Trapped in the Complexity Bowl?

Public Governance and the Liberal Art of Governing

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Abstract

For some time, academics have been discussing possible alternatives to new public management under headings such as network governance, collaborative governance, new public governance or, simply, public governance. This article seeks to better understand and critically discuss the rationalities of government supporting public governance. It argues that public governance is informed by a specific liberal rationality of government that differs from both classical liberalism and neoliberalism. Moreover, the diagnosis of societal complexity and concern for democratic self-government underpinning public governance may entail the neglect of structural social problems, such as economic inequality, and the disqualification of other relevant forms of public intervention.

Keywords: public administration; governmentality; neoliberalism; complexity; self-governance.

1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, liberal democracies have seen the rise of new forms of public governance under such headings as network governance (Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007), collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Mandell, 1999) and new public governance (Osborne, 2006). Even the OECD, which is often depicted as the promoter of new public management (NPM), has started pleading for the inclusion of citizens in policy making processes to develop democracy and provide more effective and fair policy solutions (OECD, 2001, 2011).

The scholarship on public governance referred to above is no doubt quite diverse. Yet, it does seem to share a commitment to a mode of political and administrative steering that seek to address societal problems by more or less systematically designed and regulated interaction between public authorities and a wide array of private actors. Much of the public governance literature takes its point of departure in the flaws and maladies of NPM (Osborne, Radnor, & Nasi, 2013; Vigoda, 2002). This critical stance towards NPM seems well justified (Hood & Dixon, 2015). Moreover, several have pointed to the neoliberal underpinnings of NPM to explain its unwavering zeal for the development of quasi-markets, agentification of bureaucracies, contracting out, and customer choice (Boston, Martin, Pallot, & Walsh, 1996; Connell, Fawcett, & Meagher, 2009). Deeply rooted in rational choice in its understanding of political and administrative action and in the liberal assumption of market competition as the best possible mechanism for securing freedom and wealth, NPM is arguably an offspring of neoliberalism (Roberts, 2014; Triantafillou, 2017).

If the critique of NPM and its allegiance to neoliberalism is correct, then where does that leave the critical understanding of network governance, collaborative governance and new public governance? For practical reasons, the remainder of the article will largely treat these three strands as one by using the term public governance, a decision further justified below. There is actually a quite vibrant and critical debate on public governance within the field itself. A whole score of studies are preoccupied with the institutional and political barriers to the spread and consolidation of public governance (Kickert et al., 1997, p. 9; Pestoff, 2012; Termeer, 2009). Such studies are sobering, but clearly assume that public governance is desirable and that eventual barriers to it should be understood and subsequently removed. Yet, we also find attempts to question the desirability of the normative implications of public governance. Some scholars have warned that

direct, interactive forms of policymaking may reinforce political inequalities (Peters, 2010). Others have pointed out that networked policy processes suffer from accountability problems (Papadopoulos, 2007). More recently, it has been suggested that the often murky governance interactions between resourceful political actors are susceptible to populist attacks (Stoker, 2018). These important reflections show that there is a lively debate within and at the fringes of public governance scholarship on the challenges linked to public governance.

Notwithstanding these critical reflections within the public governance literature, the latter is not very articulate on public governance's relationship to political ideologies or political rationalities. This may have to do with the fact that public governance has largely been articulated in opposition to NPM's focus on competition and market-inspired solutions. Accordingly, several influential scholars have implicitly – and a few explicitly – seen public governance as an alternative to neoliberalism. For example, Mark Bevir has argued that 'neoliberal marketization has given way to networks and service integration', suggesting that the latter has little to do with neoliberalism (Bevir, 2011). Similarly, the scarce remarks made on neoliberalism in the voluminous *Oxford Handbook of Governance* link neoliberalism to economic globalization and NPM (Levi-Faur, 2012). More importantly, we are told that 'The literature on network governance studies the institutional legacy of neoliberal reforms of the state' (Rhodes, 2012, p. 34). Thus, public governance is regarded as something that comes after neoliberalism, studies it, and proposes something different.

