



Governing through representatives of the community: A case study on farmer organizations in rural Australia



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ABSTRACT

The concept 'governing through the community' has been used frequently to interpret the neoliberal policy embraced by Australian governments since the 1990s. Yet explanation is still inadequate of how 'governing through the community' is conducted in practice, particularly the specific mechanisms that regulate interaction among government agencies, groups seeking to represent the community and individuals in the community. In this study, we find that 'governing through the community' is actually 'governing through representatives of the community' because it is the representatives that make the community visible and governable. This observation is based on a case study of three kinds of farmer organizations, in two states of Australia, who see their role as serving the community and are regarded by outsiders as representatives of the community at least on certain issues. An understanding of the interaction among different stakeholders within and outside of the community is developed through three themes of 'paperwork', 'data' and 'price' that were used by locals from Landcare groups, grower groups and farmer cooperatives, respectively, to articulate how they experience the mechanisms through which their interactions are regulated. This paper concludes that these groups can claim to represent some residents within a defined geographical area, rather than any exact definition of 'the community' and that this is a sufficient claim to enable these groups to participate in the process of 'governing through the community'. The tensions between government agencies, community representatives and community members threaten the legitimacy of the community representatives as intermediaries. Government agencies do try to contribute to reduce these tensions by strengthening the legitimacy of community representatives through various policy and project mechanisms. However, while the stated aim of 'governing through the community' is often focused on producing a 'flourishing rural community' through improving democratic modes of representation, this study demonstrates that it is only part of the community, namely the 'targeted customers' of the farmer organizations, that is potentially reachable to 'the state'.

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1. Introduction: farmer organizations as representatives of the 'community'

In recent decades, rural Australia has experienced a neoliberal

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governance regime, which, amongst other strategies, seeks to deal with economic and social issues in rural areas by devolving responsibilities for service provision and rural development, formerly provided by governments, to local communities, and, through private and non-government actors (O'Toole and Burdess, 2004; Cheshire and Lawrence, 2005; Lockwood and Davidson, 2010). This strategy has led to both a pluralization of agricultural and rural development related-funding; a rapidly changing institutional landscape; and a dramatic reduction of public funding for

agricultural organizations and programs. Against this neoliberal background, different kinds of farmer organizations, who claim to act on behalf of farming communities, embody the idea of ‘community’ in this context in different ways and play a key role in the implementation of neoliberal policy. Since the late 1990s social researchers (e.g. Lockie, 1999; Herbert-Cheshire, 2000) have focused on interpreting this regime from a Foucauldian perspective, using the concept of ‘governing through the community’, also referred to as ‘governing at a distance’, and ‘advanced governance’ (Rose 1996a, 1996b).

Scholars have described the consequences of this form of governance on some types of local farmer groups, and rural community development settings more broadly. In this study we observe how three types of local farmer organizations formed by grain producers, namely, Landcare groups, grower groups and farmer cooperatives, are enrolled by, and utilize different mechanisms of neoliberal governance to ‘represent’ their communities and maintain legitimacy with funders and stakeholders. In doing so we build and expand on the existing empirical base by considering the effect on both previously studied and other types of local rural collectives. The first of these three groups, Landcare groups, emerged as part of the Landcare movement, first started in Victoria and then expanded to a national program by the Australian Government in 1989, principally to address environmental problems, and following the principle of ecologically sustainable development (Toyne, 2000). Many Landcare groups targeting specific local environmental issues were initiated at that time echoing the financial support from government. The second type, grower groups, emerged in the early 1990s from farmers seeking productivity improvements by conducting trials on their own farms. These groups were quickly supported by the state government agricultural agencies and Research and Development Corporation of Newfoundland and Labrador through project-based funding, in turn increasing the number of grower groups. Third, we farmer cooperatives in Australia were first formed in the late nineteenth century by dairy farmers in New South Wales (Lewis, 2006). In our study we focus on the bulk handling cooperatives initiated by grain growers to reduce the cost and improve the service of grain storage and marketing.

