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Understanding Governance Networks -

a positivistic and social-constructive approach

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Governance Network” is a central concept which we these days often stumble into in literature related to policy analyses. The concept is an example of a specific direction within the growing governance literature, which is criticized to be diffuse, undefined and all-included.

*...it is a "weasel" word – slippery and elusive, used to obscure, not to shed light".
(Bevir and Rhodes in Bang H. 2003: 61)*

Studies of “governance” and are being represented within literature in many disciplines. The notion of “governance” is deployed in the World Bank’s recommendation of “good governance”, international relations debates about the possibility of governing without government, discussions about the institutional conditions for “economic governance”, the private sectors vision of new forms of “corporate governance. These are examples of different approaches towards a concept many disciplines relate to. The notion of network is an equally term, which in the governance literature relates to governing and coordination through networks. This tradition focuses on policy development through networks, which includes some kind of interaction between different policy-actors (Torfing and Sørensen 2007, Bang 2003, Mayntz 2003). The concept relates to all kind of stages within policy development like planning, decision-making and implementing. Though this narrows the concept of governance, governance network is still given different meanings and interpretations.

Why is this relevant related to the Philosophy of Social Science? Above we have seen that different traditions relates in one way or the other to Governance and Governance network as concept. The different traditions have diverse ontological and epistemological positions related. While ontology positions raises questions “what is real” and “is it real” related to the world we live in, epistemological position reflects our view of what we can know about a phenomena and how we can know it. I believe that confusion around the concept of governance network is related to: 1. the original ontological and epistemological anchorage of the concept, and 2. an ontological and epistemological movement in the meaning of the concept.

In the process of building up the governance network perspective, concepts and arguments from other scholars in the field was borrowed which has diverse theoretical point of departure. This may have affected the ontological and epistemological

anchorage of the concept. This argument will be further elaborated in the next section. Related to the second point, I will through this essay show a diversity of ontological and estipenological approaches to governance network, where the scope in the meaning and use of governance network stretches between a foundational and positivistic approach and an anti-foundational and a social-constructivist approach.

Several attempts have been made to make the concept of governance network more concrete and demarcated. The positivist tradition has through this process been dominating, and especially the Anglo-governance approach, which explains the development of governance networks through the process of modernization and the marketing and hollowing out of the state (Stoker 2002, 2004 and Rhodes 1997, 2000). In the process of explaining and trying to define what governance networks are, the contributors aim has been to provide a general account of what network governance looks like and why. An alternative approach to understand and analyze governance network is related to a social-constructivist perspective. This approach is relatively new, and has had some influence as a contrast to the Anglo-governance tradition, but it has not been dominating. Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes asks in their article why we would assume that governance network has one or more essential features, and introduces decentred theory as an alternative approach to analyse and understand governance network (Rhodes and Bevir 2007). This approach focuses on the social construction of a practice and offers a more interpretive approach in the analysis of governance networks. It highlights the importance of beliefs, traditions and dilemmas, and wants to tell a story which is exclusive in every case.

The two approaches are quite different and can be seen as extreme points in relation to each other. Still, they give us a notion of a shift and a change of meaning of the concept governance network which also affects the philosophy of social science behind the concept. A third approach which is not directly related to governance research literature will also be presented in this essay. Actor-network-theory (ANT) (Latour 2005) can be viewed as a “in between” approach to networks, or an alternative. This third approach is useful because it can contribute to a different understanding of governance network and can lead to other elements in the discussion related to how we approach the study of governance network. To summarize: In this essay I will show diverse understandings and interpretations of the concept governance network and through these discuss strengths and weaknesses in how it affects the way we understand and use them.

Before going into the different approaches to Governance network, I find it necessary to ask why concepts become diffuse, and why it is so hard to make a concept explicit. The next section will discuss some of the reasons for the diversity in perspectives related to the same concept, and at the same time give a general picture of how this literature related to network governance place itself in this discussion.