In contrast to this understanding, which sees public governance as something that succeeds and therefore differs from neoliberalism, others have pointed to their complicity. From the point of view of Marxist inspired political economy, it has been argued that public governance, at least as

propagated by the World Bank since the 1990s, reflects an ideological shift of capitalism towards neoliberalism (Eagleton-Pierce, 2014). In this rendition, public governance is little more than an ideological fixture to make capitalism run more smoothly. In a not too different vain, it has been argued that network governance is part of the neoliberal hegemonic project (Davies, 2011). Others have pointed out that in its pursuit of public value, public governance ignores questions of power and may unwittingly reproduce neoliberalism (Dahl & Soss, 2014). Finally, it has been argued that public governance amounts to a form of neoliberalism that has few if any limits to just how far public governance is willing to intervene in the lives into the everyday life and social environments of citizens (Triantafillou & Vucina, 2018). The problem with these conceptual attempts to link public governance to neoliberalism is that they risk gloss over the unique liberal features of public governance and, thereby, its difference from other forms of public management, such as NPM.

The present article seeks to shed light on the following question: what are the rationalities of government underpinning public governance? The remainder of this article proceeds by outlining a conceptual framework inspired by the French philosopher Michel Foucault that grasps public governance in terms of (liberal) rationalities of government. This framework is employed to analyse, firstly, how the sociological diagnosis of contemporary societies as increasingly complex became a key element of the political rationality underpinning public governance. Secondly, the article examines the liberal character of scholarly concerns recently feeding into public governance over the (inadequate) democratic self-governance of civil society actors. The conclusion points to some of the key normative limitation of the political rationality of public governance for political steering.

2 Liberal governmentalities and public administration

The notion of governmental rationality, or just *governmentality*, was introduced by Michel Foucault to denote the forms of secular knowledge and justifications informing the ways in which the populations and resources of territorial states are governed (Foucault 2008). Most Foucauldian scholarship has focused on the kind of scholarly knowledge and justifications engaged in the governing of individuals and populations of territorial states (e.g. Dean, 2010; P. Miller & Rose, 2008). Relatively few have paid more direct attention to the role of governmentalities informing the justification and design of modern public administrations (Catlaw & Sandberg, 2014; du Gay, 1996; H. T. Miller & Fox, 2007; Minson, 1998; Triantafillou, 2017). Governmentalities of public administration, like governmentalities in general, depend on more or less specific understandings of societies and the persons populating them, and above all, how these problems are best governed.

In order to examine the relationship between public administration and liberal governmentalities, it is necessary to unfold how the latter is understood in the present article. This elaboration is exemplified by way of two other, older, forms of public administration: classic rule-based bureaucracy and NPM. The point is not to treat these two forms of public administration in any detail, something that would require at least two other articles, but rather to help pinpoint the distinctiveness of the governmentality underpinning public governance, which is examined in the proceeding sections.

Notwithstanding the broadness of the term, liberalism may be understood as the political rationality that seeks to govern the society of a territorial state above all by protecting the liberty of its citizens

from illegitimate use of state power (Gaus, 2004). Within this broad conception, it is possible to distinguish the existing literature distinguishes between at least two forms of liberalism: classical and neoliberalism (Plant, 2009). Classical liberalism, at least as articulated in the writings by the Scottish moral philosophers Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, grapples with the problem of how to augment the wealth of societies in ways that avoids excessive state interventions (Ferguson, 1992 [1767]; Smith, 1998 [1776]). According to these moral philosophers, the problem with the forms of rule prevailing at the time, such as *Cameralism* and *Polizeiwissenschaft*, was that they required a detailed knowledge of what the Scottish moral philosophers came to label 'civil society' (Foucault, 2008, pp. 1–73). According to Adam Smith, it is simply not possible for a monarch or state apparatus to gain sufficient knowledge about civil society to govern it properly. Any attempt to govern society based on this insufficient knowledge would inevitably debilitate the self-steering powers of civil society. Instead, Smith and Ferguson would develop a new body of knowledge, political economy, according to which the so-called invisible hand or, more generally, the spontaneous order of civil society by default would bring about national wealth. In accordance with this new scholarly knowledge, classical liberalism would essentially stipulate that the role of the state should above all be one of ensuring property, the possibility of trade and production, and general law and order.

