

# **The need for an epistemological rupture in the approach of governance in Europe**

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## Introduction

When starting to conceptualise a research question, the use of trendy terms is often considered as a must, a compulsory way to position ourselves in the wave of last sharp research on the issue we pretend to address. This is also a risk when trying to better understand regional polarisation in Europe. When remobilising mainstream wording often associated to a dominant neoliberal acceptance, are we not self-trapping ourselves in an ideologically biased analyse of the reality?

For instance, is economic development reducible to innovation? One could speak instead in terms of economic change/transformation, taking into consideration that not all the territories have the same productive capacity, nor the same disposition to innovate, but may still develop their economy around less-market oriented sectors (e.g. residential economy). It might change our perception that different paths towards economic development may exist, and consequently the results of our research. It may also allow us to think out of the regional competitiveness mantra that Gillian Bristow describes as “demonstrably a limiting, growth-first discourse, with the potential to effect and enhance uneven development between places, whilst simultaneously failing to address more fundamental social and ecological matters concerning a place’s development” (Bristow 2010, 156).

Similarly, is power reducible to political capacities? One may instead think in terms of political opportunities, trapping out from this hegemonic perception of labelled peripheries actors as supposedly all intellectually unable to address regional development challenges, but instead considering that they might (or at least some of them) not be given the possibility to defend their own vision of development because they are politically ignored or reduced to silence by core dominant elites. It may also be a good way to make visible the failures and the successes of certain territorial leaders in labelled core – labelled periphery negotiations, on which arguments, values, images they build their regional development strategies (in relations to Nation-building processes or to their engagement towards the neoliberal agenda for instance, as already mentioned).

Thus, the mobilisation of spatialising arguments in the negotiation of territorial subsidies makes central the question of *governance* of core-periphery relations. And it constitutes yet another concept to unpack in order to avoid the reproduction of ideological and normative bias when starting a research on regional polarisation.

### ***(i) Why critically assessing the term of governance is primordial***

In the past decades, several researches have underlined that the role of the State has evolved in labelled *West Europe*, in particular through decentralization or devolution of certain of its prerogatives to local and/or regional scales but also through integration to supranational unions such as the EU (Brenner 2004). These transformations have come with reconfigurations of political regulation and

public action –the space of public policies dilated horizontally and vertically– but also with societal changes (Le Galès 2013, 290). New terms, such as governance, have appeared in order to provide researchers and practitioners with a better comprehension of these new phenomena (Simoulin 2013, 13). Because it emerged in particular in Europe, European studies researchers have been very eager to use this new terminology. Kohler-Koch and Rittberger named this as the “governance turn” (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006). Boussaguet and Jacquot more bitterly consider it as a “scientific industries” with its own stars, language and journals (2009). According to disciplinary but also theoretical positioning, it grasps very different significations, different practices and usages and hence corresponds to different interests for researchers. In such a context, it may appear difficult to base a reflection on the concept of governance to go beyond the contradiction between the making of public action and the making of sense (Simoulin 2013).

Nowadays, numerous researches on governance at the European level are based on the concept of good governance or multi-level governance, pretending these approaches are technical or neutral. I oppositely claim they are normative and ideological, most of the times heavily linked to the EU neoliberal agenda. This may explain the actual limits of tautological researches on governance in Europe. Indeed, most of them adopt, reproduce and promote without critically assessing the definition widely used by academics and policy-makers (Dabrowski, Bafoil, and Bachtler 2014, 356). Doing so, they are most of the times explaining limited economic development and/or increases of social-spatial inequalities by an insufficient adaptation to supposedly good precepts of multi-level or good governance. Most of these evaluations forget to call into question the model in itself. Maybe the initial precepts are the problem.

With a critical perspective, it is possible to claim that multi-level and good governance may contribute, through complexification of decision making, to less democracy and less accountability (Grabbe 2001, 1029). These systems, by introducing private and community interests in public policy, may also blur the common good. EU integration in particular has been a major tool to export a branded-as-modern-and-Western European vision of governance in new member States, but Bohle seriously doubts this has been conducted in their interests: “Exporting the core of the EU’s deregulatory programme serves the interests of transnational capital, whereas not extending the redistributive *acquis* and blocking labour mobility protects the existing bloc’s weaker forces” (Bohle 2006). It might be possible to consider that the exportation of multi-level and good governance principles is one factor explaining the increasing of socio-spatial inequalities in Europe and within regions and localities. My point here is to demonstrate the normative limits of approaches based on Multi-level and good governance and advocate for a critical (socio-political) approach of the concept of governance.

