NETWORKS AND HIERARCHIES: NOTES ON GOVERNMENT ACTION IN THE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC POLICY NETWORKS AND GOVERNANCE NETWORKS

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ABSTRACT: Government intervention in the public sphere has undergone a great transformation throughout its history. The concept of "governance networks" encompasses one of the latest efforts from political sciences to understand the process of creating and implementing public policies. This document aims to clarify the theoretical and practical implications of the concept of "governance networks" in regards to future research agendas around it. The conceptual debate suggests the need to analyze its democratic implications.

KEYWORDS: Governance networks, public policy networks, public policies, government action.

INTRODUCTION

Government intervention in the public sphere has undergone a great transformation throughout its history. During this process, several theories and approaches to analyze it have taken place in different disciplines, thus developing several analytical frameworks to explain public policy decision-making and its impact on the public and social spheres. Recently, several concepts around this topic have come up from the field of Public Administration, among which the term "governance" stands out. This concept adheres to other analytical approaches that take government action in the public realm as its object of study. It also has been recognized in the academic, social and political spheres for the role it attributes to government during the creation process of public policies.

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In this way, the concept of "governance" –first coined by the World Bank in reference to the exercise of political power to run a nation's affairs, or to manage economic and social resources in the pursuit of development (Porras, 2017)– has inaugurated an ample debate in the academic world regarding the theoretical implications involved and their significance in broader analytical models for understanding government action in the public realm.

In the studies around the concept of governance, the wide ambiguity in which the term has been used stands out. For example, Bevir (2011) uses the concept of "governance" in its most general sense, as "the theories and matters regarding the social coordination of all the government's patterns" and, more particularly, as "the new government theories and practices, and the dilemmas they involve" (Bevir, 2011, p. 3). Although definitions such as these have largely benefitted the concept's development in, for example, opening lines of research with more specialized approaches,[1] they have also generated certain confusion regarding its implications, since the absence of a general analytical framework to systematize each line of research successfully has generated rather disorganized knowledge.

In short, considering the wide interest the concept has generated, and the relative ambiguity with which it has been defined, there are constant discussion points around it, which have turned it into an "umbrella" concept that, conceptually, has overreached. Because of this, invariably, the concept of "governance" is used to account for diverse social, political and economical phenomena –earning it several criticisms regarding its analytical objectivity–. Particularly noteworthy is the concept's intimate relation with the concept of public policy networks, which is why these two concepts are commonly used indifferently.

Under this perspective, the conceptual overreaching that the indiscriminate use of the term has generated implies a confused use of it and an impediment for its better development in theoretical and methodological terms as well, due to its indefinite object of study. Therefore, it is fundamental to specify the concept's characteristic aspects, while distinguishing its use from other terms in order to favor the concept's further development.

In this sense, the present document aims to analyze, in broad terms, government action through the concepts of "public policy networks" and "governance networks". Although both terms are close, they refer to different government practices and involve a different democratic reach of the public interventions that result from and among its structures.

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1 Based on the aforementioned definition, Bevir opens three lines of reasearch on governance studies: 1) governance as theory, 2) governance as a government practice, and 3) governance as a dilemma generator. The object of study of this last line of reasearch are the implications of this concept's practice as a government method, like, for example, the democratic implications in public policy management.

Thus, the present document is divided in three sections: first, a description of the role of networks in order to understand government action in the public sphere; then, the concepts of public policy networks and –mainly– governance networks are analyzed, and their action frameworks and its main characteristics are described; finally, a section is dedicated to analyze some open lines of research around the concept of governance. The document ends with a section for conclusions.

GOVERNMENT ACTION THROUGH NETWORKS

The network theory to analyze the process of building the government's decision-making in the public sphere has a great tradition in Public Administration studies (highlighting Heclo, 1978; Marsh and Rhodes; 1992; Mayntz, 1993; Rhodes; 1997; Klijn; 1998; Evans, 1998). The main premise of this literature is the idea that governments are fragmented in different levels, depending of their institutional design and the environment in which they intervene and interact with other public and private actors.

Towards the end of the past century, several approaches to network theories gathered strength, such as the public policy networks and governance networks approaches –although a large amount of studies on these approaches invariably refer indistinctly to any of them–. In fact, one could say that both literatures are interrelated among them through the same analytical framework that regards networks as objects of study. What holds true is that the governance approach does differentiate from the public policy approach.