Classical liberalism has a complex and often tension-ridden relationship to the emergence of the modern bureaucracy. During the nineteenth century the rule-following bureaucracy described by Max Weber became instrumental to various forms of liberal political rule that – in some countries - became increasingly democratic in the sense that larger sections of the population were granted formal political influence (Plattner, 2002). The ideal separation of politics from administration and the governing of societal affairs by way of laws and regulations may be regarded a precondition for

the pursuit of protective liberal democracy. At least, Weber saw the bureaucracy as both an effect and cause of a general 'social levelling' process conducive to mass democracy (M. Weber, 1978, p. 226). While Weber stressed that the bureaucracy could be instrumental to a variety of political regimes, including authoritarian ones (M. Weber, 1978, pp. 991, 1394), he seemed to regard the formalistic – or nihilist - character of the bureaucracy as a necessary condition for allowing for the playing out of the plurality of societal values, a feature central to liberal democracies (Warren, 1988). In particular, the impartial rule-following administration was an instrumental precondition for protecting the civil and political rights of citizens vis-à-vis the illegitimate use of power by other citizens and in particular by the state administration itself.

Neoliberalism may be distinguished from classical liberalism by the constructivist element of the former (Burchell, 1996, pp. 27–29; Foucault, 2008, pp. 120–121, 259–261). On the one hand, in a vain not too different from classical liberalism, neoliberal thinkers like Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and James Buchanan believe that markets are key to the effective allocation of resources because of their unique ability to communicate individual wills and preferences (Buchanan, 1975; Hayek, 1944; von Mises, 1990 [1933]). Accordingly, state planning and macro-economic interventions as detrimental to individual freedom and societal wealth (Friedman, 1962). This is why a few neoliberals (libertarians) draw the normative implication that the state should be reduced to a night watch state (Nozick, 1974). On the other hand, most neoliberals do not take civil society to be a given spontaneous order that will automatically govern itself. Rather, they see society as a wide range of different markets the functioning of which requires an often extensive and coercive legal and institutional framework. For example, some argue that the state must secure the availability of educational institutions providing citizens with the necessary skills to compete on the labour market (Becker, 1964). Others, have maintained that the state should also provide social

services to allow citizens afflicted by unemployment or very low pay to have an income level that keep them in the market game (Friedman, 1987; Hayek, 1976, p. 87).

Neoliberalism's general rejection of the existence of a spontaneous natural order – as predicated by classical liberalism - entails that neoliberal governing of citizens is often targeting not so much the individual citizen herself but the functioning of the particular market in which she engages. The role of the public administration envisaged by neoliberalism is again somewhat paradoxical (Kiely, 2018). On the one hand, the public administration and its supply of services is seen as immanently prone to rent-seeking (Buchanan, 1985), budget maximization and bureau-shaping (Dunleavy, 1991). This is why neoliberal governmentality endorses privatization of public services. On the other hand, as shown above, there seems to be a recognition that public administration is to some extent necessary. Yet due to the immanent dangers postulated by public choice, the public administration must be systematically monitored and incentivized to avoid abuse and slack (Rees, 1985). This is where NPM enters with its battery of reforms, such as professional management, the separation of principal and provider, contracting out, the establishment of quasi-markets, performance measurement, customer choice, satisfaction surveys, etc. (Hood, 1991). The NPM schemes and technologies peg the market as a regulative ideal for reforming the public administration, and seek to further the freedom of citizens in the specific sense of augmenting their scope of service choice (Triantafillou, 2012, pp. 45–69). Thus, the citizen-subject of NPM is not the person whose civil and political rights should be protected from excessive state intervention, but rather a well-informed tax payer entitled to choose between public services offered under market like conditions (Brewer, 2007). As we shall see below, the regulative ideal for the citizen-subject of public governance is neither the person acting free from state intervention nor that with the ability

to choose, but rather a socialized person empowered to govern herself and participate actively in collaborative arrangements seeking to govern community and societal problems.