2. WHY THIS DIVERSITY?

The various understandings, interpretations and use of governance network can be explained by the different traditions which are using this concept as a theoretical frame or perspective. According to Jeffrey Alexander (1982) the problem of vagueness and confusion around concepts are caused by the lack of agreement about the general theoretical issue. In order to understand the confusion and the different interpretations around concepts, we have to look back at the process of science. Alexander argues that science is created through an intellectual process which arises between the empirical environment and the metaphysical environment. Based on this statement he develops a continuum which stretches from observations towards general presuppositions.

The figure below illustrates his point. Alexander argues that all the analytical levels are interdependent, which is implied by the notion of generality and specificity: While elements at lower level bring new information about the empirical environment made by observations, they still represent specifications for more general assumptions (1982:3).

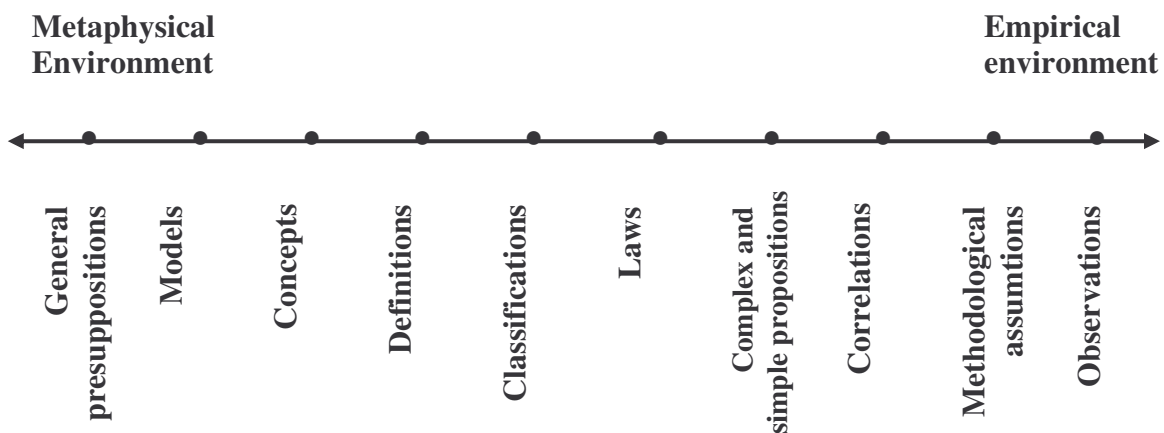


Figure 1: The scientific continuum and its components (J. Alexander 1982: 3)

Jeffery Alexander argues that the core of the problem lies in how and what scientists emphasize within the different stages related to generality and specificity, and calls for general theoretical logic in sociology. Like what do we consider a theory? And what is an observation. I will not go into Alexander's full argument, but his point can be used in the sense of understanding the lack of explicitly related to the concept of governance network.

There is a gap between the first and the second generation of governance- research (Torfing 2007). The first generation, which can be related to the Positivistic and Anglo-governance approach, have spent a lot of their research to prove that governance network actually exists. They have established the concept as an alternative to marked and hierarchy. Because of this, most of the contributions in the first generation analyzed network-form and –function (Kooiman 1993, Mayntz 1993, Rhodes 1997, Jessop 1998).

“ The theoretical underpinning of the explanatory ambitions is not always as clearly delineated as one might wish. The scholars within the first generation of governance network research seldom explicate their theoretical point of departure and they tend to borrow concepts and arguments from other scholars in the field, thus producing a somewhat eclectic and confusing theoretical landscape” (Sørensen and Torfing 2007: 7)

The second generation within governance research represents diversity in approaches. Still, a lot of the literature are mapping network-form and –function, but the argument whether these networks exist or not, does not occur in the same scale. Focus has been turned more towards issues related to conditions for governance network success and failure, in addition to democratic challenges and how to control these networks. This turn has led to diversity in approaches related to the understanding of governance network. Still, the dominating focus in the first and also now in the second generation has been and is strongly based on empirical observations and can because of this be related more to the right-side wing of the continuum. According to Alexander those scientific statements closer to the right-hand side of the continuum are said to be empirical because their form is more influenced by the criterion of precisely describing observation, hence the “specificity” of empirical statements. The variation in observations and the differences in what to and how to observe result in a wide variation in what is emphasized related to what network governance are.