Borzel (1998), for example, identifies two schools among public policy network literature. From the perspective of American tradition and British literature, this school analyzes policy networks as intermediation spaces between actors that come up and are structured around certain areas of public policy. On the other hand, the German tradition, led by Maynts (1993), and exceptionally by Rhodes (1997) in Great Britain,[2] view policy networks as a specific form of government and public policy decision-making, i.e. as governance networks.[3]

That is why, here, we state a semantic separation between both concepts:

> Traditionally, the idea of public policy works more as a representation of government action, in which political and administrative authorities hold

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2 This statement should be nuanced since Rhodes (1997) does use the concept of policy networks as the American and British traditions do, but he uses it as an instrument to –together with other characteristics– drive the concept of governance towards the style of the German and Dutch schools. Thus, the presence of both types of literatures is quite obvious in most of his work– particularly in *Understanding governance*, his classic study on governance that would set the general bases for discussing the concept in the academic realm–.

3 The Dutch school also adheres to this school of public policy networks as a new way of governing. See Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan (1997), cited by Rhodes (2016).

hegemonic positions when it comes to treating public problems (Vázquez, 2013, p. 21).

While governance, from the perspective of Public Administration studies, alludes to "new government theories and practices" (Bevir, 2011, p. 3) and particularly to a "new modality of collective steering that consists of inter-sectional coordination to achieve common goals" (Porras, 2016, p. 15). This distinction between both concepts will now be delved into deeper.

PUBLIC POLICY NETWORKS AND GOVERNANCE NETWORKS

In democratic regimes, the representation of public interests through govern-ment intervention in the public sphere has led to a continuous adaptation process that answers contingently to the economical, social and political variables it faces. Regarding the networks of actors around public policy topics, we could identify two general ways in which government acts in a network through intermediation.

In the first place, we could describe "policy communities" as networks of restrictive character, often referred to as "iron triangles", in which the relation between actors is strong and organized in an oligarchic manner (Roth, 2002). As an example, we could mention that the corporatism and neo-corporatism phenomenon that took place during the 20th Century in a large amount of Latin American countries defines this type of public intervention. The aforementioned is characterized by the strong ability of the State to completely organize and represent organizations –particularly of the union-kind– that try to influence the public sphere through exchanging resources (economical, political, etc.) (Jordana, 1995) and that, up to that point, were the main spokespeople for citizens before the State (Subirats, 2015).

In contrast, the "issue networks" make up a relatively stable and inter-dependent horizontal network with actors with operative autonomy, that interact through negotiations and that are able to affect the effectiveness of a public policy or public decision. Among these, the ones that stand out are those with a high technical expertise or professional networks (Rhodes, 1997).

In short, in the literature about policy networks, one can find that the two kinds of aforementioned networks are differentiated from the concept of governance in the following sense. Public policy networks are viewed and analyzed as a kind of political intermediation (Rhodes, 1997), while gover-nance alludes to a coordinated process of public policy decision-making and

implementation by actors from the public and private realms and volunteer associations (Rhodes, 1997).

Public policy networks are viewed and analyzed as a medium level concept that opens the door to understanding the creation of public policy through analyzing the interaction of actors around a public policy (Evans, 1998). While governance, from a Public Administration perspective, alludes to a new method of government, different from the government's hierarchical and market methods (Rhodes, 1997) that involve new collective "steering" mechanisms on the government's side in public affairs (Porras, 2016), recognizing the complexity of the problems it is facing.

In this sense, the concept of governance has been promoted by several social, political and economical phenomena that led to a process of interdependence among actors to achieve individual and collective goals. Among these phenomena are: i) the new public management, which forced governments to retract its executive capacities from the State, due to the streamlining and pursuit of efficiency through a lesser bureaucratic apparatus, ii) the globalization phenomenon, which diminished the association costs between several actors all over the world, and resulted in, iii) regional and supranational integration processes, through which there would be a loss of directionality and political effectiveness of government actions, being conditioned by international agreements and agendas, and bilateral cooperation processes among regions on the margins of their actions, iv) the growing interest of citizens in public affairs, and v) the mayor relevance of sub-national governments (Hirst, 2000; Pierre, 2000b; Rhodes, 2000; Sorensen, 2005).

For all the above reasons, public policies, from a governance standpoint, are a contingent result of the joint interaction, negotiation, and decision-making between a diversity of actors that form a network –not just of the intermediation of specific interest groups that aim to influence public policy decisions before the government.

