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Policy networks: conceptual developments and their European applications

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Introduction

Discussions on policy networks are becoming increasingly common in the analysis of public policy. However nowhere is to be found a common understanding of what policy networks are and how they operate. Little agreement exists even on whether policy networks are to be considered as a metaphor, a method or a proper theory with explanatory power.

The paper will explore how the policy network approach has been developed to describe and explain the complexity of new forms of decision-making and policy implementation and their implications for democracy and effectiveness of the political system.

The focus is on conceptual frames developed in the context of policy and public administration studies seen here as specific sector of organisational studies. It will then move forward to review how this concepts have been incorporated in studies on emerging forms of spatial governance, namely multilevel and transnational governance with particular reference to the European context.

Methodological perspectives and quantitative analytical approaches such as those developed within Social Network Analysis studies or in the more traditional fields of quantitative modelling of political behaviours and power distributions are not investigated in this literature review.

Can Policy networks be a bridge between multiple policy perspectives?

A policy network can be defined as a «a set of relatively stable relationships which are of non-hierarchical and interdependent nature linking a variety of actors, who share common interests with regard to a policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests acknowledging that co-operation is the best way to achieve common goals» (Börzel, 1997; see also Peterson and Bomberg, 1999, p8). However, this elemental definition is the only one on which different authors would agree. Beyond this definition a variety of perspectives, understandings and applications exists, some of which are often ambiguous or attracted by the use of a fashionable concept.

Three major divides structure the current literature on policy networks and there are no signs that these are going to be bridged soon. The first separates authors that understand policy networks merely as a useful metaphor (Dowding, 1995) useful to describe the fact that policy making involves many and different actors, from those authors who see policy networks as a theory and model capable of explaining policy dynamics and outcomes (Carlsson, 2000). The latter perspective has found essential support in the work of Sabatier, 1988 on "advocacy coalitions" and its recent reviews and applications (Sabatier, 1998; Weible and Sabatier, 2005) and in the concept of "epistemic communities" developed by Adler and Haas, 1992.

A second divide separates quantitative from qualitative analytical approaches (Marcussen and Olsen, 2005). Authors from both sides accept networks as an analytical tool. The quantitative approach (Brinton and Provan, 1998; Knoke, 1990, 1996) applies network analysis to understand and describe the structural properties of networks measured in terms

of centrality, structural equivalence, cohesion. The qualitative approach (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003; Hay, 2002; Hay and Richards, 2000; Marsh, 1998; Rhodes, 1997) focus less on the structures and more on the processes and on the contents of the interactions, using discourse analysis and in-depth interviews.

The third divide is currently the strongest and the one with the deepest implications: it separates authors (mainly in US and in Britain) that identify policy networks as a typology of interest intermediation and intergovernmental organisation from the continental European literature that describe policy network as a specific and emerging form of governance. Despite the degree of fluidity between the two areas the major difference rests in the former approach seeing the concept of policy network as an *analytical perspective* applicable to all forms of actors interaction while the latter group of authors identify policy networks as a *real change* in public-private interaction characterised by sitting between hierarchical and anarchical (market-led) forms of governance.

The upbringing of the concept of policy networks

Early ideas on policy networks, although not using this terminology, emerged on the United States in the 1950's and 1960's as a critique of the pluralist model of interest groups intermediation and as the basis of the sub-government model which described «a cluster of individuals that make most of the routine decisions in a given […] area of policy.» (Ripley and Franklin, 1987).

A deeper critique of the pluralist model came from several different developments of the sub-government model, namely Lowi's "iron triangle" (comprised of, in the North American political systems, a government agency, a congress committee and an interests group, often from an industrial sector) and the "exclusive clubs" models. Peters, 1996, describe iron triangles as exchange relationships between actors who are aware of their mutual functional dependency for achieving success.

However sub-governments and especially "iron triangles" are also seen as a limit to the full expression of a democratic political system and in response to this democratic deficit, the 1970's witnessed the come-back of the pluralist model. Heclo, 1978 revived the pluralist model by successfully minimising the idea that it provides a restricted access to policy and decision-making and stressed the importance of issue networks (a form of more loosely tightened policy networks) as communication networks of interested parties. Heclo and other pluralist authors of the 1980's (McFarland, 1997) have never denied the existence of sub-governments or even triadic systems of power, but their view of this system is that it is rarely exclusive and instead provides an environment for constant criticism and revision of the policy process.

British authors discussing the functioning of British government in the 1980's, were influenced by the work of Heclo and Wildavsky, 1974 on sub-governments. Both Richardson and Jordan, 1985 and Wilks and Wright, 1987 redesigned the map of decision-making in Whitehall and emphasised disaggregation and divisions within governments and the existence of sectoral policy networks. Richardson describes policy community, which are impenetrable to the general public, the fragmented system of policy communities and of interest group that participate in the decisional arena, a system that reflects the fragmented nature of society. These authors stressed interpersonal dynamics more than structural nature of the networks and communities as the drivers of policy outcomes.

