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Expertise and the Politics of Failure

Jacqueline Best, *Governing Failure: Provisional Expertise and the Transformation of Global Development Finance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014)

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Why does it suddenly become essential for World Bank staff to learn how to design a results matrix or a consultation process, whereas they had not even heard of these practices fifteen years ago? What does the increasing prominence of checklists, global indicators, and risk and vulnerability assessments tell us about the why and the how of transformations in global economic governance? Some read these transformations as a manifestation of institutional learning from past failures prompting a paradigm shift in development thinking, others interpret this as a logical step in the evolution of advanced capitalism and still others charge that this is mere rhetoric obscuring the fact that we are still essentially within the structural adjustment era (pp. 68-70).

In *Governing Failure*, Jacqueline Best develops an alternative account that explains these transformations through two central problems in modern governance: the fragility of expert authority and the politics of failure (p. 190). In her brilliant analysis, she argues that the undermining of expert authority and the ways in which recent events – such as the Asian financial crisis, the ‘lost decade’ in Africa and the recent global financial crisis – have become problematised as failures have transformed practices in managing development finance (p. 67). These transformations represent a fundamental change in the ways in which development finance is governed today as compared to the structural adjustment era (1980s-90s). Best diagnoses a broad shift from the confident governance style of the structural adjustment era that involved few actors, favoured direct governance techniques, and was based on more coercive forms of power and expert authority, towards what she calls ‘provisional style’ of global governance that integrates a variety of (local) actors, relies heavily on indirect and complex governance techniques, deploys more productive forms of power that empower certain actors while excluding others, and draws on various forms of authority that include expert as well as moral and popular authority (p. 37).

This provisional governance style includes four new strategies: fostering ownership, developing global standards, managing risk and vulnerability, and

measuring results. The first governance strategy seeks to build local support for development programs and involve borrowing countries in taking responsibility and participating more actively in such programs (p. 91). It is expressed in efforts to transform conditionality and the introduction of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. Standardisation governs through universality, as illustrated by the good governance agenda and the standards and codes initiative (p. 116). Thereby, 'indirect but proactive techniques' are used to 'encourage market and civil society to pressure governments to comply with new standards' (p. 117). The third strategy 'reconceptualises the objects of development assistance – such as poverty reduction or project success – as more contingent and prone to failure' (p. 9) and develops pre-emptive techniques that seek to deal with risk and vulnerability, such as through calculating and cataloguing. A new results-based approach to measuring and evaluating makes up the final pillar of the provisional governance style. Thereby, ever more sophisticated measuring methods contribute to a 'results culture' that pushes bureaucratic actors to change the ways in which they develop programs by anticipating their ultimate results, hedging against the risk of failure (p. 166).

The book is divided into four parts. After presenting the analytical framework, part two traces the historical context of the emergence of new governance strategies. Part three analyses these new governance strategies in detail before concluding with a section on the likely future of global governance and the role of provisional governance in managing development finance, asking about the sustainability of these governance strategies.

Methodologically and theoretically, *Governing Failure* focuses on 'how do we study the how of global governance?' (p. 8). The book proposes a fascinating methodology that 'starts in the middle' (p. 12) in order to study the how of global governance through focusing on meso-level practices, including concrete policy practices such as consultations. Theoretically, the book is situated within the sociological and the practice turn in IR and brings into dialogue actor-network theory and science and technology studies with the global governance and IPE literature (p. 13). This highly innovative analytical framework allows to link the often-separated macro and micro level of global governance and to bridge the material-discursive divide, making an invaluable contribution to the study of global governance.

Governing Failure draws on an in-depth analysis of a wealth of empirical material to analyse the transformations in the governance of development finance. Best delivers a fascinating account of the complex processes of problematisation, contestation and attempts to turning contested issues

back into tacit assumptions, highlighting the fragility of expertise. The book concludes with an exploration of the future of provisional governance that can potentially take a ‘more experimental, democratic and open-ended’ or a ‘more cautious, instrumentalising and even cynical’ path (p. 202). The first path holds the potential to open space for local forms of knowledge and expertise and more open-ended forms of politics. Yet, Best suggests that current ways of governing failure are more likely to reinforce the second path, painting a rather bleak picture of the future of global governance. Recognising this double nature of the politics of failure is crucial. One might have wished for a bit more space in this book to explore the potentials and already existing realities of the first path, which continuously destabilise and exist alongside expert authority and use the space of failure in creative, unexpected and context-specific ways. Future research could dig a little deeper into the complex nature of the politics of failure.

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