In this way, network governance is presented as a new structure of government, far from traditional models (hierarchical and market) (Rhodes, 1997; 2000). This new structure is mainly characterized by its capacity to self-regulate, as well as being interdependent and autonomous from other organizations and institutions like the government itself, which is why it is not bound to specific norms, but the ones agreed as game rules by the participants of its network (Rhodes, 2000).[4]

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4 That is how the traditional image of government as an almighty entity, with the passage of time, reduced its capacity to make decisions unilaterally and, because of that, when we talk about governance, the idea of governing is reconsidered and, once again, a new window of opportunity is opened to continue analyzing the government's doings inasmuch as compared studies (Peters, 2000), as well as the analysis of individuals in society from the perspective of political ethnicity (Rhodes, 2000).

In spite of conceptual advancements, governance is and has been debated as an umbrella concept largely utilized indiscriminately, due to the sparse clarity and constant debate around its definition (Porras, 2012). With this, I mean that such concept has been studied by diverse disciplines, analytical levels and approaches that have generated some disarray whenever it is used[5].

Specifically, there are two particular approaches that have turned it operational-oriented. The first one did it from a more normative framework that has had a large influence in topics like citizen participation and democratic governability (Porras, 2012). An example of this approach is the concept proposed by the World Bank, an entity that, whenever speaks of "good governance", alludes to certain normative elements of good government, such as indexes of corruption, transparency, accountability, etc. On the other hand, the "German" school (and Rhodes in Great Britain) has placed a special emphasis on the informal interaction processes between society and government that differentiate this concept from traditional methods to govern through the centralization of State or Market (Bevir and Rhodes, 2007). The aforementioned –according to this school of thought– has led to a special form of public action through a network of actors, public as well as private, together under the premise that government has stopped being the only actor with the capacity to make decisions that affect the public sphere and public policy topics.[6]

This document analyzes governance in the second described dimension, since it places "good governance" as a concept more inclined to the field of new public management and democratic governability than to governance networks. In table 1, you can see this difference between approaches, even in comparison with the orthodox approach of traditional policy management.

In this way, "good governance", for example, and governance networks, al-though both allude to fragmented governability processes, they do not share the same substantial characteristics inasmuch the role that each actor –government, market, citizens– plays in public affairs. This difference can be seen on table 2, which shows the characteristics that each actor plays in the two analyzed approaches, stresses that actor capabilities in a governance network are shared in relation to the management of public policy, while each actor has a specific role in "good governance".

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5 Rhodes (2000) alludes, at least, refers to 7 types of governance approaches, depending of the study discipline, among which you can find public administration, international relations, organizational affairs, economy, etc.

6 In this sense, it is convenient to stress that these process of incidence of society in the policy processes are given through non-formal representational mechanisms, which is why these processes are excluded from participation through political parties, bureaucracy, congress or executive power. In this sense, governance, aside from analyzing new processes of government action under the inclusion of new actors in the public decision-making, has also awoken the interest of the scientific community in relation to the insufficiency processes of the government's traditional institutions to regulate public affairs (Méndez, 2012).

TABLE 1. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT
AND GOVERNANCE

Model / Key Elements	Theoretical Roots	State Tradition	Analysis Unit	Key Approaches	Resource Allocation Mechanisms	Fundamental Beliefs
Public Administration	Political Science and Public Policy	Unitarian/ Federal	Political-Management System	Counseling and Policy Implementation	Hierarchy	Public Sector Ethos
New Public Administration	Rational Election Theory and Management Studies	Regulatory	Organization	Organization Resource and Performance Management	Markets	Efficiency, Competence and Market
Governance	New Institutionalism and Network Theory	Differentiated	Red	Negotiation of values, meanings and relations	Networks	Trust and reciprocity

Source: Rhodes, 2016.

TABLE 2. GOOD GOVERNANCE AND GOVERNANCE

	Government's role	Market's role	Citizens' Roles
Good Governance	- Regulator - Policy maker	- Public goods purveyors	- "Client" - Supervisor
Governance Networks	- Coordinator - Policy maker	- Coordinator - Policy maker	- Coordinator - Policy maker

Source: The author

That is how, in a context of high social, political and economical complexity governance tries to go against the legitimacy and inequality crisis generated by the governing style of State and Market respectively (Subirats, 2015). Considering this, and under a principle of interdependence, the government assumes the need to interact and cooperate with other social agents to govern a society of this kind: complex. Because of this, governance networks are not spaces for the intermediation of interests, as policy networks indeed are, but allude to a decision-making process coordinated by diverse social actors that give more legitimacy to the process of making and implementing public policies, and, at that moment, argue for their greater redistributive capacity (Subirats, 2015).[7]

That is why, the analytical framework provided by governance networks is placed before the need to describe the public decision-making process within a

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7 This new structure is mainly characterized by its capacity to self-regulate and interdependence of other organizations and institutions like the government itself, which is why it is not subject to specific norms, but to the ones the networks participants agree as game rules (Rhodes, 2000).

context of high complexity characterized by: i) a high concentration of actors from different sectors and levels of competence in certain territories around a public policy topic, ii) a high decentralization of the necessary resources to carry out a public policy between them; and iii) an active participation of citizens in topics of public interest.