Rhodes, 1981, 1988, who has made the terminology of policy networks popular in the British context, was more influenced by the continental European literature (discussed below) on intergovernmental relationship and emphasised structural relationships between political institutions based on patterns of resource-dependency as the crucial element in a policy networks. The model fully developed by Marsh and Rhodes, 1992, besides downplaying the role of agency, argues that network structures can define the agenda and outcomes of a policy network. Networks' membership and the distribution of resources among members

lead to the definition of different types of policy networks which have their extremes cases in policy communities (tight policy networks) and issue networks (loose policy networks).

Constructed around the German groups working on inter-organisational theory (Marin *et al.*, 1991; Scharpf, 1997b; Börzel, 1997) but with significant recent contributions from the Dutch public management school (Kickert *et al.*, 1997), the European Literature see "policy networks as a real change in the structure of the polity" and as an emergent form of governance.

In the German literature policy networks are placed against hierarchical and market forms of governance. While hierarchies are described as system with strong central coordination and control organised by the government and tight coupling between public and private levels and markets as system with no coupling and where all actors interact driven by interest maximising rationalities, policy networks sits between these two models and provide an environment for loose structural coupling, interactions between autonomous actors that generate negotiated consensus, shared value and improve strategic coordination and problem-solving capacity.

Policy networks are seen as a response to the increasing interdependence between state and private sector: hierarchical governance is too rigid to respond to increasing reuirements of policy effectiveness, efficiency and equity and the regulation associated with market forms of governance do not protect society from market failures, therefore policy networks are identified as the optimal solution for policy-making and delivery,

The Dutch literature of the 1990's discusses whether policy networks enhance or reduce democracy of the political system. Authors argue that policy-making is about cooperation, not coordination. The success of governance depends on the good management of the network and of the exchange of resources within the network (Kickert, 1997; Kickert *et al.*, 1997).

The Dutch school, similarly to the German stresses the importance of the institutional settings and structures but it also emphasise strategic behaviour, which implies some degree of autonomous decision from the actors.

Macro, meso or micro-level? A suitable "location" for policy networks

The debate over the explanatory power of policy network has largely reflected upon the level of policy making at which policy networks might be more effective in explaining policy outcomes. Within this debate a macro level represented by the different state models such as corporatist or pluralist has been confronted with a meso level identified with interests grouped around a policy sector and a micro-level, identified as the level of individual interactions and decision making.

In this sense, the debate about which level of policy making would better be described by policy networks, bears influences from the policy sector model. According to this model, policy making in a given policy sector will tend to converge towards similar practices and procedures, even across separate liberal democracies. Similarly, within the same state, different policy sectors will show different models of power distribution and deliberation. On this groundings Lowi, 1972) has developed his famous typology based on distributive, redistributive and regulatory policy systems. At a broader level, the debate is part of the open question of structure versus agency or context versus contact in political science (Hay, 2002 p 89-134).

Rhodes, 1988) and Marsh and Rhodes, 1992 have strongly argued that generalised institutional models might be unequipped to explain the differences in the policy processes, and have highlighted the fallacy of macro-level approaches. They see policy networks as a model of interest intermediation positioned at the meso-level. The Marsh and Rhodes model is characterised by a focus on the network's existence, membership and structural properties and on their capacity, more than institutional or behavioural aspects, to influence policy outcomes. Dowding, 2001 however, disagree with this interpretation of the policy network idea. In his view there is no room for a meso-level theory of policy making, since it cannot provide the required universality provided by micro-level foundations (such as rational actor theories) and macro-theories such as corporatism.

Daugbjerg, 1998 has made an effort, supported by empirical work (Daugbjerg and Swinbank, 2004), to integrate the meso-level frame of policy network with both macro and micro level analysis. Daugbjerg recognises that «Meso-level policy networks are embedded in a broader institutional context. Therefore, 'some room must be left for the … [integration] of macropolitical structures into the analysis of policy outcomes' (Atkinson and Coleman, 1992)» (Daugbjerg and Swinbank, 2004, p414). His approach to integrating meso and macro-level approaches firstly looks at the implications that different state models (elitism, pluralism and Marxism) have for policy network formation and structures. The network's features that he takes into account are network's size, the importance of structural over interpersonal relationships, the degree of inclusiveness or exclusiveness and the range of interests involved. This approach is different from the work of Rhodes, 1981, 1988. Rather than building a theoretical model, he grounds his integration into the empirical analysis of how the characteristics of the broader context of intergovernmental relations can influence meso-level processes. Both approaches however do not provide a useful solution to the increasing ambiguity of the role of the state which can be considered both a macro-level context but also an agent of meso and even mico-level processes.

