International ‘Best Practice’ and Neo-Liberal Governance

There is little doubt that twentieth century liberal governance was faltering in many ways. Towards the end of the century, governments were overloaded, regulatory frameworks complicated and contradictory, and domestic economies unstable. Concerns had been expressed across the political spectrum about a number of issues including welfare dependency, unemployment, and environmental change. Thus it is not too surprising that in Australia and elsewhere, new approaches to governance have been often enthusiastically embraced by governments across the supposed left-right divide and by public sector managers seeking better ways to govern. This involves fundamental changes in governance that resonate in all sectors, at all levels of society, and right into the hearts and minds of all citizens and how they live their lives.

Moreover, the emergence of neo-liberal approaches to governance has international impetus dedicated to introducing and implementing a culture of change in response to the apparent failures of liberal governance. In recent years, ‘good governance’ has been a priority for western governments and international governance bodies such as the World Bank and the OECD. For instance, the OECD is developing codes of ‘best practice’ in governance for all sectors of society while the International Monetary Fund enforces best practice in governance as a precondition to development assistance (Harvey 2005). This preoccupation is recognition that radical change or alternatives to twentieth century liberal governance practice is needed. However, it is strongly influenced by the New Right.

The New Right has been in political ascendency in the western world for several decades now, and has strongly influenced all major political parties (Marginson 1997). Popular New Right commentators such as Hayek have long advocated the reinstatement of markets as the best form of social, political, and economic practice (1992). Downes has been another strong advocate for marketisation, that is, a changed culture of governance in which individuals assume responsibility for their fate for which the state is currently held responsible (1998). Their ideas have been embraced by capitalist elites seeking to regain power they had seemed reduced by the reforms of the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, their approach to corporate governance has been very influential in shaping the ‘good governance’ agenda of international economic and development agencies. The adoption of conservative approaches to good governance by domestic governments is legitimised by its status as best practice, which by definition is an endorsement on technical grounds seen to be outside ‘ideology.’ Best practice speaks for itself as the ‘right’ way to proceed, and precludes critique and debate.

Where To Now?
The specific developments in neo-liberal governance we are experiencing today are not inevitable and are likely to change again, similarly to the pendulum swing between liberalism and mercantilism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They arise out of human agency, through decisions and actions taken, in a climate of debate and contestation about the future. While those currently shaping the immediate neo-liberal future are drawing substantially upon New Right ideas of the ‘good society’, this need not remain so. The challenge at hand is to understand what is happening and why, in order to be part of shaping the future. With neo-liberal governance has come new forms of social control, surveillance, and pressures towards complicity. However it is also potentially an opportunity for addressing the failures of the twentieth century, and to allow us to think again about what a just and peaceful society could look like.

References


i is the site of government or maya
for Anita Gallardo

this illusion grows stronger everyday
by night its face shifts & becomes
a hallway fixture in mirror paperwaste
an image of hellish monsters running over
no escape to it as i appears every time
looking at its watch is money game
eluding facing the graffiti of walls &
skins tattooed with sameness

horror of this i wanting to posses itself &
thoughts growing stronger & military
vacc mask rooting itself to skullmind
lizard blushing tongue stick surfacing
the world waters through hands of inkscape
blotting its way into books of heavy
fictional libraries & fantasies weighting
down beautiful rooted tree of life

this i does not exist neither weight
the beauty of the world out there no match
we play i's illusion bubbling game &
perish in building up i big papa foundation of government

there is no i but u the seat of meaning & youth
u the soul of life & u new born mapping
u no fantasy & u eyes wide open rooted
in other plains & wild horses running river of life

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