That is how the traditional image of government as an almighty entity, with the passage of time, reduced its capacity to make decisions unilaterally, due to the development of new actors in the public arena like an organized civil society or the private sector –which managed to generate their own resources and to take an important place in the discussion of public affairs, as well as generating logics for action (institutions) that escaped the guidelines imposed by the central government or other governmental authorities–. So when government is not the only actor than can influence public decisions, it becomes a coordinating agent with the main function of getting itself organized with the other social, economical and political actors for the design and implementation of policies. In short, this is a coordinating or interactive State (Rhodes, 2000)[8].

In this way, the concepts of public policy networks and governance, although related, keep a slight difference between them, which answers to each concept's explanatory locus. In the processes to govern through policy networks, the main relevant factor is political intermediation; in governance networks, it is interdependence and the network's stability in time before any given problem. But in spite of the above mentioned, both concepts play a crucial role in the policy analysis process, since they determine the social, political and cultural contexts in which these develop based on the institutions that regulate the behavior of the actors that constitute these networks.

From this perspective, some works like the ones of Pierre and Peters (2000) and Peters and Pierre (2005) have pointed an exaggerated dimension of the reach of governance networks in the public realm, particularly regarding the role that the government plays in them. For these authors, although governance networks do involve a new method of "steering" public problems on the government's side, this practice doesn't necessarily translate into a weakening of the central government *per se*. Even for them, it shows the government's capacity to adapt to new circumstances of greater complexity, which is why its resilience capacity "shines".

In consequence, research around the concept of governance could be placed in a continuous line that goes from authors that believe governance networks

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8 In this sense, Kooiman and Van Vliet (1993, p. 64) note that the concept of governance "points towards the creation of a certain structure or order which cannot be imposed from the outside, but is the result of the interaction of a large variety of actors that influence the way to govern".

are managed by the government (Pierre and Peters, 2000), to those who believe that these networks are auto-regulated and that the government doesn't have an important place within them[9] (Rhodes, 1997).

Thus, it is necessary to point, in the first place, that government action through networks in the public realm is part of a single *continuum* that, according to public policy topics, begins with a hierarchical role for the government in public decision-making, and evolves into a shared decision-making structure in which government doesn't have a predominant role. In other words, government and governance are part of one same action process by the government as a network.

For a better understanding of the aforementioned, in terms of network structure, we could argue that this *continuum* can be seen in several types of networks, going through "policy communities" (restrictive), "issue networks" (plural) and "governance networks" (interdependent). The difference between "issue networks" and "governance networks" is the explanatory factor provided by the interdependence between actors when the time comes to structure the joint decision-making[10] (Rhodes, 1997). While the flux of actors that form the "issue network" can be constant, in relation to the stage in the public policy decision-making process, in which there are no other indispensable actors to make decisions besides the government, in the governance networks, the structure stabilizes once it presents itself before a specific set of problems, generating its own logics of action. The actors that form a governance network are vital for the achievement of its objectives and the government does not maintain a prevailing role in its decision-making process (Rhodes, 1997), or it does so, but at least playing the role of coordinator or manager (Pierre and Peters, 2000; Peters and Pierre; 2005)

That is how governance has woken the interest of the scientific community dedicated to the study of government and public policies by offering a new perspective from which to look at government actions in the public sphere through an analytical framework different from the traditional methods of State and the Market. But, how can you analyze governance networks? And how to know if these methods are, in fact, democratic? The next sub-section discusses both questions, while explaining the main challenges that these processes involve.

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9 See Rhodes (1997).

10 This characteristic is part of an answer given by Rhodes (1997) to Dowding's critiques of his network models: the Rhodes model. Very often, several works like Evans's (1998) glorify Dowding's critique to Rhodes, weakening the explicative character of his model, but do not offer any reference to the answer they offer about it.

DEMOCRATIC (?) GOVERNANCE NETWORKS

To think of governance in democratic terms is to venture into an area that hasn't been discussed by the academic community that addresses this subject matter, because the main interest around governance processes resides mainly in the new forms of management and implementation of public policies. That is to say that there is a larger interest in the efficiency processes in political management than in discussing whether its processes and results are given in democratic contexts or if they even generate results of this kind.

