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Theoretical Approaches to Regional Governance

Theory of Governance

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Abstract

Over the last decade the concept of governance has gained much popularity in social science debates and in public discourses generally. Although most scholars agree that what is referred to as governance is not completely new and that there is no unique defining criteria for what governance in the end means, its frequent use and its points of reference are best understood as a response to overall diverse, dynamic and complex societal changes. In order to explore the Viennese perspectives in the context of the newly emerging Centroe region, the usability and possible scope of the concept of governance is examined. In particular the role of regional governance is focussed on and an overview of different theoretical approaches is provided. As the scope of regional governance is by no means self-evident, in a further step different perspectives and implications of the concept of regions are examined.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade the concept of governance has gained much popularity in social science debates and in public discourses generally. Although most scholars agree that what is referred to as governance is not completely new and that there is no unique defining criteria for what governance in the end means, its frequent use and its points of reference are best understood as a response to overall diverse, dynamic and complex societal changes. In order to explore the Viennese perspectives in the context of the Centroepe region, in the following section we examine the usability and possible scope of the concept of governance. In particular we will focus on the role of regional governance and provide an overview of different theoretical approaches. As the scope of regional governance is by no means self-evident, in a further step different perspectives and implications of the concept of regions are examined.

2. Theoretical approaches to Governance

Today the role politics can or has to play in society is being redefined – a process which is best caught with the diagnosed shift “from government to governance”. So, after all, at the heart of the popular concept of governance are no rigid definitions, but a general indication of areas in the political system and the society-state-relationship that have undergone profound changes. In varying degrees, depending on the disciplinary and political background of work, the following four areas of change are discernible.

First of all, most agree that the shift from government to governance implies a multiplication or diversification of the actors involved in policy making. Especially state actors and institutions are accompanied by all sorts of non-state actors, such as private or civil society actors. Second, a new type of political “steering” is diagnosed. While processes of “government” are associated with apparent hierarchical and authoritarian styles of regulation, the new modes of governance are supposed to be characterised by new styles of political interaction and negotiation, marked by more horizontal forms of negotiation and cooperation. Third, the spatial/territorial scope of politics has undergone shifts and has expanded. Political-economic processes which formerly have been attributed to specific scalar units – such as the local, regional, national, global scale – follow and create new scalar geographies, to the effect that the role and significance of specific scalar units are re-evaluated. The ongoing debate on the shifting role of the national scale and the new importance of the global and the regional scale, marked by new forms of global governance or regional governance may be one indication of this change of perspective. But also the whole scalar interplay, the way how political and economic processes at different territorial units articulate and relate to each other is object of study. Specific attention to this aspect is paid in work on multi-level governance (Bache/Flinders 2004; Gualini 2004, Brunnengräber/Walk 2007) and, with a slightly different emphasis, in the debate on the politics of scale (Swyngedouw 1997; Marston 2000; Brenner 2001; for a comparison between both approaches see Wissen 2007). And finally also the content and priorities of politics undergo changes. The general transformation of statehood, described above, goes along with a profound shift in the orientation of

public politics – as a general re-assessment of public structural policies, the shift from input- to output-oriented public policies, austerity policies and a strong focus on market-orientation and inter-territorial competition.

Starting from these very general common characteristics, conceptualisations of governance vary following disciplinary backgrounds, the projected applications of the concept, and the emphasis of research also can be classified whether being more descriptive, normative, political-strategic or rather analytical (see Brunnengräber et al. 2004). While most of the debates on governance focus on questions of effective steering and how the state has to adapt to its dynamically changing environment in order to regain or preserve steering capacity, the term “steering” is gradually replaced by the term “governance” (ibid.,8f; Benz 2004 in ibd.). Research interests in this respect vary from state-centric approaches – focussing on the political and institutional capacity of the state to steer the society and the economy based on “political brokerage” and “marked priorities” – to more society-centred approaches setting the focus on “various forms of formal or informal types of public-private interaction” and questions of co-ordination and self-governance within different types of networks and partnerships (Pierre 2000,3). In opposition to this focus, critical perspectives emphasise the hidden asymmetries of the governance concept and the involved discourses, and criticise it as an instrument of power. Especially the growing informalisation of public policy and the structural exclusiveness of public-private bargaining processes tendentially weakens less powerful actors and undermines formal democratic procedures for the problem formulation and decision making (Brunnengräber et al. 2004,11; Brand 2003; for a regional case study see Coimbra/Novy 2007).