3 Public Governance and societal complexity

So far, this paper has not been very clear about the notion of public governance and simply used it as a common header for network governance, collaborative governance and new public governance. The three differ but also share some fundamental features. Starting with the last one first, Stephen Osborne described new public governance in a now much quoted article in *Public Management Review* (Osborne, 2006) by referring to seven elements that point to a mix of general principles and theoretical inspirations. It is a mode of governing that, according to Osborne, is inspired by organizational sociology and institutional theory, ascribes to a pluralist state ideal, has an inter-organizational governance focus, emphasizes service processes and outcomes, endorses interdependent and on-going relationships with private partners, believes in trust or relational contracts as key governing instruments, and adopts a neo-corporatist value-base favouring institutionalized dialogue. Two things are noteworthy here. Firstly, even if new public governance is indebted to organisational sociology and pays special attention to inter-organisational relations, it is not only about managing organisations or local networks. Its ambition is also to serve as a model for the handling of wider societal problems by making public and private organisations work together (Kapucu, Yuldashev, & Bakiev, 2009). Secondly, Osborne's definition emphasizes the need for institutionalized dialogue between a plurality of public and private actors in the design and delivery of public services.

This focus on dialogue between public and private partners in solving societal problems is also reflected in Ansell and Gash's definition of collaborative governance:

> A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets (Ansell & Gash, 2007, p. 544).

Ansell and Gash's emphasis on consensus-orientation and deliberation seem to fit rather well with Osborne's focus on trust and institutionalized dialogue. Similarly, the third strand of public governance literature, network governance, takes the institutionalized negotiations and deliberations over the resolution of public issues between interdependent, yet relatively autonomous, public and private actors as defining features of network governance (Kickert et al., 1997, p. 6; Rhodes, 1997b, Chapter 3). Such institutionalized networks are regarded, on the one hand, as self-organizing actors driven mostly by self-interest and, on the other hand, as susceptible to indirect steering by public authorities seeking to promote wider public interests.

While these definitions of new public governance, collaborative governance and network governance are not identical, they all regard institutionalized dialogue and cooperation between public and private actors as crucial to the production of public policies and public value. It is this kind of engagement that is offered as a generalized answer to a wide range of societal problems to which traditional state regulation and market (style) answers are seen as incomplete if not outright useless. Over and again, the public governance literature is rehearsing the diagnosis, in more or less nuanced forms, that liberal democracies are undergoing a transition from top-down, hierarchical

government to multilevel, networked and ultimately more complex forms of governance (Kickert et al., 1997; Marcussen & Torfing, 2007; Osborne, 2010). Moreover, it is not only political steering that has become more complex, so has its target: society (Pierre & Peters, 2005) and the societal problems to be solved (Ansell & Torfing, 2016, p. 7). Based on this complexity diagnosis, the normative implication for political rule is neither to consolidate hierarchical steering nor to roll back the state and unleash market forces. Rather the normative task of governing today is to nurture the development of each of these spheres of governing in general and to shape their interrelationships in productive ways in particular (Matthews, 2012). In order to increase the capacity to govern and effectively solve complex or wicked societal problems (E. Weber & Khademian, 2008), what is needed is not a diminished public administration but a more coordinating and enabling one (Pierre & Peters, 2005, p. 134).

