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Between democratic network governance and neoliberalism: A regime-theoretical analysis of collaboration in Barcelona

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A B S T R A C T

Contemporary explanations of urban governance in Europe have underlined the increasing influence of the 'networks paradigm'. For some, urban network governance revitalises local democracy by fostering a more plural, inclusive and participative approach to urban policymaking. For others, the shift towards collaborative governance facilitates the concentration of urban political power and the cooptation of civil society into the rationalities of neoliberalism. This paper argues that such accounts are excessively reductive, failing adequately to recognise the spatio-temporal complexities of urban governance trajectories in Europe. The paper argues that a reinvigorated regime-theoretical approach can help overcome the networks/neoliberalism dualism by showing how different coalitions mobilise different sets of resources over time and in different policy arenas. Prospects for urban democracy are not only determined by the evolution of structural forces like the 2008 crisis or global neoliberalism. They are also influenced by the outcomes of political competition between alternative coalitions within each city. The analysis of the case of Barcelona illustrates the value of such analytical perspective and of the research agenda that stems from it.

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Introduction

Contemporary explanations of urban politics in Europe have put their focus on transformations of urban governance in the context of a broader process of state restructuring. Prominent among the different theories and narratives analysing and explaining such transformations are those that since the late 1990s have claimed that traditional modes of bureaucratic government are being replaced by new modes of collaborative governance. Through the concept of "collaborative governance" – or others close to it like 'interactive governance', 'governance-beyond-the-state', the 'partnership paradigm', 'joined-up government', 'network governance' or simply 'governance' (in opposition to 'government') – this strand of the literature has underlined the increasing significance of collaboration between governmental and non-governmental actors in the making of urban public policies. Whereas public–private collaboration could hardly be presented as novel in the United States, its expansion in Europe has been much more striking because of the dominance of a state-centred policy approach, particularly in the context of the building and consolidation of welfare states.

According to this narrative, the shift "from government to governance" is not exclusive but it is particularly evident at the urban realm. In a monograph about the British case, for example, Leach and Percy-Smith (2001: 1) concluded that the traditional conception of local government as "what the council does" had to be replaced by a new one in which local policymaking "increasingly involves multi-agency working, partnerships and policy networks which cut across organizational boundaries". In reaction to the criticism that such a shift might be a peculiarity of the UK (see, for example, Le Galès, 2002), John (2001: 174) stated that: "the charge of (UK) exceptionalism should be rejected, since the Netherlands, Germany and Spain are as reforming as the UK on certain dimensions (of governance)". In the same vein, Newman stated (2005: 85) that "the idea of a shift from markets and hierarchies towards networks and partnerships as modes of coordination is a dominant narrative". Network governance became a potent 'orthodoxy' (Davies, 2011; Marinetto, 2003; Marsh, 2008) in Europe during those years, both in political and academic discourses.

A long time has passed since the publication of the work of authors like Leach and Percy-Smith (2001), John (2001), Denters and Rose (2005) and others who epitomised this narrative (e.g. Rhodes, 1997). Looking back, we can observe how enthusiasm about the meaning and the implications of this transformation has drastically diminished. In its original formulation, networks were supposed to "overcome the limitations of anarchic market

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exchange and top-down planning in an increasing complex and global world" (Jessop, 2003: 101–02). Networks potentially unlocked a third way between states and markets, extending the public sphere, empowering communities and cultivating inclusive policy making (Deakin and Taylor, 2002: 17; quoted in Davies, 2011). The critics of this perspective, however, have presented network governance as a fundamental facet of neoliberal hegemony (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Davies, 2011, 2012; Fuller & Geddes, 2008; Geddes, 2006; Swyingedouw, 2005). Rather than the development of new plural, horizontal and inclusive forms of network governance, critics say, what we observe in European cities is the increasing concentration of urban power in the hands of a few political and business elites. Discourses of horizontality underlying the network paradigm have colluded in drawing a veil of discretion over power relationships in the city.

This paper starts from the premise that despite the differences in the uses and interpretations of network governance in different European countries, and despite the evolution of this debate over the last decade, there continues to be a fundamental tension between those who perceive the evolution towards the network paradigm as an opportunity to democratise urban governance and those who emphasise the highly asymmetrical nature of urban political power and its increasing concentration as a consequence of neoliberalisation. The central contribution of this paper is to argue that such accounts are excessively reductive, failing adequately to recognise the complex inter-relationships and dependencies among different modes of governing and spatio-temporal variation in different urban governance trajectories. Through the analysis of the trajectories of urban governance in Barcelona since the first democratic elections in 1979, this paper highlights the need to reconnect meta-narratives of urban governance with micro-level accounts of the 'messiness' of local politics and practices (Blanco, Griggs, & Sullivan, 2014). The paper argues that a reinvigorated regime-theoretical approach can help overcome the networks/neoliberalism dualism by showing how different coalitions mobilise different sets of resources over time and in different policy arenas. The paper contributes to regime theory by illustrating how patterns of regime-governance vary not only among cities, but within them too.