Integration with micro-level approaches is also important if we consider that the behaviour of individual actors is a crucial determinant of policy outcomes (Daugbjerg, 1998, p67). However, what is required is a model or theory of individual choice and behaviour that can account for the constraints provided both by the meso-level (the network) and the macro-level. For this reason the application of the classical intentional explanation represented by rational choice theory has been used with caution (Koenig and Braeuninger, 1998; Stokman and Berveling, 1998). Dowding, 1994, 1995 and John, 2003 have advocated for the integration of choice models, game theory and evolutionary approaches into policy network analysis in this sense giving priority to the idea that resource exchange patterns are at the basis of network formation and policy change.

Network Governance and issues of efficiency and legitimacy

As we have seen, policy networks can be described a form of interest coordination capable of addressing the emerging changes in social and political needs, namely those related to an increasing dissatisfaction with the representative democracy model. Interorganizational and intergovernmental partnerships are increasingly present in public policy making and public administration (Pierre, 1997) and often referred to as network modes of organizing policy making and implementation. Within this discourse and narrative, «the policy network has therefore become an institutional innovation for governance in a time of complexity and fragmentation» (Hertting, 2004, p2). See also Rhodes, 1997; Albrechts and Mandelbaum, 2005.

The promise of policy networks and of the mode of governance they represent is to produce more effective and legitimate policies, without resting upon the authority and limitations of a single representative political body. Indeed, the local networks of interested actors that were once perceived as the key reason for implementation and democratic deficits are nowadays viewed as the primary source of legitimacy in public politics and policy. «In the wake of the many reports on government failure and market failure, public authorities now aim to govern society by involving different kinds of citizens, professionals, voluntary organizations, labour-market organizations and private firms in self-regulating networks.» (Sorensen and Torfing, 2005 p196). From a managerial perspective, policy networks are also seen as necessary institutional instruments for legitimate and efficient policy making and implementation. «Lack of cooperation rather than lack of control is of prime concern» (Hertting, 2004).

Despite this normative theory (Hirst, 2000) for what policy networks should achieve, many authors argue that even though policy networks and network governance can indeed increase the efficiency of policy making, they suffer, similarly to other modes of governance, of an accountability and legitimacy deficit.

The issue of the democratic performance of policy networks is particularly important in the research agenda of a more recent wave of governance and policy network studies (Pierre,

2000; Pierre and Peters, 2000; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Kooiman, 2003; Sorensen and Torfing, 2005). Indeed Börzel has stated that what still remains a key challenge in the policy networks debate is how policy networks are seen to be both enhancing and reducing the efficiency and legitimacy of policy making (Börzel, 1998 p254).

The arguments in support of the contribution of policy networks to efficient governance considers first of all the potential for a more proactive policy process since the presence of manifold actors can guarantee the early identification of policy problems and solutions and a certain degree of flexibility and adjustment to the complexity of existing conditions (Kooiman, 2000). Second, policy networks are seen as an instrument for gathering information about the policy and about the stakeholders in the policy, that wouldn't be available otherwise (Kooiman, 1993; Scharpf, 1999). Third they can provide an environment for consensus building and therefore limit the emergence of implementation resistance (Marin and Mayntz, 1991).

The literature that discusses the democratic implication of policy networks has a consistent overlap with how the same topic is dealt with in the governance literature, the review of which goes beyond the scope of this working paper. I will therefore limit my review to the main positions emerging in the network governance community.

In the tradition of liberal theories of democracy, policy networks are seen to undermine democracy, because they limit the power of democratic institutions and particularly elected governments (March and Olsen, 1989). Not only policy networks blur the boundaries between state and society but they also expose the policy making process to uncontrollable and particularistic power games. On the other hand, governance theories, even though they see policy networks as a threat to liberal and elected institutions, they don't see these also as a threat to democratic policy making. Indeed Jessop, 2000, Rhodes, 1997 and Kooiman, 1993 all see policy network as a significant «contribution to the territorially organised institutions of representative democracy» (Sorensen and Torfing, 2005, p200).

Having looked at different policy network issues "in theory", let us know turn to the ways they are used "in practice" to study European governance and transnational policy making.