In order to better grasp how this complexity diagnosis differ from but at the same time also show a certain affinity with liberal governmentalities, it is necessary to excavate in some detail the epistemological origins of this diagnosis. Steven Osborne suggests that organizational sociology and institutional theory are the key intellectual inspirations of new public governance. These are no doubt influential sources as are the early works on policy networks in Europe (Hanf & Scharpf, 1978) and in the US (Milward & Wamsley, 1985) on network governance and collaborative governance. Yet, the source of the complexity and interdependency diagnosis is neither organisational sociology nor neo-institutional theory nor policy network theory, but rather sociological system theory. This theory was developed by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann through an impressive series of publications during the 1970s and 1980s, and synthetized in the book *Soziale Systeme* (Luhmann, 1984), which was published in English in 1995 (Luhmann, 1995). Inspired both by Talcott Parsons' functionalist sociology and by the notion of *autopoesis* developed

by three Chilean biologists (Varela, Maturana, & Uribe, 1974), Luhmann's system theory regards modern society as made up by an increasing number of self-communicating systems that are essentially unable to communicate with each other. They try to resolve this problem by producing ever more (sub-) systems. The overall result, according to Luhmann, is further complexity, rather than better communication. Accordingly, the potentials of political steering in handling societal problems is inherently limited because the political system cannot ever remove the differences between itself and other social systems, such as the economy, without destroying the latter (Luhmann, 1997 [1988]).

Two scholars seem particularly important for invoking Luhmann' system theory in the formulation of public governance as a rationality of government: Walter Kickert and Jan Kooiman. It may be proper to start with Walter Kickert's portrait of the predicament facing political and administrative steering in contemporary liberal democracies. This portrait, given in a chapter in the volume *Modern Governance. New Government-Society Interactions* edited by Jan Kooiman, went:

> The control capacity of government is limited for a number of reasons: lack of legitimacy, complexity of policy processes, complexity and multitude of institutions concerned etc. Government is only one of many actors that influence the course of events in a *societal system.* Government does not have enough power to exert its will on other actors. Other social institutions are, largely, autonomous. They controlled by any singe superordinate actor, not even the government. They largely control themselves (Kickert, 1993, p. 275, my emphasis).

Kickert's understanding of governance revolves around the problem of ungovernability based on the ontological diagnosis of societal complexity. Four years later, Rod Rhodes would cite this

passage from Kickert in his much quoted *Understanding Governance* to argue that Britain and other liberal democracies are seeing a move from government to governance, in which a key defining feature is the interdependency between state and non-state actors (Rhodes, 1997b, pp. 52–53). That same year, in a foreword to Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan's *Managing Complex Networks*, Rhodes would explain how important the work by Walter Kicker and Jan Kooiman had been to his (Rhodes) understanding of governance (Rhodes, 1997a, p. xiii). Again, Rhodes would explicitly to refer to Niklas Luhmann's cybernetic diagnosis of the complex 'centreless society' as key to understanding the current predicament of government (ibid. xii).

In the edited volume mentioned above, Jan Kooiman argued, with explicit inspiration from the ecological systems theory of Varela, Maturana and Uribe, that the need for governing societal systems has grown in recent decades due to systemic tendencies towards 'chaos, disintegration and disorientation' (Kooiman, 1993, p. 45). Considering the complex, diverse, and dynamic features of social systems, Kooiman was quite sceptical about the potential of political steering (by the political system). Yet he did invoke the possibility of a form of meta-rule that would balance the needs and actual capacity for regulation (ibid. p. 47). In a later book, *Governing as Governance*, which over and again refers to Luhmann's systems theory, Kooiman further developed the problem of governability, though he would start to appear more optimistic about the possibilities for creating a productive interactive mix of hierarchical governance, co-governance, and self-governance (Kooiman, 2003).

If public governance is evolving around a diagnosis of increasing society complexity, which in turn is based on sociological systems theory, what does that say about its rapport with liberal governmentalities? Clearly, the epistemological heritage of the complexity diagnosis differs

fundamentally from that of both classical liberalism, which is indebted to classical political economy, and neoliberalism, which is indebted to a mix of legal philosophy, monetary theory and public choice. Notwithstanding these distinct epistemological origins, there seems to be a strong homology between the liberalism's foundational assumption regarding the state's cognitive limitation, and Luhmann's claim that the political system cannot ever really intervene in other systems due to fundamentally different codes of communication. Neither believes that the economy and society could do without a state equipped with sovereign powers; both problematize the state's ambitions to intervene in economic and social life with a view toward ensuring the welfare of all.

