

# The Social in the Global: Social Theory, Governmentality and Global Politics

Written by Jonathan Joseph

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## The Social in the Global: Social Theory, Governmentality and Global Politics

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/19/review-the-social-in-the-global-social-theory-governmentality-and-global-politics/>

JONATHAN JOSEPH, OCT 19 2012

*The Social in the Global: Social Theory, Governmentality and Global Politics* looks at the influence of a range of social theories and concepts. But rather than taking the normal route and assessing their ability to explain the world, the book looks at them from the point of view of their contribution to political practice: in other words, what role does contemporary social theory play in global politics?

The book's argument develops in two parts. It first outlines the idea of governmentality and defends an approach that sets it in a wider context that takes account of the development of neoliberal forms of governmentality. The book makes the case that a lot of the more influential recent theory reinforces this governmentality rather than questioning it. The second part substantiates this argument by looking at how these ideas find resonance in the practices of international organisations like the World Bank and European Union.

Most of the leading ideas about global politics come from social theory rather than IR. Problematic though these ideas are, they are influential in guiding political practices. The book therefore focuses on the big concepts – things like globalisation, risk and reflexivity – that portray the world in a certain way and in doing so renders it open to particular interventions. Interestingly these theories often claim to be radical, critical even, in their nature. By applying the idea of governmentality, I suggest that this is far from the case.

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Foucault's concept of governmentality is well suited to a project that tries to link contemporary social theory to contemporary forms of governing and dominant rationalities of governance. It also allows for an expanded idea of what is meant by governing that goes beyond a limited understanding of the role of governments, and involves a variety of different techniques, practices and institutions. The rationality aspect moves a study of governmentality beyond the traditional confines of understanding power and rule and looks at how governing is more deep-rooted in ways of seeing, thinking and acting.

Indeed, it can be argued that our ways of thinking and acting and our expectations of political practice are shaped by particular rationalities and discursive frameworks. Many contemporary social theories contribute to this framework by portraying the world in such a way that makes it seem like we are being overwhelmed by social and global change. In emphasising things like risk, uncertainty and the fluid nature of social relations, these theories suggest that the world is beyond our control and that we therefore resign ourselves to adaptation at the micro level. Hence these approaches encourage individual responsibility and lend themselves to a neoliberal view of individualised or privatised social behaviour.

Such conceptualisations of the global support various forms of governance due to the way they portray macro and micro level relations. They provide ideological support for a neoliberal view by accepting recent social and political changes as deep-rooted and irreversible. The strength of the governmentality approach is that it does not buy into the ontological aspects of the things it describes. In contrast to the other theories, it sees things like risk, globalisation, individualisation, reflexivity and networks as strategies, tactics, techniques and ways of governing rather than as ontological features of late, post- or reflexive modernity.

However, if governmentality does not do this, then we need to add our own ontological commitments in order to explain the conditions of possibility that make governmentality itself possible. Hence the focus on neoliberal forms of governmentality in the context of economic reproduction and shifting hegemonic blocs.

The global aspect of this can be seen through various strategies of international organisations. Contrary to the view that these represent new forms of global power, I argue that they reflect the hegemonic strategies of the dominant strata of the dominant states. However, given the uneven nature of the international domain, similar strategies and discourses will have different contexts within which to operate. The EU develops forms of governmentality in a region that is more suited to such techniques. A study of recent EU documents and reports reveals how ideas like networks, information and risk are used to justify particular ways of managing populations, defining citizenship and reorganising work and welfare. Because this needs to be seen in the context of projects to reorganise social relations and in particular, to challenge the European social model, the approach is contested. There is a gap, therefore, between the discourse and the actuality.

In the case of the World Bank we might come to an even clearer conclusion that techniques of governance developed under Anglo Saxon neoliberalism are wholly inappropriate when applied to different social contexts and to issues like poverty reduction. However, these strategies should not be judged at face value. While international organisations use issues connected to the health, wealth and well-being of populations to justify their intervention, the success of these strategies should be judged not in relation to their effects on the populations themselves, but in relation to the behaviour of governments and state institutions. This form of governmentality works from a distance by using targets, benchmarks and indicators to judge institutional reform, competitiveness and openness to the world market.

Ultimately, the book argues that the global is a fabrication and that the world is more properly described as an international system dominated by a capitalist production and a system of states. However, despite this, we should be interested in the idea of the global from the point of view of the governable space that contemporary social theory helps to construct. Ironically, it is in constructing a particular idea of the global that social theory helps to reinforce the actual power politics of the international system.

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*themes of his latest book.*

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## **About the author:**

**Jonathan Joseph** is Professor of International Relations at the University of Sheffield. His latest book is *The Social In the Global: Social Theory, Governmentality and Global Politics* (Cambridge 2014).