3. TWO DIVERSE UNDERSTANDINGS OF GOVERNANCE NETWORK

The concept of governance network has a lot of its origin related to the Anglo-governance school which has been and still are the dominating school. This approach to the concept has also been adopted and transferred to other countries as well. Along with new empirical research, new perspectives on network governance have been developed in order to adjust the Anglo-governance approach. I will present two approaches which can be understood as dichotomies pointing in two different directions. This might not be fair to all contributions that combine these approaches, but through this dichotomy these “in between“ positions will be discussed, even though there are many nuances. Still, to my purpose, the dichotomy serves as a starting point and as an example of how different a concept can be understood.

Positivist approaches to Governance network.

“Governance network is viewed as a self-organizing and coordinating mechanism notably different from markets and hierarchies and not as a hybrid (Rhodes 1997, Stoker 2004)”.

The Anglo-governance school related to governance network dominated at the end of the 90'ties and the beginning of 2000. The Anglo-governance tradition refers to governance as a change in meaning of government, pointing at a new process of governing. It refers to the development of governing styles in which boundaries between and within public and private sector has become blurred (Stoker 1999). Social scientists related to this approach treat governance as a complex set of institutions and institutional linkages defined by their social role or function, which they refer to as a positivist account of governance (Rhodes 1997, Stoker 1999, 2004). The positivist account reflects the focus in this approach towards *explanation*. Like mentioned earlier this approach explained new forms of governing through empirical research showing new structures, forms and function.

Rhodes (1997) uses the concept of “Policy network” in order to explain network structures in policy-development. He focuses on the connection between institutions and the interdependent relation between actors in the process of policy development, and defines it as:

“A cluster or a complex of organizations tied together through interdependency” (Rhodes 1997).

Rhodes argues that resources and dependency explains the difference between networks and within networks. The dominating WestMinister model which has been the model used to explain the British government was challenged by this network approach. The rise of this counterargument was related to the “Thatcher regime”. Earlier issue network¹ was a common feature of British government, but the Conservative Government wanted to reduce their power by using a more market based approach in delivering services where privatizing public services and using private sector logic and working principles in public sector. Positivist approaches argues that this led to a fragmentation of networks in addition to increased membership of existing networks (Bevir and Rhodes 2007), and showed through this how the WestMinister model had failed. Empirically focus was pointed at principal-agent relations like establishment of agencies, direct service organizations, private schools. The increased involvement of the private and voluntary sector in service delivering and strategic decision-making was explained as contracting- out and public private partnerships.

This approach to governance networks emphasizes the empirical findings in order to prove changes in traditional policy development. The book “Governance”, published in 1993 and edited by Jan Kooiman is referred to as an important contribution to the new approach to the governance literature (Kooiman 1993). In this book different European researchers provided in order to explain new forms of social coordination and structure in order to cope with increased dynamics, complexity and diversity. In order for a network to succeed important conditions are related to structure, but also conditions as trust, reciprocity and interdependence between actors are central in order for make coordination possible. Very shortly, the literature related to the positivist approach to governance network makes an important contribution in order to explain changes in governing structure and processes, and these changes are identified by looking for specific features, forms and characteristics in order to recognize these new forms of coordination. Focus is directed to actors (institutions, persons or organizations), which

¹ Issue network is one kind of networks along a continuum from integrated policy communities to loose issue network. Issue networks are characterized by many participants with different resources and power and varied interaction and participation. It is based on information exchange and counselling more than negotiations.

are viewed as rational. Changes in governing and actors behaviour are explained by the actors need to coordinate in order to reach their policy goals. This kind of “identifications – process” related to the concept has been and still are necessary in policy analyses in order to develop common understanding related to empirical observations. The meaning of the concept governance network is related to the *explanation* that new forms of governing exist, which is based on observed changes in both actors and structures.