5 Public governance and the concern for democratic self-governance

The preceding analysis of the societal diagnosis and the understanding of citizens underpinning public governance suggests that it is underpinned by a liberal rationality of government. Yet, at the same time, the form of liberalism supporting public governance deviates importantly from both classical liberalism and neoliberalism. This is particularly clear in public governance's concerns over the ability of citizens, communities and organisations to govern themselves in a democratic fashion, i.e. in a way in which they participate and contribute actively to handling of societal problems.

Driven by concerns over the (dwindling) ability of contemporary societies to ensure democratic legitimacy, a number of mainly US and British political theorists have pointed, albeit in different ways, to the inadequacies of political-administrative institutions and processes narrowly attuned to judicial reviews and ministerial accountability secured mainly through electoral cycles (Bellamy,

2007; Bevir, 2010; Fung & Wright, 2003; Sirianni, 2009). In a vain not too different from the complexity diagnosis they note that the democratic legitimacy of policymaking processes today is under acute pressure due to their increased diffusion of powers from parliaments and elected government to transnational corporations, international political regimes, corporatist policy networks, contracting out schemes, and private-public partnerships (Fung, 2004).

In response to these concerns over dwindling democratic self-governance, several public governance scholars have proposed forms of participatory governing that seek to empower and mobilize the resources of civil society actors (e.g. Bevir, 2010; Warren, 2001). Archon Fung, for example, proposes that governments should work to incorporate 'empowered participation and deliberation into their governance structures' (Fung, 2004, p. 4). Participatory forms of government are desirable not only because they are more responsive and enable the empowerment of citizens that may ultimately build a stronger (participatory) democracy, but also because, if designed properly, they are more effective. Apparently, a real win-win situation. The solution to concerns over the democratic legitimacy of contemporary public governance arrangements is not to roll back the state. Rather, the public administration should be attuned to the development of new forms of deliberation and participation together with new, more relevant standards for gauging their legitimacy (Warren, 2001). What is required is systematic government interventions and institutions designed to unearth the resources of citizens and communities (Sirianni, 2009). Likewise, Sørensen and Torfing (2005), in a widely cited article, argue that network governance entails endorsing state interventions via networks to intervene in civil society. Sørensen and Torfing are proposing the somewhat curious term 'post-liberal' models of governance to denote these governance arrangements (ibid. pp. 216-217). While the defining character of these 'post-liberal' arrangements

are not entirely clear, they are all taken to imply an opportunity for inventing new forms of citizen participation and generalized interaction between public and private actors.

It seems then that public governance scholars are endorsing a positive conception of freedom enabling citizens and communities to participate in political and administrative processes, and a freedom equipping them with the powers necessary to solve the problems affecting them. The regulative ideal for the citizen-subject of public governance differs from both classical liberalism and neoliberalism by endorsing a socialized person empowered to govern herself and participate actively in collaborative arrangements seeking to govern community and societal problems (Cruikshank, 1999). Moreover, public governance scholars over and again refer to the potential of governance – under the right conditions – to pursue the public good, a notion vehemently rejected by both classical liberalism and neoliberalism. We may also note that public governance is preoccupied not with the ability to compete in a market but with the ability to collaborate and participate in the solution of problems in the community and perhaps even at the level of society. Thus, public governance seems to be concerned less with the debilitating effects of state interventions and more with concerns over the ability of citizens, communities and organizations to govern themselves in a democratic fashion.

