



Environmental governance and the hybrid regime of Australian natural resource management

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 July 2009

Received in revised form 3 December 2009

Keywords:

Governance

Governmentality

Hybridity

Neoliberalism

Ecocentrism

Localism

Natural resource management

ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore hybridity in Australian natural resource governance, both 'inside' and 'outside' of neoliberalism. We develop an understanding of this governance regime as an assemblage of subjects, ethics, ends and techniques that constitute a hybrid of practices directed by three mentalities of government: neoliberalism, localism and ecocentrism. This three-way parentage engenders particularly complex internal dynamics – tensions and congruencies, grounds for contest and opportunities for collaboration – that shape and transform the regime. Our analysis clarifies the formative roles of the three logics and in so doing offers a new perspective of tripartite governance dynamics. We conclude by showing how the co-existing mentalities compete to establish NRM policy that is in accord with their respective ends and ethics, subjectify problems and other actors to fit with their own agendas, and attempt to secure primacy for those technologies congruent with their logics. At the same time, as mutually constitutive forces of the regime, they exhibit varying degrees of adaptivity as they co-opt or accommodate technologies favoured by their competitors.

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1. Introduction

Since 2002, Australian governments have experimented with a devolved form of natural resource governance in which community-based regional bodies, under government direction, develop plans, procure investment and coordinate implementation of on-ground actions. Such approaches to natural resource management (NRM) are often seen as a response to the practical (continued declines in biodiversity and productivity) and moral (inattention to social justice) failures of centralised state-based governance (McCarthy, 2007). In Australian NRM, however, devolution to communities has been partial and conditional. Here, community-based NRM bears the hallmarks of neoliberalised governing at a distance – deconcentration of responsibility to regional NRM organizations as service deliverers without corresponding authorities; intensification of market logic through the promotion of market-based instruments such as competitive bidding; responsabilization and instrumentalization of community as on-the-ground implementation agents of regional NRM strategies; and performance management as a technology to direct regional NRM organizations (Davidson and Lockwood, 2009).

Nevertheless, elements of the state regulatory apparatus for environmental protection and development control established in

the latter half of the 20th century have survived the neoliberal roll-back of government. And over the last decade, governments have designed and implemented new 'soft' regulations to enable, support and control the allocation of responsibilities, and, to a lesser extent, powers, to communities and individuals. Regional NRM bodies, together with agencies of public government, private sector businesses, civil society groups and individual landholders now employ, contest and shape governmental arrangements into a diverse mix of voluntary, collaborative and rule-based measures.

Lemos and Agrawal (2006) interpret such trends as an emergence of hybrid environmental governance modes, comprising co-management, public–private partnerships and social–private partnerships that bridge state–market–community divisions. They argue that 'pure' modes of governance are poorly equipped to respond to the complexity and multi-scalar character of coupled social and natural systems, whereas hybrids that cross state–market–community divisions show considerable promise. Hybrid approaches to environmental governance involving state–community partnerships have been used, for example, in the Amazon basin to address the challenges of forest conservation generated by road-building and climate change (Perz et al., 2008). The emergence of hybrid governance forms is also attributed to the crisis of state competence resulting from the scalar and capacity mismatches that typify environmental problems (Karkkainen, 2005).

Neoliberal government in particular has shown a propensity to sustain and generate hybrid practices. The idea that neoliberal logics operate in tension with competing discourses to produce

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hybrid practices of government was first articulated by [Stenson and Watt \(1999\)](#). In their study of local government service provision in southeast England, these authors found that earlier social government narratives around equitable and universal service provision continued to be influential despite central government emphases on managerialist discourses of economy, efficiency and target-setting and community responsibility. [Stenson and Watt \(1999\)](#) conclude that different discourses and governmental logics interact and shift about as 'governmental repertoires' evolve. In the case study, social governmental ideals were not so much relinquished but reformulated with particular rationalities and practices, such as lead roles for the public sector, being maintained.

[McCarthy \(2005\)](#) argues that the environment is an arena through which neoliberalism is actively engaging in experiments with collaborative governance that are hybrids of neoliberal logics and contemporary progressive impulses to democratize resource management. Australian agri-environmental programmes exemplify this dynamic. [Higgins and Lockie \(2002\)](#) and [Lockie and Higgins \(2007\)](#) show how authorities' expectations that land managers assume social and ecological responsibilities jointly with entrepreneurial and economically rational practices constitute a neoliberal strategy for resolving competing and apparently incompatible imperatives. They term this a hybrid assemblage in that practices of governing attempt to address social and environmental sustainability through economically rational means.