Policy networks and European multi-level governance

Policy networks in their interpretation as a new form of governance between the Weberian notions of a hierarchical state and neoliberal theories of delivering public services through private markets have found wide application in the exploration of what Risse-Kappen, 1996 calls "the nature of the beast" that is to say the nature of European policy making. Early studies on European Integration were characterised by a strong dichotomy between neo-functionalism, (a theory of regional integration that sees supranational institutions of the European Union as the drivers of integration in a system where the role of national states is progressively declining) and intergovernmentalism (a theory that suggests that governments control the level and speed of European Integration. Moravcsik, 1995; for a full review of the two positions in European policy studies see also Adshead, 2002, p1-30). The dissatisfaction with the capacity of these two approaches to explain the process of European policy formation has led in the early 1990's to the development of alternative theories of which the most successful has been multi-level governance (Bache and Flinders, 2004; Hooghe, 1996; Hooghe and Marks, 2000, 2001; Marks *et al.*, 1995; Scharpf, 1997a). One of the key differences of multi-level governance over the other approaches is that it accounts for a transformation of the national states and of other territorial decisional "levels" within the process of European Integration rather than for the demise of one in favour of the others. The criticisms raised towards the earlier conceptualisations of multi-level governance complained the lack of attention for non-state actors and a narrow focus on "levels of government" only. In this context policy networks have been introduced as a way "to put governance back into multi-level governance" (Smith, 1996).

According to Peterson, 2004, three features of European approach to multi-level governance justify the use of policy-network analysis. First of all, the EU can be considered as an

extraordinarily differentiated polity in which decision rules and dominant actors vary greatly between different policy sectors (see also Ansell, 2000; Blatter, 2001; Gualini, 2003; Perkmann, 2000 for applications of the "networked polity" concept to regional and cross-border policy in Europe). Secondly, EU policy-making is highly dependent on technical knowledge which risks to depoliticise the policy process. Thirdly «European policy-making takes place in a «labyrinth of committees that shape policy options before policies are 'set' by overtly political decisionmakers such as the college of Commissioners, Council of Ministers, or European Parliament» (Peterson, 2004, p2).

The hypotheses supporting multi-level governance therefore combine well with the concept of policy networks. In the absence of a clear democratic leadership, each European policy is developed within networks characterised by an hybrid mix of individual actors embedded in a system of national, sub-national, supra-national, intergovernmental and transnational relations. The European Union relies, for its policy-making, on vertical and therefore multi-level alliances of various interests: national ministers, parliamentary commissions, and a large number of bureaucrats, lobbyists and politicians.

Given this system of policy-making as a whole, the diversity of actors' interests and the requirement for a consensus-building approach from the European institutions, there is a constant risk of what Scharpf, 1991 has called the "joint decision trap". The need to avoid such gridlocks has called for the development of a prescriptive alternative for European governance. One of the frameworks put forward in order to achieve active European Integration was the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

Defined by the Lisbon's European Council in 2000, originally as a system for the coordination of employment's policies, the OMC has been introduced as a form of policy coordination for virtually all the sector policies of the European Union (Faludi, 2004). The OMC promotes a means of spreading best practice and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU goals. Looking at this definitions, it can be said that the OMC is an attempt to provide a normative definition of policy networks in European governance.

The open method of coordination explicitly relies on the policy network approach in order to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge and to foster policy convergence.

However to make sense of such an evolution requires a clearer understanding of the way networks operate, something that it is not available at the moment. At EU level, their functions seem to vary widely, depending on the policy sectors (Marsh, 1998): some are meant to enhance professional values and promote mutual learning, others to defend joint interests, other still have been given a formal role in the implementation of EU policies. Their degree of openness, their links with 'stakeholders', their interface with 'government' structures, both at domestic and at EU level, would need to be analyzed systematically in order to assess under what conditions they can contribute to the efficiency of EU policies.

Conclusions

Governing through the negotiated interactions of a multiplicity of actors from public, semi-public and private sectors of society has become a recognised form of making and implementing public policies in Western states. It is a response to the failure of government and markets alike to provides an efficient and effective system of regulations and welfare services.

Policy networks have emerged in the political and policy studies literature in the 1980's as an attempt to build a coherent body of theory and an analytical toolbox through which consistent comparative studies could be carried out. Recently the concept has been introduced as a normative model for policy-making, particularly in contexts, like the European polity, where procedural efficiency and for democratic legitimacy of policy-making are in high demand.

However the concept has yet to find a secure and univocal position both as a theory, a methodology or even an ontology. Several definitions co-exist with, at best, wide margins of overlap or, as in most cases, no academic debates for supremacy.

Indeed, scholarly positions are still very fluid and most authors seem to be satisfied with having developed their own format for asserting that policy networks are enhancing or reducing the efficiency and legitimacy of policy making, a theory or a metaphor.

This is by no means a negative evaluation of the debate. Indeed its vagueness has allowed it to permeate even more empirical and comparative works. These, rather than reinforcing the search for a shared theory, have revealed that policy network approaches and analytical tools can be rather easily be substituted by other frameworks. Therefore although we can foresee a long life expectancy for policy networks, it is more likely that the search for a theory of governance will develop along multiple lines.

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