The social constructivist understanding of Governance Network

“.. a decentred theory implies there is no comprehensive account of governance network. There is no necessary logical structural process determining the form governance or the success or failure of networks...” (Bevir and Rhodes, 2007).

Ironically, this second approach is presented by some of the same researchers as in the positivist tradition presented above. Rhodes and Bevir claim that positivist approaches reduce the diversity of network governance by referring to logic based on modernization, institutional norms and a set of classifications or correlation. The alternative decentred theory is a critical contribution to Rhode’s own work (among others), saying that we have to turn our approach to the study of governance network towards an interpretive approach. Behind the different types of interpretative theory, there lies a shared assumption that in order to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, beliefs and preferences of the people involved. (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). In the case of governance network this means a shift in focusing on characteristics towards a focus on the social construction of governing through the ability of individuals to create meanings in action. Rhodes and Bevir argue for a shift towards an anti-foundational approach to interpretation. By this they favour a form of interpretation that lies between hermeneutics and post-structuralism. We can understand this as a turn towards a more social-constructivist understanding of governance network.

“To decentre is to focus on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create, and act on, meanings; it is to unpack a practice in terms of the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals” (Bevir and Rhodes 2003: Ch 4 in Bang H.).

According to this approach, governance network and network governance arises from the bottom-up which leads us towards meanings and beliefs instead of aggregate concepts that refer to social law and institutions (Bevir and Rhodes 2007). Methodologically this means that policy networks must be studied from below. This calls for a contextual and process-oriented type of analysis which tells the story about the network. This means that interpretation / understanding of governance network only can be established and understood within discourses and traditions. Consequently, focus are turned away from the mainstream literature on networks which specify conditions related to the rise and fall of networks, the coordination of networks and the management of networks. Such a comprehensive account of network governance makes sense only if these implications are valid. But why would we assume that network governance has one or more essential features (Torfing and Sørensen 2007)? Instead they argue that network governance arises from change as a result of diverse actions and political struggles, and that there is no determining structure and process which can identify and define network governance. Rhodes and Bevir argue that they understand the general concept of network governance by using them in cases. Their meaning derives because of this from the way in which they use it in various texts (Bevir and Rhodes 2007).

3. AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

- “WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM LATOUR”

The two approaches presented earlier represent diverse understandings and meanings of network governance. The different meanings also imply different approaches related to how to study governance networks. In the further discussion related to how to understand and study governance network, I will draw on the work of Bruno Latour. His work has not been directly related to the governance network literature, but is a controversial contribution in network analyses in sociology. Governance network theory and Latour’s approach has got different purposes. While Governance network is empirically oriented towards social-political negotiations between different actors, Latours’ approach is based on critical sociology related to material²-semiotics³ (notably

2 Between things

the work of philosophers like G. Deleuze, M. Foucault and D. Haraway). The critical and altered turn in Latour's work makes it interesting to discuss in relation to governance network.

Bruno Latour presents in his book "reassembling the Social" (2005) two different approaches: first "the sociology of the social" and second "sociology of associations". He uses these two approaches to revamp the meaning of sociology – also called Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). ANT attempts to explain and interpret social and technological evolution. It incorporates a "principle of generalized symmetry" that what is human and not-human should be integrated into the same conceptual framework. As a result, humans and non-humans are both referred to as "actants". Latour emphasizes that Actor-Network-Theory is not a "in between approach" related to the question whether the actor is "in" a system or if the system is made up "of" interacting actors. It is not a compromise, but an autonomous approach (Latour 2005). Latour believes that all science is objective, but that objects can be more complex compared to what the "objectivists" claim. Interpretive sociology claims that human desire, meanings and intentions introduces interpretive flexibility into the world which contains inflexible objects. Latour says he belongs to the objective side of sociology and has no sympathy for the interpretive, and view himself as a relativist in search for the objective truth. He claims it is possible to suggest that the social and the technical are not primitively different, but that both are relational effects, and their distinctions are derivative of those effects in one way or another. Then perhaps it is possible to note that what one thinks of as "the social" is included in what one thinks of as "the technical", and vice versa. This is the kind of line argued in Actor-Network Theory.