## ***(ii) Good and Multi-level governance normative and ideological limits***

Good governance is more linked to public management and to the public choice theory. In that context, the governance question is seen as a problem of accountability and coordination in public action. Good governance aims at the enactment of new rules, supposedly apolitical, that make more efficient the game between the market and actors by reducing the costs of transactions and improving public policy through reorganized concurrency between agencies (Le Galès 2014, 302–303). Very much based on the neo-classical approach of economy and often articulated with liberal democratic values, good governance is supported at the European level, and declined in very different fields. This is for instance the case of the Council of Europe with local authorities<sup>1</sup>. The EU is also heavily using this concept in various fields, for instance in sport<sup>2</sup>. These conceptualizations and uses of governance have led these institutions to pay more attention to procedures and instruments rather than contents (Boussaguet and Jacquot 2009). This perspective relies on the strong normative assumption that governance is only a question of coordination of multiple actors (not of collective choices) to reduce costs (supposing that costs has always to be reduced) in order to become good. Actors are invited to follow the so-called best practices, as if this good behaviour is reproducible anywhere regardless of spatial, social, historical specificities, an idea that Le Galès considers as absurd and illusory (Le Galès 2014).

Multi-level governance may be described as “a policy-making system based on vertical and horizontal interactions and interdependencies across levels of government and sectors” (Dabrowski, Bafoil, and Bachtler 2014, 356). This specific terminology is even more linked to the EU and to EU studies since it is perceived as a “palatable, easily digestible paradigm for grasping how the European Union (EU) works in practice” (Stephenson, 2013: 817). It is praised as giving more scale flexibility through subsidiarity but also as increasing the effectiveness of policy implementation. Promoted at the EU level<sup>3</sup>, this model is supposed to redefine policy making in Europe through new vertical linkages, with the reinforcement of sub-national actors, and through enlarged horizontality, with more permeability to private and civil society interests (Le Galès 2014, 305; Dabrowski, Bafoil, and Bachtler 2014, 358). Some enthusiastic authors see in multi-level governance both “multi-levelness, which blurs the centre–periphery divide, and network governance, which blurs the state–society divide” (Papadopoulos 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to the strategy for innovation and good governance at local level based on 12 principles, encouraging local authorities to reach “governance excellence” by delivering a label to the best ones. For more information, see the Council of Europe webpage on the question: [http://www.coe.int/t/dgap/localdemocracy/strategy\\_innovation/12principles\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dgap/localdemocracy/strategy_innovation/12principles_en.asp), accessed on 20/10/2014

<sup>2</sup> an EU expert group has adopted in Septembre 2013 recommendations on the principles of good governance, defining this latter as follows: “The framework and culture within which a sports body sets policy, delivers its strategic objectives, engages with stakeholders, monitors performance, evaluates and manages risk and reports to its constituents on its activities and progress including the delivery of effective, sustainable and proportionate sports policy and regulation” (EU expert group “good governance” 2013).

<sup>3</sup> in particular through the partnership approach in the Cohesion Policy framework

Nevertheless, beyond these ideological assumptions, several recent in-depth case studies have come with more circumspect conclusions. Authors have pointed out the high variability of institutional, spatial and social contexts and consequently the differences in induced effects from one country, one region to another (Bache 2008; Dabrowski, Bafoil, and Bachtler 2014). Romain Pasquier et Julien Weisbein underlines the differentiated capacity of intermediary territories in conducting contemporary public action: “the dynamics of the new territorial governance produce (...) a new cartography of political domination, more unpredictable than standardized, more asymmetrical than uniform, but real” (2013: 287).

The contribution of multi-level governance to the production of more equity, more efficiency or more democratic and sustainable accountability is also questioned since these objectives appears to push in different directions (Perron 2014; Milio 2014). It may instead lead to the reproduction and the deepening of the “domination by the established groups of societal partners resulting in exclusion of the weaker stakeholders” (Perron 2014). Dabrowski et al. highlight in particular the need for calling into question the “widely shared opinion that partnership tends to work better in countries or regions with traditions of cooperation<sup>4</sup>” (2014: 359); that means to question the wide-spread explanation that post-socialist countries are doing less well with Cohesion Policy because of weaker democratic habits<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, Andreas Faludi also makes a point when highlighting that the multi-governance model comes with an underlying hard conception of the territory as “nested jurisdictions” rather than “the variety of ‘soft’ spaces that overgrows the fabric of any multi-level polity” (Faludi 2012, 20)<sup>6</sup>. Finally, multi-level governance appears as an unsuitable paradigm to question the reality of regionalization and regionalism in Europe because it takes as granted the polity change in the States internal politics and the institutional changes (and underestimates path dependency) (Pasquier and Perron 2008, 10; Bafoil 2010, 13)

### ***(iii) what is a critical approach of the governance of core-periphery relations***

With such limitations, may the term governance be of any use to research on the reconfigurations of public action in Europe?

On a first glance, it would be easy to answer no, since scientific objectification requests precisely to make more stable and consistent the phenomena under scrutiny. Governance would turn to be, as

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<sup>4</sup> quoting for instance the work of Maura Adshead on Ireland (Adshead 2014).

<sup>5</sup> and anyway, is the self-proclaimed West really doing better?