Up to this point, the literature that addresses this kind of questionings has been scarce, but among it, the work of Sorensen and Torfing (2007a) stands out. Through their collective effort, these authors develop diverse postures to analyze the democratic adjective of governance networks. Among these postures to analyze the term, three principal schools of thought that stand out.

The first proposal is the one developed by Bevir and Rhodes (2007). These authors argue for the need to rethink the concept of governance in relation to contextual mechanisms that disassociate themselves in specific manners from the term's exact definition. They also argue for the need to understand the concept of governance and the governance processes as multidimensional frameworks that encompass diverse ways to understand these processes within the framework of the social and cultural traditions in which they are being discussed. For this goal, the authors point to deep ethnography as a first rate analytical tool, as well as other kind of data recollection tools that allow for the exhaustive knowledge of the phenomenon being studied.

From a different perspective, Sorensen and Torfin (2007, b;c), using the different schools of thought of the new institutionalism, stress the need to analyze the network structuring process, since this is the moment when the network's interpretative framework for action and negotiation among its actors will be established and, possibly, will become part of the institution itself with the passing of time. They also argue for the need to understand and assess governance networks in a different way from the way it is done with organizations, since governance networks do not flourish within organizations, but on relatively institutionalized frameworks that facilitate and compel the relations between network actors, therefore affecting its result production (Sorensen and Torfing, 2007c).[11] That is how, through the institutionalization of rules and procedures, as well as by the recognition of interdependence among actors, it is determined who could be considered a legitimate member of the network and who could also be directly benefitted by it in its "democratic" aspect.

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11 This process of institutionalization happens precisely through the creation of "institutions" which we can address as "rules, norms, cognitive models and social imaginary" and are the result of the interaction between the network's participants that regulate its behavior" (Sorensen and Torfing, 2007c, pp. 25).

Finally, Esmark's proposal (2007) stands out. He points towards analyzing governance networks as a mechanism of complementary representation to the traditional areas of democratic representation, under the new post-liberal democratic frameworks, mainly based on the term of "competitive democracy" suggested by Etzioni, which opens the door to relate traditional mechanisms of political and electoral representation with new frameworks for joint decision-making, such as the governance networks. Esmark proposes that the analysis of the democratic reach of governance networks could be carried out based on the network's degree of inclusion, the advertising of the decision being made and the degree of responsiveness of those who represent different group of actors within it.

All three proposals encompass an agenda of rather promising active research to continue with the analysis of the public policy management and implementation processes under a democratic approach. Even if these proposals must be complemented with methodological tools, because of the data analysis and gathering mechanisms similar to its theoretical hypothesis, the line of research remains open to the use of these interpretation frameworks that allow us to dismiss or strengthen these perspectives.

On the other hand, the main challenges that this new research agenda outlines are mainly centered on the temporal challenge of knowing the processes of design and institutional changes within the networks of actors that can be analyzed, as well as the methodological instruments at medium level that allow for comparative studies. In this final instance, new methodologies stand out, such as the Social Network Analysis (SNA) that allows us to comprehend the relations between individuals and the network's structure for a greater understanding of its conformation process and the roles that each of its members has within it (Ramírez, 2016), which is why it is viewed as a rising methodology for analyzing every government action in broad terms, particularly the management of public policy and governance networks.

CONCLUSIONS

Government action has gone through an extensive transformation because of several social, political and economical phenomena that have taken place through time all over the world. This has pushed governments to keep modifying its administrative apparatus and its way of acting and conducting themselves in the public sphere. This situation has been reflected in the continued generation of analytical frameworks that allow a greater understanding of government performance in public affairs and its way of participating in the political management of public policies.

Throughout this document, we have mainly discussed government action through the concepts of public policy networks and governance networks. This journey has shown the constant process of change in relation to the complexity of the problems that government action faces. Also, it has provided the necessary tools to notice how concepts such as governance networks currently dominate academic activity due to the complexity of the public problems that they presently face and press for public policy actions based on the large cooperation between actors from different levels and sectors.

Specifically, it has been noted that the concept of governance networks can be discussed and related to a large variety of other concepts, which has led to a confusing use of the term and all the implications that this implies. Regarding this situation, in this document we have decided to adopt the perspective of analysis that establishes a semantic separation between the concept of public policy networks and the concept of governance for a larger understanding of both terms. Even though the present document has managed to clear several contrasting aspects related to the analysis of the concepts of governance networks, it is necessary to continue analyzing the concept in the field, in order to keep dismissing or exploring all the factors that can invigorate its empirical success, so that, to a larger extent, we can award it with the adjective "democratic".

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