Even if public governance differs from both classical liberalism and neoliberalism, liberal rationalities do appear highly influential to public governance. First of all, notwithstanding the repeated calls by public governance scholars for increased collaboration between state and society, between public and private actors, they do not in any way suggest to dissolve these distinctions that are of decidedly liberal origins (Mack & Gaus, 2004). Secondly, as mentioned above, the kind of self-government endorsed by public governance does not amount to an abandonment of centralized

state intervention in favour of more or less politically sovereign communities as some communitarian scholars seem to imply (Sandel, 1998). Rather, in line with both classical liberalism and neoliberalism, the state has a crucial, albeit distinct, role for ensuring and developing the self-governing capacities of citizens and communities. Moreover, public governance is clearly in line with liberalism when it vehemently rejects any idea of an omnipotent state or body of experts able to rule society and, instead, argue in favour of a form of government that seeks to unearth the knowledge and resources of societal actors. public governance is above all endorsing a form of rule based on the freedom of those through which this state rule is taking place (Rose, 1999).

6 Discussion and conclusion

This article has argued that public governance may be grasped as a specific liberal governmentality infused by a concern over the increasing complexity of society and the ability of citizens, communities and organisations to govern themselves. This kind of liberalism has variously been labelled 'advanced liberalism' (Rose, 1999, pp. 137–166), 'info-liberalism' (Catlaw & Sandberg, 2014), and 'constructivist neoliberalism' (Triantafillou, 2017, pp. 41–49). Yet another possible term could be *complexity liberalism*. While terminology is important, even more crucial is the need for academic awareness of the remarkable ability of liberal governmentalities to renew themselves and produce new alternative ways of rendering societal problems amenable to government interventions in ways that one way or the other works through the freedom of citizens the societies they populate.

As mentioned in the introduction above, there is a frank debate going on inside – or at the fringes of - the public governance literature on both the practical and the normative challenges of this mode of

steering. The frankness of this debate shows that the public governance literature, unlike much of the literature supporting NPM, is reflexive about the normative challenges of public governance. Still, this internal debate seems to have some important limitations. Suffice here to point to two fundamental normative problems that are rarely if ever debated in the public governance literature. These two problems correlate with the call for democratic self-governance and the societal diagnosis underpinning public governance. Firstly, even if several public governance scholars point to the uneven political access to collaborative decision-making processes, the main strategy to deal with this seems to be more of the same: expanding and institutionalizing democratic self-governance in the sense of enhanced collaboration between public and private actors in general, and the systematic empowerment of citizens and communities in particular. Public governance seems inherently vetted to address problems affecting citizens and their communities in terms of inadequate capacity to govern themselves, rather than the economic circumstances impinging on their problems. At least, few, if any, public governance scholars address the economic causes of the differential ability to participation, such as economic inequality. If the implication of (rising) economic inequality is to exclude many actors from meaningful political participation, would it not be more to the point to try to reduce these inequalities, say through tax reforms, rather than opting for more citizen participation and empowerment? In its rejection of or, at least, lacking attention to such structural solutions, public governance does not seem terribly far from its other liberal siblings. The main difference being between securing the optimum functioning of collaboration instead of optimizing market functioning.

Secondly, much public governance literature seems to be so enmeshed in the diagnosis of increasing societal complexity that they tend to push complex processes and solutions, rather than considering more straightforward ones. If, for example, society is ridden by problems of drug

related crime, then would it not be obvious to consider some (regulated) form of liberalization of drugs, rather than developing intricate networks between police, schools, hospitals and social workers to fight drug peddling? Public governance scholars may also want to question one of their favourite assumptions, namely that supposedly complex or wicked problems by default call for public governance and its complex apparel of institutionalized interactive networks. Conventional government regulations and the reform of economic structures are left to deal with simple problems. Yet, it seems that most societal problems today would appropriately fit the label problems, leaving little if any room for alternatives to public governance style interventions.

In brief, even if most public governance scholars seem to agree that public governance is and should remain a supplement to rather than a replacement of Weberian style public administration, we find remarkably few critical reflections on the circumstances under which public governance should make way for alternatives. Instead, by regarding society as increasingly complex and couching the problems facing citizens in terms of inadequate self-governance, public governance seems to leave very little room for other modalities of government. Thus, there is a need for public governance scholars and practitioners to take an occasional step outside the complexity bowl. This may allow for alternative societal diagnoses and, thereby, clear a space for considering the potential of other forms of public intervention to deal with contemporary economic and social problems.

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