Was network governance such a good idea?[1]

During the 1990s and the early 2000s networks became a dominant concept in the theorisation of urban governance shifts in Europe. The move 'from government to governance' (Rhodes, 1997) was considered to be occurring not only at the local level but at the national and supranational levels too, reflecting a more fundamental change in the nature of political power, in the modalities of state-society interaction and in the modes of policymaking (Pierre & Peters, 2000).

The debate on the meaning, the drivers and the implications of such transformation adopted different tones in different countries and evolved significantly. Original formulations for the emergence of the governance paradigm in the UK, for example, referred to governance networks as 'self-organising, interorganisational networks' enjoying a significant autonomy from the state (Rhodes, 1997: 15). One of the fundamental features of the 'Anglo-governance school' is the emphasis on the 'hollowing out of the state', mainly as the result of "market style policies initiated in the 1980s" (Marinetto, 2003: 595). Networks, in this context, were interpreted as a search for integration within an increasingly fragmented organisational landscape emerging from the privatisation

reforms of the Thatcherite era (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998: 315; see also Rhodes, 2007).

Bevir and Rhodes (2010) identified metagovernance theory as a 'second wave' in governance literature following the Anglo-Governance School. Based on the contributions of Nordic academics like Kjaer (2004) and Sorensen and Torfing (2005, 2008), among others, "metagovernance brings the state back in as the coordinator of governance networks and, in the case of governance failure, as accountable body of last resort" (Davies, 2011: 19). Metagovernance, in this latter sense, is partly a response to the problematic relationship between governance networks and democracy (Klijn & Skelcher, 2007), placing the responsibility of the 'democratic anchorage' of governance networks on state institutions (see Sorensen & Torfing, 2005).

A fundamental debate in the network governance literature, thus, is to what extent (and under what circumstances) the shift 'from (hierarchical) government to (collaborative) governance' entails a more pluralistic and democratic style of government or, on the contrary, provokes an increasing concentration of power and weakens democracy. As recognised by Klijn and Skelcher (2007: 588), "in the absence of evidence, the debate has been polarized".

The confrontation between the Differentiated Polity Model (DPM) proposed by Rhodes and Bevir (2003) and the Asymmetric Power Model (APM) by Marsh (2008) is a paradigm case for understanding the tensions within explanation of network governance. These two models offer alternative explanations on how power relations have shifted (or not) in the United Kingdom, although they have strong relevance for the debate on urban governance transformations – within and beyond the UK. In the remainder of this section we review the terms of such debate and its reflection in different accounts of urban governance developments.

Bevir and Rhodes' (2003: 41) main thesis was that "British government has shifted (…) from the government of a unitary state to governance in and by networks".[2] The new polity, in their view, involves a continuing process of negotiation and exchange between different actors at different levels of governance (local, regional, national and supranational), and among different sectors (government, private and voluntary). The state has been "hollowed-out" from above by international interdependence, from below by marketisation and sideways by agencies, which has "undermined the ability of the core executive to act effectively, making it increasingly reliant on diplomacy" (2003: 58). In a context of increasing fragmentation and dispersion of resources, governments cannot monopolise the policy process anymore. This does not mean that they do not play a significant role. The concept of metagovernance, as suggested by Jessop (2003) points to the adoption of a new steering (and not rowing) role which entails: (1) setting the rules of the game; (2) shaping discourses/narratives/identities; and/or (3) distributing resources.

Such a perspective tends to provide a fundamentally optimistic insight into the transformations of governance and political power. The fragmentation of political power entails more pluralism and opens an opportunity window for enhanced citizen participation in public decision-making. Although it is accepted that governance networks are not necessarily democratic per se (Bogasson & Musso, 2006; Klijn & Skelcher, 2007; Sorensen & Torfing, 2005, 2008, 2009), this strand of the literature tends to see potential in them for democratic renewal – particularly if they are properly metagoverned. Network governance also improves the capacity for providing effective and legitimate solutions to complex problems (Waagenar, 2007). A widespread perspective within this strand of the literature is that the emergence of the 'networks paradigm'

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[2] Rhodes now tends to treat network governance as a story rather than as a transformative empirical phenomenon (see Rhodes, 2011).