"our distinctive touch is simply to highlight the stabilizing mechanisms so that the premature transformation of matters of concern into matter of fact is counteracted. ANT argues that it is possible to clarify this confusion, to distinguish the two tasks of deployment and unification, to spell out the procedures for due process, thus modifying what it means for a social science to be more politically relevant and more scientific (Latour 2005:261).

Network is according to Latour a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described. It is not found by substantial content, but by a list of associations. It is through the associations meanings are created, and

these meanings are affected by all kinds of recourses,- both objects and subjects. What is an association? An association is according to Latour a type of connection between actants. He exemplifies: whenever something new happens (a new movement, a new vaccine, or a new law) we have to reshuffle our conceptions of what was associated together because the previous definition has been somewhat irrelevant” (Latour 2005:6)

The question is: Can we use Latour’s approach in order to get a better grip of the concept of governance network? The ANT approach would emphasize that there is a need for a diverse approach in order to understand and explain the meaning of networks and how to study them. It is the concrete associations that create meaning, independent whether these associations are created from objects or subjects. In a creative way we can transfer this message to the discussion related to the understanding of governance network, and by this use Latour as a third approach. The positivist approach are claimed to reduce the diversity of network governance by referring to a logic based on modernization, institutional norms and a set of classifications or correlations. According to Bevir and Rhodes (2007) too much focus has been directed to the explanations related to specific network features and not in the direction of interpretation and understanding of network governance. According to Latour, these specific features and the interpretations as a result of all kinds of associations are both equally important to understand the meaning of network.

In the discussion related to a positivistic, a social constructivist approach to network governance and the Actor-Network-Theory, the methodology appears as one of the most important element. Especially the last two approaches emphasized the meaning of network governance is created through the study and the interpretation of them. Because of this I will direct the further discussion related to the different approaches towards the study of governance network.

4. TOWARDS A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF GOVERNANCE NETWORK?

The two different approaches to governance network and the Actor-Network-Theory provide different meanings to the concept. According to Jeffery Alexander the vagueness around concepts are caused by a lack of agreement. He claims we have to look back at the process of science in order to understand the diffusion and the different interpretations around concepts. In this last section I will return to the question we started out with in the introduction: In what way do the different approaches affect the way we study governance network?

The objective approach or the Anglo-governance approach made and still are making an important contribution arguing that new forms of governing exist. In order to explain changes in traditional governing, changes are identified by looking for specific features, forms and characteristics in order to recognize these new forms of coordination. Because of this a lot of explanations are based on theory-based hypotheses which can be tested by direct observation. There has been a lot of attempt to make causal relationships between social phenomena, like f.ex the New Public Management reform as an explanation to the increasing development of governance network in the WestMinister. Focus is directed to changes in the coordination between actors (institutions, persons or organizations), which has led to a lot of quantitative studies as well as qualitative. The social-constructivist approach or as Bevir and Rhodes refer to as “decentred theory”, emphasize meaning of network governance created through narratives. They criticize the use of characteristics when studying governance networks and calls for a more narrative approach. They believe network arise from and change as a result of diverse actions and political struggles inspired by different traditions and beliefs, and because of this network governance is the stories people use to construct, convey and explain traditions, dilemmas and practices.