Governance-concepts have a very different focus, whether debated in economic sciences or in political sciences. A major difference between economic and political science debates on governance is the different emphasis on state and market. While the political science debate concentrates on questions of changing modes of coordination at the interface between state and society, the work stemming from political economy focuses on problems of institutional steering and embedding of economic/market activities (see Lütz 2003 in Brunnengräber et al. 2004,8). Governance in economic sciences can be very broadly divided into economic governance, referring at a macro-level to questions of steering of modern capitalist economies and the role of private enterprises in society – and corporate governance, observing rather at a micro-level the internal structures of firms, enterprises and corporations (see Brunnengräber et al. 2004,14). As for the purpose of this project, the social science debates hint at more fruitful aspects. In the following sections we draw mainly on social science debates on governance.

In order to better understand the outlined above regional developments there are three, only partly overlapping, sub-strands of debates on governance which hint to useful insights: urban and metropolitan governance, multi-level governance and regional governance. In urban research and planning it has become common place to on the one hand analyse the changing role of cities in a global city system and on the other hand to stress the new modes of urban or metropolitan governance. As described for the governance concept in general, a certain divide can be observed between work which frames its focus in a broader political economy perspective and asks about the strategies by

which the growing orientation towards the entrepreneurial, competitive, creative but also revanchist city is implemented (Keil 1998; Brenner 2003). Other work is in the first place rather concerned with questions of the changing conditions for political steering and “strategies of coordination available to urban actors”, like the formation of urban growth coalitions (Stoker 2000,93ff) or the political implications of private-public partnerships (Sack 2005). The general transformation of the public sector ‘from government to governance’ is debated in public administration as “new public management”. The later focuses on corporate management, referring to “introducing private sector management methods to the public sector through performance measures, managing by results, value for money, and closeness to the customer” and marketization, referring to “introducing incentive structures into public service provision through contracting-out, quasi-markets, and consumer choices” (Rhodes 2000,56).

Starting from the background of the European integration process, debates on multi-level governance try to analyse the changing forms of state regulation under conditions of globalisation (see Bache/Flinders 2004; Marks/Hooghe 2004; Gualini 2004; Brunnengräber/Walk 2007). First applied to challenges posed by the interplay of administrative units in federal settings, the concept was further expanded in the context of the ongoing European integration process to capture the transformation of political steering capacities and shifting relations between national and European political processes.

While debates on multi-level governance focus more on the changing significance and the interplay between different levels of statehood and political steering processes in general, mayor strands of regional governance rather tend to take its multi-level context for granted and focus on the different forms of governance within sub-national regional units linking it in a more explicit form to processes of spatial development. Basically, it refers to complex structures of steering or regulation within regions, comprising formal and informal procedures, state and non-state actors and at the same time hierarchical, competitive and cooperative relationships between those actors (Pütz 2004,11). At a very general level, Fürst (2006) differentiates between functional approaches, focussing on specific problems of regional development, and territorial approaches to regional governance, analysing the strategies of specific actors and institutions in a given territory. Both approaches can be marked by either an analytical orientation, analysing specific processes and structures or a normative orientation, stressing possible forms of “good governance”. Related to debates about regional governance are the previous debates on learning regions, linking endogenous regional development and innovation to the capacity to the idea of learning; the milieu approach, observing regional actors and their inter-relations as a basis for regional development; and finally network theory, analysing the role of actors and their cooperation for the steering of societies (Heintel 2006).

What is referred to as a “resurgence of the region” in the last decade, is intrinsically linked to new strategies of accumulation and to the emergence of new forms of regulation across space. Consequently, the notion of new regionalism is closely related to what is debated as regional governance. It is essential, in order to better understand the concept of governance and regional governance to acknowledge the overall changing contexts in which these concepts are placed.

Many debates on recent transformation stress technological innovation as a foundation for an

emerging information society, diversification of life-styles, general economic globalisation processes and the resulting fading role of national politics. In this perspective, recent changes in regional development may appear as unavoidable consequences produced by the external driving forces of globalisation. However, in order to understand the dynamics of regional transformation in more detail, approaches which rather observe complex processes of de- and re-territorialisation linked to a general transformation of statehood instead of the fading of national state politics provide better insights (see Keil 1998; Pütz 2004). The “state scale in this perspective is not being eroded, but rearticulated and reterritorialised to both sub- and supra-state scales” (Brenner 1998,1). What has been termed the shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism also went along with profound changes of the modes of regulation and the inner organisation of statehood at the national level, linked to dismantling what has been called Keynesian welfare.