We begin the paper with a brief review of studies of neoliberal policy in advanced liberal democracies from a governmentality perspective, focusing particularly on rural Australia. Next, we overview the three types of farmer groups that serve as case studies for our analysis and describe our methods. In the analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews with members and stakeholders of the organizations, we then identify (i) how different definitions of ‘community’ are deployed in the operations of these groups; and (ii) the diverse mechanisms or technologies of governance used by the state, and the groups themselves, to ‘govern through the community’. We focus on how these mechanisms shape groups understanding of their local community, their relationships with their own members, and with their funders and stakeholders. We also examine how the mechanisms related specifically to accessing and maintenance of income or funding for the groups’ activities shape these relations. To help make sense of our findings we draw on concepts of different governing ‘mentalities’ and techniques of governance, used by Lockwood and Davidson (2010) and described below, to explore and explain differences in the representational and funding dynamics within and between the groups in our study. Finally, we conclude by arguing that farmer organizations, who reinterpret both the demand of their communities and the supply of policy, make the neoliberal regime ‘governing through the community’ both possible, and at the same time problematic for local forms of rural community representation.

2. ‘Governing through the community’: top-down, bottom-up or hybrid governance?

Derived from Foucault’s work on governmentality, the concept ‘governing through community’ refers to:

“a way of demarcating a sector for government, a sector whose vectors and forces could be mobilized, enrolled, deployed in novel programmes and techniques which operated through the instrumentalization of personal allegiances and active responsibilities” (Rose, 1996b, p. 332).

Based on Rose’s work, the term ‘governing through the community’ has been used broadly to analyse the neoliberalist mode of regulation relied upon in some ‘advanced’ Western countries (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004) in different fields. These fields include the study of school systems and migrant women programmes in Germany (Schreiber et al., 2015; Marquardt, 2014), research on urban governance policy in Canada (Rosol, 2014) and discussion of urban citizenship and rural governance policy in the UK (Flint, 2002; Ward and McNicholas, 1998; Shucksmith, 2010). These studies from the UK and Europe show similarities in the policy directions and programs of rural development to those experienced in Australia in recent decades (Herbert-Cheshire, 2000). In Australia, this concept has been relied upon to study the implementation of national agri-environmental programmes established since the late 1990s. Lockie (1999) shows that in the neoliberalist context, state agencies actually developed a method of governance to mobilise farm businesses to participate in community Landcare groups under the Landcare Program, rather than ‘abandon family farmers as transnational agribusiness comes to dominate the organization of production’. Although widely used in Australian economic development policy, this regime of ‘governing through community’ has encountered problems in dealing effectively with the negative effects of globalization. For example Cheshire and Lawrence (2005) point out that this kind of neoliberal policy cannot prevent the marginalization of rural and regional Australia as it does nothing to challenge the mechanisms of contemporary globalized capitalism.

The concept of ‘hybrid governance’ developed from the term ‘governing through the community’. This terminology helps to illustrate the complexity of the implementation of neoliberal policy, although defined differently to some extent by different scholars. In their discussion with the Foucauldian governmentality school about the ‘death of the social’, Watt’s (1999) study in south-east England points out that the neoliberal governance regime is employed by state agencies together with the universalist principles of service provision. This mixed assemblage of governance logics is termed ‘hybrid governance’ (Lockwood and Davidson, 2010) and is used by some Australian scholars to analyse the mentalities directing the community-based programmes, or in other words, ‘governing through the community’ practices in Australia. Higgins and Lockie (2002) argue that hybrid governance is evident in Australian natural resource management programmes. Their research shows that, within this hybrid governance, ‘statistics of performance’ are employed as technologies, which shape both the farmers’ view on their practices and the policy decisions. Although embraced as a powerful tool by state agencies, hybrid governance actually contributes to the failure of agri-environmental programmes due to its inner conflicts between economic rationalities and social targets (Lockie and Higgins, 2007). Lockwood and Davidson (2010) in their detailed study of Australian natural resource management policy analyse the mentalities of hybrid governance. They hold that, within that particular policy context, neoliberalism, localism and ecocentrism are the

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