“Ethnography studies individual behaviour in everyday context and gathers data from many sources. It adopt an unstructured approach but focuses on one group or locale, and in analysing the data it stresses the interpretations of meanings and functions of human action” (Bevir and Rhodes 2007)

They emphasizes the writing of thick descriptions or

“our construction of other peoples construction of what their up to” (Geertz 1973).

Latour claims it is two ways to look at a network: In the first case networks are studied through already made descriptions, while in the second case there is no frame determined and by this network are made through the associations in our description. In the first case we use characteristics in order to identify, analyse and explain network, and in the other case we make a description of a case and make the network appear through this, like “networks are mainly made of X”. Latour argues through a metaphor that it is not normal for a painter to create or buy a frame before painting the picture. The picture comes first, which should also be the case when studying networks (Latour 2005).

The ANT slogan is to follow the actors themselves:

“Try to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish” (Latour 2005:12).

In order to make up a good ANT account, it is necessary to create a narrative or a description or a proposition where all the actors do something. Network is in this view an expression to check how much energy, movement and specificity our own reports are able to capture. This movement of associations includes all kind of “actants” (both objects and subjects). This is the main argument that separates Latour from the Social – constructivist approach, who say that human desires, human meanings and human intentions introduces some flexibility into the world of inflexible objects. (Latour 2005: 144). This is not the case in ANT, where interpretations include both objective realities and subjective realities.

This ANT approach would emphasize that there is a need for a diverse approach in order to understand and explain the meaning of networks and how to study them. This “combination” line can be followed into one of the latest methodology reports in governance network research. Bogason and Zølner (2007) stress the point that it is hardly possible to expect the roles and the important associations in policy-making to be clear at the outset, and therefore a flexible research design is desirable. The boundary and the scope of networks are difficult to identify. They recommend identifying the different governance networks in relation to a *policy output* in terms of a specific policy report, action plan, project, regulation or initiative. Both top-down and bottom-up policy

analyses tend to privilege a certain policy actor, but by beginning with a certain policy output and then attempt to unravel the complex network of actors and associations somehow involved in its production, it is possible to capture all of the relevant policy actors (or as Latour would say “actants”). Through this it is possible to explore how they interact through a process towards a policy output. This is the research strategy of *output-based backward mapping* (Bogason and Zølner 2007, Bogason 2004). This may be an example of a combination of the two approaches where the network is not defined to start with, but through a concrete case it is possible to identify the movements of important actants in associations. Still in this case the researcher’s departure from an idea of what this network looks like.

I believe the different approaches have their strengths in operating side by side. While the positivist approach has got a strength in explaining how governance networks appear, operate and change, the social-constructivist approach has got a strength in understanding why these relations between different actors in governance networks appear the way they do. In the study of policy analyses like governance networks we are in need for a foundational approach which contributes to a common understanding through empirical observation, classifications and definition of concepts. Just as important we need an anti-foundational approach to stay critical in what the concepts are about and how to interpret them. The positivist and the social-constructivist approach gives us different methodological tools which we by favour can combine and use in turns depending on what to study in relation to governance networks. The ANT contribution has got a different focus related to networks, but it provides a dimension about the meaning of *objects and material features* and how they affect our interpretation of the social. This is an important element in studies related to governance networks. There is a need for openness concerning what elements that are being connected in a policy process,- it might not only be the meaning of policy actors, but also other associations that can be of importance in a governance network.

Without trying to go in a normative direction, it is clear that both the positivist and the social-constructivist approach are being used in the second generation of network governance research – also as combinations that can be related to Latour’s associations. They represent different directions within the philosophy of social science which affects both the way we understand the concept and the way we choose to study them. This leads us back to Jeffery Alexander’s point: we do have different theoretical frames

and interpretations of concepts, which lead to that they remain diffuse. Is it then possible to create a common theory and common understanding of the term “Governance Network”? Both the Social-Constructivist and Latour would answer no to this question and may respond: Is it a point? This diversity which these days are strongly criticized may be the mean to the continuous rise or fall of governance network theory.

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