Regional economic development and governance are both linked to each other. Hence, a key-question is how to conceptualize governance and its relation to economic development in order to arrive at a coherent understanding of governance processes. It is suggested here to adopt a regulationist approach as this political economy perspective allows for linking economic structures and processes as well as processes of regulation within a coherent theoretical framework (Aglietta 2000). While Hall and Soskice (2001) provide a perspective to distinguish between different national and regional types of capitalism and the institutional structures which stabilize different varieties of capitalism, the regulationist approach helps to explain why capitalism changes over time. Regulationist theory represents an institutionalist perspective on economic development and, hence, is complementary with concepts of governance. The strength of governance is that concepts of statehood building on the idea of the Leviathan are denied and regulations are considered a result of concrete processes of interactions between different actors. Notwithstanding, economic structures cannot be addressed in an adequate manner, therefore regulationist theory is not merely complementary but necessary. The regulationist approach allows for opening the field to an integrative analysis of economic structures and agent’s strategies. Regulation is a key-concept which refers to the institutional structures which stabilize the process of accumulation. Regulation includes institutions, norms, conventions and even culture. Governance is closer to agency and, therefore, useful for the inquiry of processes of negotiations about regulations which shape the emergence of entire patterns of regulation or so-called institutional forms. Moreover, we suggest considering governance a concept which helps to address, at least in part, the way how regulations work. Regulation is – similar to governance – considered to be multi-scale phenomena, meaning that regulation takes place at different spatial or territorial levels such as the local, the national, the regional and the international level. Historically, the territoriality of regulation shifts. This goes along with transformations of the spatial dimensions of dominant strategies of accumulation (cf. Jessop 1997, Becker 2002).

3. Regions and accumulation

It is not possible to deal with regional governance without having a clear understanding of the term

region and the economic, political and social factors which determine regional developments. Therefore theoretical approaches to regions as such as well as theoretical approaches which explain regional processes are analyzed briefly in the following. The term *region* refers to both: sub-national and supra-national territories. The definition of regions at a first glance seems simple if one thinks of it as an administrative territorial unit. Nevertheless, if one takes economic, social and (informal) political structures into account it becomes more difficult to arrive at a clear understanding.

Even if many historically established regions may appear widely taken for granted, regions are by no means naturally pre-given entities, but rather the outcome of complex processes of formation – “both mediums and outcomes of social interactions” (Gualini 2004,32). In order to better understand the political implications of specific regional developments the conceptual vagueness of the term *region* needs some observation (MacLeod 2001,811). At the simplest level, the region, or the regional, may be understood as a specific scalar manifestation of territoriality – like the local, the national, the global – often delimited by administrative boundaries. But even from this perspective neither the defining criteria nor the territorial outcome or meaning are self-evident. Furthermore what has been agreed on as a meaning of regions is not forever fixed but perpetually redefined, restructured, and often contested by opposing understandings – in this respect what becomes essential is understanding the very process of how and from which perspectives regions are constructed.

Not even the scalar articulation of regions is obvious. Following different disciplinary research interests, regions may be located either at the supra-national level or at the sub-national level. Supra-national regions, like the EU or the MERCOSUR are frequently studied by scholars of international relations or global political economy. Processes of region formation at this level are studied as “regional integration” (see Becker et al. 2006; Becker 2006). Regions as territorial units at the sub-national level but also large city-regions like the German Ruhr-area, are topics for all kinds of research in regional planning or economic geography. In recent times cross-border regions, encompassing sub-national territorial units out of different national units have received growing scholarly interest. In the following parts we will draw on notions of regions as sub-national units in order to develop basic understandings for cross-border regions.

Beyond the notion of scalar or territorial spatial units, regions can also be understood as concepts referring to some kind of common interaction, perception or identity of actors within a specific area. In this way notions of regions can also be differentiated whether based on *descriptive* features (in terms of boundaries, inner homogeneity, functions) or whether being a *normative* construct, based on administrative or political decisions (see Pütz 2004,15). In this perspective Smouts (1998) differentiates regions as historical results of different strategies of actors to (re-)define their relevant areas for action, distinguishing: “officially designed regions”, based on top-down political decisions, “spontaneous regions”, emerging out of rather bottom-up areas of exchange and interaction, and “chosen regions”, as subjective spaces, constructed out of symbolic representations (Smouts 1998,33ff).

In relation to the broader multi-level system, the sub-national regional level can also be considered as an important terrain where different socio-spatial interests are articulated and the distribution of

various kinds of resources becomes contested on the ground (Wissen 2000,374). Historically, regions have played varying roles in processes of nation- and state-building. In this respect, regions and regional territorial institutions often played a changing and contradictory role in mediating the relationship between central power and local society. From a top-down perspective, regions and their articulation of territorial distinctiveness were always a challenge for the central state in the process of nation state consolidation. From a bottom-up perspective, regional interest groups articulated as regional formations and confronted central states with the articulation of various types of demand, as claims for more or less regional autonomy, democracy, material transfers and the like, taking varying – conservative, nationalist, modernising, progressive or right-wing regionalist – forms (Keating 2003,257ff).