<sup>6</sup> To go further with this idea, see also the extensive work of the French geographer Martin Vanier on the concept of interterritoriality (Vanier 2008).

some argue, just another of these fuzzy concepts that "make the job of coming up with evidence much more difficult", which results in the "toleration of (...) misguided policy" (Markusen 2003, 713).

Nevertheless, social scientists adopting a relational approach, as I do here, would argue that the meaning of a concept "is defined by its relational context (...), the task of the analyst is to demonstrate why it takes *that* meaning in *that* context" (Hudson 2003, 746). Indeed, the softness of the term of governance comes also with advantages. Its plasticity allows more transversal and more transdisciplinary discussions. Its epistemological fuzziness also simply corresponds to the complexification of the modes of political legitimation to be described (Pasquier and Weisbein 2013). Being conscious of the possible negative effects of certain dominant models of governance previously mentioned does not mean denying that public action is changing towards the integration of local, but also private actors to the decision process (sometimes, in some context). Instead of posing it as an assumption, the questions are when, how, why, and if anything is specific to/in the new member States.

More precisely, the position I defend here is to critically assess the practicalities of the transformations but also the constancies of public action, the whys and hows. It means not to consider them as being good (or bad) by nature, but to construct a theoretical relational approach that permits to better understand than to praise for the evolution of governance. To do so, I advice here to rely on the open definition given by Patrick Le Galès<sup>7</sup>:

Governance may be defined as a process of coordination between actors, social groups and institutions, in order to reach collectively defined and discussed goals. It grasps the whole institutions, networks, directives, rules, norms, political and social uses as well as public and private actors that contribute to the stability of a society and a political regime, its orientation, its capacities to direct, to provide services and to ensure its own legitimacy<sup>8</sup> (Le Galès 2014, 301).

What is the most important in the context of this paper is the repositioning of the term of governance as a collective decision-making process. This is in particular this aspect that may be under scrutiny when analysing the political dimension of peripheralisation and centralisation in Europe. Instead of judging (mis-)adaptation of governance reforms, the question could be: to what extent the decision-making process is collective? Four features may be critically assessed when analysing the evolution of the governance of labelled core – labelled periphery relations in Europe<sup>9</sup>:

- 1 - Is institutional complexity conducting to the scattering of power or produce opposite results, i.e. the concentration of power in the hands of a few?
- 2 - Is there a bigger inclusion of private actors and civil society in the decision process? If yes, when? How? And in the interest(s) of whom?

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<sup>7</sup> Referring to the large definition given by Leca on the French case; see: (Leca 1996, 339).

<sup>8</sup> Translated from French by the author

<sup>9</sup> the four categories comes from : (Boussaguet and Jacquot 2009), but the questions are made by the author

- 3 – Are the procedures taking a rising importance? In other words, is the attention given to the form and to instruments at the expenses of the actual content of public action? To whom such changes benefit?

- 4 - Is the relation to constraint and authority is more horizontal and less vertical, or is it the contrary? Why ?

A critical approach of (territorial) governance may thus allow to question the socio-spatial logics driving the actual redistributions of political resources: “when analysing territorial governance, one also chart the new territories of leadership and domination” (Pasquier and Weisbein 2013, 281). Indeed, the growing complexity of territorial organization, as well as the rising competition between social groups representing fragmented interests in public policy making, appears as accentuating the necessity for questioning the power relations between territories: “neither all individuals, nor all territories have the same capacities or the same strategies to adapt to this new context” (Pasquier and Weisbein 2013, 285). But even more important is not all are being given the same opportunity to participate to public decision-making. Furthermore, the shape of State-intervention itself is evolving, what Renaud Epstein describes as the end of territorial governance and the time of *gouvernement à distance*. He defines this *hands off* policy as the renewed capacity of States to engage in territorial policies not directly but via (often private) agencies, norms and standards (Epstein 2013). This renewed State constraint create less favourable conditions for local leaders that may impact their capacity to propose and to elaborate projects (not only financially) (Le Galès 2014, 299). One may ask if the dogmatic approach of budgetary orthodoxy in many of European States is not a way to confiscate the public debate from the hands of thus peripheralised actors and to impose in a hegemonic way the neoliberal agenda to local and regional leaders?

Finally, the comprehension of how peripheralisation is performed and what peripherality means in Europe (for its inhabitants for instance) implies to take into consideration path dependency, i.e. “the particular weight of history (...): the demands of identity, the impact of national sovereignty, and the strategies that ensue from it” (Bafoil 2009, 209). To that extent, post-socialism matters. Because peripheralisation should be approached as a socio-political process rooted in identities<sup>10</sup> and in “an on-going social construction of territories and centre-periphery relationships” (Cole and Pasquier 2012, 176; Pasquier 2004).

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<sup>10</sup> That the authors described as “a set of socially constructed practices, beliefs and visions of the world which shape and guide the strategies of regional actors” (Ibid.)

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