



Methodological and Ideological Options

Deliberation as a catalyst for reflexive environmental governance[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 June 2016

Received in revised form 19 August 2016

Accepted 12 September 2016

Available online 30 September 2016

Keywords:

Reflexive governance

Reflexivity

Environmental governance

Deliberation

Deliberative democracy

Polycentric governance

ABSTRACT

Ecological or ecosystemic reflexivity involves the capacity of social-ecological systems to reconfigure themselves in response to reflection on their performance. In this paper we argue that deliberation is central to reflexive governance, mainly because it can reconcile many if not most of the sometimes contradictory claims that are made in the literature about its drivers. We take four key dimensions along which reflexivity may be sought, each of which features a binary that puts two plausible drivers of reflexivity in tension with one another: (i) sources of knowledge (public participation versus expertise); (ii) composition of public discourse (diversity versus consensus); (iii) institutional architecture (polycentricity versus centralization); (iv) institutional dynamics (flexibility versus stability). In each case, we demonstrate that deliberative ideas can manage the tension between the two plausible drivers of reflexivity.

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1. Introduction

The field of environmental governance has long concerned itself with questions of how to secure cooperation and coordination in the context of abuse of commons resources (Ostrom, 1990). The other main concern in the field—yet to be addressed as effectively as cooperation and coordination—is how institutions and practices can respond productively to changing social-ecological conditions, especially when those changes are capable of producing catastrophe. Ideas about resilience (Walker et al., 2006), experimental governance (Ansell and Bartenberger, 2016; De Búrca et al., 2014), and adaptive governance (Chaffin et al., 2014) have joined a debate about how to address this need.

We believe that the idea of reflexivity speaks more directly to this kind of need for responsiveness than do the alternatives—especially in the context of profound and pressing challenges. The reason is that it entails no equivocation concerning restructuring. If institutions are performing poorly, then they need to be able to question their own foundations—rather than just modify their practices while maintaining the same overall identity. In the context of governance generally, reflexivity is the ability of a structure, process, or set of ideas to reconfigure itself in response to reflection on its performance. In environmental

governance we can speak of ecological or ecosystemic reflexivity whose concern is with social-ecological systems rather than just human systems; while reflection requires human agency, the ability to listen and interpret signals from the non-human world is central.¹ On the one hand, reflexivity emphasizes (more so than resilience) the capacity of individuals and institutions to function as deliberate, self-critical agents of change in social-ecological systems. On the other hand, reflexivity emphasizes (more so than experimentalist or adaptive governance) the specific implications for institutional change that flow from linkages and feedbacks between human and non-human systems, including the need to monitor the impacts of institutions on ecosystems and vice versa, and to rethink and reshape core values and practices accordingly.

Reflexivity has long been accepted as a central virtue in environmental governance (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 2014; Hendriks and Grin, 2007; Meadowcroft and Steurer, 2013; Voß et al., 2006a). But the increasingly prominent conceptualization of environmental affairs in terms of an emerging epoch of the Anthropocene confirms the importance of reflexivity and adds urgency to its pursuit (Dryzek, 2014). The Anthropocene emerges as human influences become decisive in affecting the parameters of the Earth system. While its starting point is debatable, the Anthropocene makes itself felt in the “Great Acceleration” in material production, global trade, and environmental degradation starting in the mid-twentieth century (Steffen et al., 2011). The departure from the relatively stable conditions of the preceding Holocene epoch increases the risk of catastrophic tipping points or state shifts in ecosystems, including the

[☆] We are grateful for comments on this research from Carolyn Hendriks, Jensen Sass, Ana Tanasoca and two anonymous reviewers. We received valuable feedback on this research from presentations at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra, and the University of Tasmania. This research was supported under the Australian Research Council's Laureate Fellowship funding scheme (project number FL140100154).

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¹ Given that our context in this paper is environmental, we shall refer to reflexivity for short while we mean ecosystemic reflexivity throughout.

Earth system in its entirety. Possibilities include rapid sea level rise as polar ice melts, and local or regional collapse of ecosystems such as the Amazon rainforest. Many if not all of the dominant human institutions that developed in the late Holocene have trouble recognizing their environmental preconditions and impacts, and as such are insensitive to the possibility of catastrophe and indeed have contributed to ecosystem degradation. In other words, the key problem with dominant political and economic institutions such as states, corporations and markets is that they are not reflexive. The problem is exacerbated inasmuch as those institutions feature path dependency, generating feedback that seems to confirm their own necessity, but in a way that avoids responding to signals from the non-human world (which, in an epoch of pervasive human influence in ecosystems, is less non-human than before).