[McGuirk \(2005\)](#) charts the fortunes of neoliberal influences on metropolitan planning in Sydney, paying particular attention to the role of the state. This is a story of hybrid forms of governance moving along a trajectory from roll-back neoliberalism, through roll-out neoliberalism, to the most recent form of a metropolitan strategy that is neither. She finds that successive narratives tend to overlap so that more recent global competitiveness narratives intersect with rather than supplant earlier distributive concerns, with the interaction between these two discourses being compounded by a need for political legitimacy. The result is that, although neoliberal tendencies are present (that is, distributive issues and accessibility are viewed through an economic lens), the most recent metropolitan strategy portends considerable state intervention and spatially directive planning. [McGuirk \(2005, p. 67\)](#) concludes that '[s]omething more complex, partial and hybrid has been enacted' that is 'neither predetermined by any neoliberalist prescription nor unequivocally neoliberalist'.

Similarly, recent scholarship from what might be called the New Zealand school explores the 'progressive spaces' that some actors have been able to create within the neoliberal project. [Lewis and Underhill-Sem \(2009, p. 167\)](#), for example, 'highlight the potential of particular agents in particular contexts to harness neoliberal technologies of control to alternative political projects'. The case study used to illustrate this contention involves an indigenous family, health and welfare organization in far northern New Zealand, Te Rarawa, which was able to utilise new public management contract processes to become a successful deliverer of social services and advance a Maori anti-colonial agenda, despite the disadvantages of competitive bidding and the uncertainties of project-based funding. So while earlier scholarship concentrated on the apparent hegemony of neoliberalism, more recent studies have attempted to de-mythologize it, to play up its inherent contradictions, and so to argue for the possibility of progressive spaces within the neoliberal project through exploitation of such tensions ([Larner, 2003](#)).

As these studies show, neoliberal forms of governing tend to employ diverse and sometimes contradictory governmental technologies in order to make programmes workable ([Lockie and Higgins, 2007](#)). Also evident is a concentration of research interest on hybrid forms as a strategy of neoliberal governance. Analyses of neoliberalism's propensity to hybridise have particularly focussed

on the interactions between actors and the ways in which collaboration is conceptualised and managed. Key themes have been the distribution of power between parties in partnership arrangements, institutional forms in which actors come together to achieve mutual goals, and types and levels of stakeholder engagement. However, the forms, origins, structures and dynamics of hybrid governance are largely unexplored. Little attention has been given to the underlying logics and dynamics that generate and shape these hybrids – their elements, the transformation processes acting upon them, and their resulting properties – limiting both understanding and explanation. The focus on neoliberalism has also meant that accounts of hybridity pay little attention to the power of socio-cultural processes to create and transform modes of governance ([Barnett, 2005](#)).

In this paper we explore hybridity in Australian natural resource governance, both 'inside' and 'outside' of neoliberalism, and give a particular emphasis to nature conservation concerns. The analysis of governmentality approach is well-suited to this purpose in that it 'seeks to identify these different styles of thought [mentalities of government], their conditions of formation, the principles and knowledges that they borrow from and generate, the practices that they consist of, how they are carried out, their contestations and alliances with other arts of governing' ([Rose et al., 2006, p. 84](#)). And while [Barnett \(2005\)](#) argues that governmentality analyses tend to be blind to the 'bottom-up' agency of spontaneous grass-roots collective actions, an aspect of nature governance that we are interested in exploring, this is more an artefact of governmentality literature concentrating on the neoliberal mentality than a limitation of the approach. We agree with Barnett that investigation of community-generated regimes is poorly developed at present, and hope to make some contribution in this regard.

We are not so much interested in particularities, but in the broad dynamics that shape the current regime and influence its trajectory. Our consideration of hybridity implicitly accommodates the understanding that natural resource governance is 'always becoming, necessarily uneven, often contested, and sometimes exercised outside of the state' ([Rutherford, 2007, p. 292](#)). We develop an understanding of NRM governance as an assemblage of subjects, ethics, ends and techniques that constitute a hybrid regime of practices directed by three mentalities of government: neoliberalism, localism and ecocentrism. This three-way parentage engenders particularly complex internal dynamics – tensions and congruencies, grounds for contest and opportunities for collaboration – that shape and transform the regime.

We begin by introducing the contemporary structure of Australian NRM governance. To set the parameters for our analysis, we then outline the conceptual terrain and language of governmentality and hybridity used in this paper. Our analysis of the hybrid dynamics of Australian natural resource governance follows. We conclude by showing how the co-existing mentalities – neoliberalism, ecocentrism and localism – compete to establish NRM policy that is in accord with their respective ends and ethics, subjectify problems and other actors to fit with their own agendas, and attempt to secure primacy for those technologies congruent with their logics, while at the same time, as mutually constitutive forces of the regime, exhibiting varying degrees of adaptivity by co-opting or accommodating technologies favoured by their competitors.

2. The structure of Australian NRM governance

Australian NRM governance comprises a complex of state, community-based and private institutional structures concerned with sustaining agricultural productivity and the socio-economic

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