessop, we are forced to simplify matters in order to be able to ‘go on’. There were two main strategies for achieving complexity-reduction: Sinnmachung (meaning-making) and Strukturierung (structuration). Sense- and meaning-making, or semiosis, denoted the process by which actors adopt specific social imaginaries as entry-points and standpoints, in order to reduce complexity. This involved, among other things: selective observation of the real world; reliance on specific codes and programmes; the use of particular categories; reference to particular identities; and justification in terms of particular vocabularies and motives. Structuration, meanwhile, was the setting of limits on the articulation of different sets of social relations. This strategy included the stabilisation of cognitive and normative expectations, the guiding of individual and organisational learning, and the deployment of disciplinary technologies. According to Prof Jessop, governance involves both forms of complexity-reduction—semiosis and structuration. The way in which the two strategies reduce meaningless and unstructured complexity and turn it
into meaningful and structured complexity was nicely summarised in the diagram below:

In addition to regular complexity, said Jessop, the world manifested **deep complexity** resulting in complex problem-situations which could not simply be reduced and which necessitated second-order reflection on how to handle complexity at a higher level. In order to be reduced, said Prof Jessop, deep complexity required a wide-ranging set of operations as well as reflection on ‘deeply ill-structured problem-situations’ such as structurally rooted crises. In other words, the notion of deep complexity highlighted the fact that complexity was not always easy to govern. It necessitated thinking on the crises of crisis-management and the governance of governance (as explained in more detail below, in connection with third-order meta-governance.)

Turning to the question of how complex it is to govern a **state**, and what state power means in times of complexity, Prof Jessop began with a paraphrase of Antonio Gramsci’s definition of the state as ‘political society + civil society’, and suggested that the state could be redefined as **government plus governance in the shadow of hierarchy**. And government, said Prof Jessop, signified more than the state as defined by
Georg Jellinek in his classic trias of territory, power, and people, because state power always exceeded imperative coordination. Government, said Prof Jessop, was a social relation that could be understood as hegemony armoured by coercion. It always involved collibration, meaning the rebalancing of different forms of governance in the shadow of hierarchy. Since collibration was more than a technical, problem-solving solution to issues of governance and because it was tied to wider, unstable equilibria of compromise as well as to specific objects, techniques, and subjects of governance, it inherently involved instabilities and tensions. Consequently, government was always connected to domination.

Following this Gramscian line of thought, the state could be understood as a meta-governor. In other words, the role of statecraft today should be conceived of as a complex art of government encompassing the governance of governance within and beyond the boundaries of the state.

Moving on, Prof Jessop addressed the issue of governance failure. Governance, he said, went inescapably hand in hand with failure—just as states of normality went hand in hand with crises. Some approaches—such as Renate Mayntz’s Steuerungsansatz (an agent-centred institutionalist approach to steering)—saw the cause of governance-failure as lying in complexity itself, resulting cognitive failures, and the poor design of governance. These were, in principle, remediable and this justified ‘steering optimism’. In contrast to this approach, with its emphasis on solving problems in the collective interest, Prof Jessop argued that we needed to call on the idea of Herrschaft—domination—in order to understand how governance was implicated in the reproduction of domination. He looked to Weberian Herrschaftssoziologie and Marxian thinking to explain such failure. In addition, some objects of governance were inherently contradictory and these contradictions were incompressible, always re-emerging in one form or another to the extent that the social relations that generated them were themselves reproduced. These required modifications to the analysis of complexity reduction presented in the preceding figure (see next page.). In such cases, governance was inherently bound to fail. If we accepted this basic assumption, said Prof Jessop, we could then work out how to deal with instances of failure.

Having analysed the notions of governance, complexity, and complexity-reduction, and having examined the role of the state in governance and the reasons for governance-failure, Professor Jessop introduced the idea of third-order meta-governance. The basic assumption underlying this, he said, was that because governance fails, we need to find modes of governing governance. Third-order meta-governance was based on
observation of how different modes of governance perform and could be described as a reflexive form of governance.

*Reduction through enforced selection*

One specific strategy involved in meta-governance was *collibration* or the re-ordering of the relative weights of alternative modes of governance. It included: the provision of ground rules for governance; the creation of forums enabling dialogue among partners; ensuring coherence of regimes across scale and time; and the modification of self-understanding on interests and identities. In addition, it subsidised the production of public goods and organised side-payments for those
making sacrifices in a social arrangement; it exercised supervision and identified ultimate responsibility when governance failed. It was important to note, said Prof Jessop, that meta-governance did not imply that there was one single meta-governor: meta-governance was highly contested and always reflected a delicate equilibrium of compromise. Moreover, meta-governance—just like governance—was prone to failure.