Reflexivity is, then, a key virtue for environmental governance. But what exactly enables reflexivity, and what inhibits it? The literature on reflexive governance (and associated areas) makes a variety of claims about the sources of reflexivity and obstacles to it. This literature does not however speak with one voice. So, for example, views are divided as to whether addressing complex global problems such as climate change requires an approach that is highly decentralized (given diverse individual and social drivers of environmental impacts and the ways in which climate change affects communities) or highly centralized (given the globally aggregated nature of the causes of climate change). Here we will not try to put to rest questions about the drivers of reflexivity, but we will make the case for regarding deliberation as necessarily central to reflexive governance, mainly because it can hold a series of governance binaries in productive tension, thus yielding reflexivity. Our concern is with drivers that can be the object of collective choice, which rules out (for example) uncontrollable disasters and crises.

Our strategy is to take four key dimensions along which reflexivity may be sought, each of which features a binary that puts two plausible drivers of reflexivity (both of which have their advocates) in tension with one another. The dimensions and their associated binaries are:

- (i) Sources of knowledge: public participation versus expertise;
- (ii) Composition of public discourse: diversity versus consensus;
- (iii) Institutional architecture: polycentricity versus centralization;
- (iv) Institutional dynamics: flexibility versus stability.

In each case, we will demonstrate that deliberative ideas can manage the tension between the two plausible drivers of reflexivity.

While at its core our argument is an attempt to pin down what enables reflexivity in practice, it can also be read as confirmation that deliberation in environmental governance remains important under a diverse range of assumptions about institutional arrangements.

Though our argument is mostly normative, it is informed by empirical evidence on environmental governance at global and national levels, albeit not (in the space of a short paper) by systematic empirical analysis. The binaries we set out may provide foundations for further empirical study of drivers of reflexivity and the associated role of deliberation.

2. Conceptual and Causal Linkages Between Reflexivity and Deliberation

The cognitive emphasis of reflexivity highlights a conceptual resemblance with the idea of deliberation. We characterize deliberation as dialogue “aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (Chambers, 2003:309). By analyzing reflexivity and

deliberation in tandem we seek to address a limitation of existing literature that often fails to distinguish clearly between what reflexivity is (its constitutive features) and what enables it (its drivers). Like reflexivity, deliberation describes a process of reflection and revision.

Nevertheless, it does not follow that reflexivity is necessarily deliberative. If von Hayek (1979) is right about the way markets work, poor performance can lead to their reorganization, using numerous bits of incomplete and fleeting knowledge, with no collective contemplation of reasons for failure. Lindblom's (1965) “intelligence of democracy” works through “partisan mutual adjustment” or a series of reciprocal adaptations without conscious collective attention to success or failure. Non-deliberative (or weakly deliberative) reflexivity might also involve: responses to social movement protest or civil disobedience; technocratic implementation of environmental policy mandates; or the spread of technological or institutional innovations through market-driven competition (see respectively Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014:214–216; Hildingsson, 2010:160–161; Westley et al., 2013). For these reasons we characterize deliberation as a possible or contingent driver of reflexivity rather than as a constitutive or necessary feature of reflexivity.

There is a large literature on deliberative democracy and the environment (see among many others Gundersen, 1995; Baber and Bartlett, 2005; Smith, 2003), most of which points to the positive environmental consequences of deliberation (but see Humphrey, 2007 for a discordant note). While the occasional reference to reflexivity can be found in this literature (see for example Hendriks, 2009; Hildingsson, 2010), as yet there is no sustained treatment of the sort we develop in this paper.

While the explicit theory of deliberative democracy was developed in Western liberal states, the practice of deliberation is pervasive. Amartya Sen (2003) locates the universal roots of democracy in deliberative public reason (rather than in voting, which is much more culturally specific). Deliberation can, then, be thought of as a universal human capability for collective reasoning that is manifested differently in different cultures. Empirical study now charts these differences while revealing commonalities (Sass and Dryzek, 2014).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to chart all these cultural varieties and trace their implications for reflexivity, we are confident that if it applies anywhere, the case for deliberation applies everywhere. Moreover, experience suggests few limits to the sorts of issues that can profitably be subjected to citizen deliberation—including complex issues of technological risk and environmental protection that have been among the most popular topics for designed deliberative exercises.

Within the context of environmental governance, deliberative exercises need to take into account cultural variations not only in how the environment is valued but also in how collective decisions about environmental concerns are made (Raymond et al., 2014). At the same time, research on deliberative valuation of environmental services in contexts as different as Scotland (Raymond et al., 2014:151–152), Australia (Lo, 2013) and the Solomon Islands (Kenter et al., 2011) supports the view that deliberation may help to transform preferences towards greater appreciation of longer-term and intrinsic environmental values. Given that many cultures value nature primarily in non-monetary terms, methods of valuation commonly used in Western societies (e.g. contingent valuation) may be inappropriate; deliberative valuation presents opportunities to engage a more diverse range of values through culturally appropriate modes of reasoning and dialogue (Spash, 2007).

The variety of deliberative and non-deliberative sources we have outlined is grist for an ongoing debate about the drivers of reflexivity. We will try to show that, whatever one thinks about these non-deliberative sources, deliberation needs to be central to thinking about reflexivity, and that the theory of deliberative democracy can show what is required.

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