After a crisis and stagnation of regionalism in the 1970s, the term region or regional again became fashionable during the 1980s and 1990s. “There has been a new wave of regionalism, impelled by economic restructuring, globalization; the transformation of the nation state; and above all by European integration.” (Keating 2003,261). While cities were associated with ambivalent futures, regions became carriers of hope for approaches capable to cope with the challenges of technological change and overall socio-economic transformations (Pütz 2004,18). This re-emergence of regions in political and academic debate is referred to as “new regionalism”.

Brenner (2003) broadly identifies two different strands of analysis in new regionalism. On the one hand, new regionalism refers to the “resurgence of regional economies under conditions of globalized, post-Fordist capitalism” (see, for instance, Cooke and Morgan 1998; Amin 1999). From this perspective, the new regionalism refers to the key role of large scale regional agglomerations – and their concomitant interfirm relations, innovation clusters, learning processes, associational networks, untraded interdependencies and forms of institutional thickness – as the crucibles of economic development within contemporary global capitalism (Florida 1995; Morgan 1997). This strand of the new regionalism has focused, in particular, upon certain purportedly paradigmatic industrial districts such as Emilia-Romagna, Baden-Württemberg, Rhône-Alpes, Boston’s Route 128, Silicon Valley and Los Angeles/Orange County.” (Brenner 2003,304).

On the other hand, the notion of new regionalism has also been used to refer to the emerging sub-national political-economic landscapes within the EU. In this context the post-war nation state is considered to undergo processes of ‘hollowing out’ or rescaling towards supra-national administrative institutions, but also towards the sub-national level. In the resulting European framework of multi-level governance, national governments represent only one actor among others. In this context the role of the emergent regions is “to promote endogenous regional development under conditions of intensified supranational territorial competition” (Brenner 2003,304).

New regionalist work puts its main emphasis on regions itself and describes the impact of the re-emergence of the regional level – sketching out possible pathways of successful regional development in a globalising world (Scott 1996; Storper 1995; Florida 1995; MacLeod 2001). The central questions are on the one hand why regions seem to be more important today than decades before and how they can best play their role in order to contribute to prosperous regional development. On the other hand,

the search for new forms of governance which may be suitable for this new kind of successful regional development is pursued – a debate which is led under the umbrella of regional governance (see below).

A broader perspective is chosen by strands of political geography and geographically inspired political economy, reflecting on the overall ‘politics of scale’ (Swyngedouw 1997; Brenner 2001, Marston 2000; MacLeod 2001). A common place in these debates is that scales are no fixed pre-given entities but – in a contested process – permanently constructed, relativised and reconfigured. Instead of analysing regions in a pre-given setting of globalisation – where regional units have to ‘stand together’ in order to confront the challenges of global territorial competition – the very process of emergence of privileged territorial and scalar units for political and economic organization and their contested, dynamic and relational insertion into the diverse scalar geometry is of key interest. In other words, which kind of accumulation strategies and which projects of regulatory experimentations are linked to the resurgence of regions (Brenner 2000,329).

Although acknowledging the insights on new regional phenomenon provided by empirical new regionalist work on resurgent regional economies in emerging regions, critics point at a series of shortcomings. Especially the mostly strong tendency to focus on regional success stories, like Emilia-Romagna or Silicon Valley (see Läßle 2001 in Pütz 2004,18) and the attitude to deal with fashionable terms like ‘innovation’, ‘regional competitiveness’, ‘cluster’ in an uncritical manner is questioned. If competition is about producing winners and losers, then questions of uneven spatial development would have to be addressed in a more explicit way (MacLeod 2001,819).

Furthermore, a dominantly normative orientation of new regionalist work with a strong tendency to quickly derive policy recommendations is diagnosed. In this perspective, “new regionalism” is supposed not to simply describe ongoing developments but rather is perceived as discourse or a political strategy. The tight linkage of notions like “territorial competitiveness, regional learning, associational networks and the supposed imperatives of globalisation” is not to be seen as a simple response to the “regulatory imperatives associated with global capitalism or an integrated EU” but rather as an argument “to justify subnational institutional modifications” (Brenner 2003,305f; MacLeod 2001).

4. Conclusion

Governance is a concept with very different meanings within different sub-disciplines. Concepts of multi-level governance and politics of scale are crucial to understand regional developments in the context of overall political-economic transformations. Moreover, regional governance should not be discussed without referring to its content and scope. Therefore, an empirical analysis of governance processes within a specific region should take the political-economic context explicitly into account.

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