As already pointed out, said Jessop, meta-governance occurred not only within but also across the traditional boundaries of the nation-state. When it came to governing outside the state, he said, we should conceive of institutional and spatio-temporal fixes as the most suitable approach to governance. He defined a spatio-temporal fix as an institutional fix that offered a provisional, partial, and relatively stable solution to coordination problems of the economic, social, or political order. It set spatial and temporal boundaries within which the coherence of a given order was temporarily secured. It externalised the costs of securing coherence by displacing them to another place or deferring them to the future. The ways in which spatio-temporal fixes could be organised, said Jessop, were: first, hierarchisation, meaning that some contradictions, crises, or complexities were classified as more important than others; second, prioritisation, meaning that one aspect of a contradiction or dilemma was prioritised over another; third, spatialisation, or the technique of relying on different scales or sites of action to address a contradiction, or of displacing it do marginal places; and fourth, temporalisation, meaning the one-sided treatment of a contradiction until what has been neglected becomes urgent.

On the common concept of multi-level governance, Professor Jessop argued that it was not very useful in understanding global governance, because it implied the existence of a hierarchical political structure. It focused on relations of vertical interdependence, communication, and joint decision-making and neglected the changes in the nodal and marginal level of government in different areas. As a result, he said, it tended to overlook problems of coordination across different issue-areas and across different types of spatial organisation – territories, places, scales, and networks. What we should do, suggested Professor Jessop, was consider the world not only in terms of territorial hierarchy but also as a space of flows. Globalisation had led to a multi-centric, multi-scalar, multi-temporal, multi-form, multi-agential, and multi-causal world and this multi-dimensionality complicated all efforts to manage or govern it. Global economic governance, for example, involved not only relations between national economies but also governance of commercial, productive, financial, and labour power flows. States, he said, operated as
‘power connectors’ in this dynamic of flows; they connected and organised power-relations across borders. However, it was hard for states to control these flows, or the speed at which they were operating. In other words, in our complex, globalised world, the space of flows and the logic of territory to which the nation-state was tied contradicted each other and posed a major challenge to effective global governance. We should therefore give up the idea of multi-level governance in this context and instead adopt the concept of multi-spatial meta-governance and spatio-temporal fixes.

Summing up, Professor Jessop said globalisation had led to our living in a messy, flowing, complex world where territorial governance had lost importance or clashed with the logic of world-market flows. This led to inherent contradictions that posed a particular challenge to governance. In addition, he said, we lived in a world of deep complexity that could not undergo simple reduction. As a consequence, we were confronted with permanent dilemmas, problems of coordination, and tendencies to crisis. The best way to deal with these, said Jessop, was through the organisation of spatio-temporal fixes or multi-spatial meta-governance. This involved a marked plurality of affected or mobilised levels, scales, areas, and sites of governance, together with complex, interwoven horizontal, transversal, and vertical political linkages and a plurality of heterogeneous actors within and beyond major economic, political, and social subjects. It operated through multiple modes of governance and with multiple stakeholders, in the shadow of post-national statehood. Meta-governance, as previously stated, was the art of collibration—the redesigning of different modes of governance and their rebalancing in order to ensure that the different challenges to governance posed by regular and deep complexity were met with the necessary variety, flexibility, and adaptability. But even meta-governance, said Prof Jessop, was not immune to failure. Contested approaches to meta-governance, competing meta-governance imaginaries and problem-definitions, and the inherent ungovernability of some objects and subjects could lead to failure. Likewise, the absence of an ‘Archimedean point’ from which to execute meta-governance contributed to the likelihood of meta-governance failure. Here again, argued Prof Jessop, spatio-temporal fixes could constitute a solution.

In conclusion, Prof Jessop pointed out that globalisation was not a single mechanism with uniform effects that would culminate in a fully integrated world-economy, world-society, or world-state. A world-state was therefore not a possible governance-regime. This being so, rather than searching for an effective form of global governance somewhere
above the level of the state, we should embrace the idea that deep complexities prevented the possibility of coherent global governance. What we *could* attain to was spatio-temporal fixes and multi-spatial meta-governance in which the state plays a crucial role as ‘collibrator of last instance’. We live in a world of states rather than a world state, said Professor Jessop, and all attempts at reducing the complexity of this world are likely to reproduce complexity at other scales. Our hyper-complex world, he said, was characterized by deep complexity and its governance therefore inevitably led to a multiplication of complexity. Overall, multi-spatial meta-governance was the best way to handle our world of complexity.

In their responses to Professor Jessop’s lecture, Professor Jonathan Joseph of the Department of Politics at Sheffield University and Professor Dirk Messner, Director of the German Development Institute and Co-director of the Centre for Global Cooperation Research, focused, respectively, on issues of complexity and issues of governance. Professor Joseph raised the question as to why complexity had attracted so much scholarly attention in recent years and whether it really was on the increase. He discussed what it meant to live in a complex world and referred to the role of technology in relation to complexity. Professor Messner spoke about the degree of change which the world had undergone in recent years and how these transformations had contributed to complexity. He identified two major drivers of change: the rise of non-Western actors and the shift from the *holocene* era to the *anthropocene* era, marked by the impact of humankind on the earth-system. These developments, he said, had created new complexities which necessitated new forms of governance.

Besides triggering a lively discussion amongst those attending the lecture, Professor Jessop’s thought-provoking talk provided an intellectually challenging stimulus for the two-day follow-on workshop—‘Rethinking Governance in a World of Complexity’—which took place at the Centre immediately afterwards.