Metagovernance

Whereas governance is a familiar but fuzzy notion with a long history, the concept of metagovernance is fresher and somewhat more focused. It was introduced independently in the mid-1990s by several West European scholars interested in problems of complexity, governance, and governance failure and has since been integrated into several theoretical and policy paradigms. It has been defined as, *inter alia*, the organization of self-organization, the regulation of self-regulation, the steering of self-steering, the structuring of the game-like interaction within governance networks, and interaction among actors to influence parameter changes to the overall system. In its most basic and general (but also most eclectic) sense, it denotes the governance of governance. Despite its importance in certain theoretical as well as policy paradigms, the term hardly surfaces in the leading journal, *Governance*, and is rarely mentioned explicitly even in very recent surveys of research on governance (e.g. Benz et al., 2007; Bevir, 2007; Kjaer, 2004; Lütz, 2006; for exceptions, see Bell and Hindmoor, 2009; Sørensen, 2006; and some chapters in Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). This chapter aims to compensate for this neglect. Thus it traces the background to interest in metagovernance and its association with governance failure, identifies some pre-theoretical antecedents that have often gone unremarked, notes possible meanings of metagovernance and locates them within a typology of modes of governance, notes the strong practical orientation of contemporary interest in metagovernance, and, in a critical and contrarian spirit, explores some implications of metagovernance failure for theoretical and policy analysis.

From Governance to Metagovernance

The notion of metagovernance is obviously supervenient on that of governance. Although it is not part of my remit to explore or explain the revival of theoretical and practical interest in governance in the 1980s and 1990s, it is important to note that it was related to the growing perception of the problems generated in this period by a combination of state and market failure and/or by a decline in social cohesion in the advanced capitalist societies. This was reflected in notions such as governmental overload, legitimacy crisis, steering crisis, and ungovernability. It prompted theoretical and practical interest in the potential of coordination through self-organizing heterarchic networks and partnerships and other forms of reflexive collaboration. Most of the early studies of governance were concerned with specific practices or regimes oriented to specific objects of governance, linked either to the planning, programming, and regulation of particular policy fields or to issues of economic performance. Concern with problems of governance and the potential contributions of metagovernance followed during the mid-1990s and the nature and dynamics of metagovernance have since won growing attention. This is illustrated neatly in Figure 8.1, reproduced from Meuleman (2008: 73). It shows some significant routes to interest in metagovernance in different theoretical traditions (rational choice vs sociological) and with respect to the three most commonly identified modes of governance (market, hierarchical, and network). Of particular interest in this figure is the implicit distinction between first-, second-, and third-order governance, to which I will return below, as well as the key role it accords to reflexivity, deliberation, and normative commitments in second- and third-order governance — which are also the two main sites of metagovernance.

Figure 8.1 Governance and metagovernance: A ‘conceptual crowd’ addressing the ‘new modes of governance’
Whereas some scholars and practitioners explicitly refer to metagovernance, many other terms have been used to denote or connote this phenomenon. This terminological variety is linked in part to the relatively ‘pre-theoretical’ and eclectic nature of work on governance and metagovernance, to the diversity of theoretical traditions with which more rigorous work is associated, to the different political traditions and tendencies that have shown interest in governance, to the great heterogeneity of the subjects and objects of governance and, a fortiori, of metagovernance, and to the challenges involved in translating theoretical reflections on governance and metagovernance into policy paradigms and, indeed, commercial consultancy in the public, private, and third sectors. For present purposes, governance refers to the structures and practices involved in coordinating social relations that
are marked by complex, reciprocal interdependence, and metagovernance refers in turn to the coordination of these structures and practices (cf. Jessop 1995, 1997, 1998). I later distinguish between first- and second-order metagovernance in terms of whether coordination concerns one mode of governance or a combination thereof (cf. Kooiman, 1993). Before elaborating on these definitions and exploring some of their implications, I will review some pre-theoretical or tangential approaches to these phenomena.

It is important to note that there are significant historical precursors to the recent idea of metagovernance as well as some close contemporary equivalents. Among its antecedents we can mention Greek and Roman notions of a balanced constitution; the medieval and Renaissance ‘mirror of princes’ literatures on the art of government; various notions of ‘police’ (policey or Polizei)4 concerned with the structures and practices that would help to promote a sound political economy, good governance, and state security; and such political principles of statecraft and diplomacy as the mixed constitution at home and the maintenance of international balance of power abroad. These traditions have survived in different forms. In addition, newer theoretical paradigms have turned their attention from governance (or its equivalents) to metagovernance for their own reasons, at different times, and in their own ways. An influential contemporary analogy is Foucault’s approach to governmentality as ‘the conduct of conduct’ (1991), especially as developed by the Anglo-Foucauldian school of governmentality studies (see Miller and Rose, 2008).

An important contemporary precursor of the concept of metagovernance was the work of the second-generation critical theorist, Claus Offe, who drew on empirical research in the 1970s on market and state failure in vocational training (1975a) to develop a more general account of the problems involved in three main forms of public policymaking. He concluded that each of these forms — namely, rule-based bureaucratic decision-making, goal-oriented public planning, and participatory governance — had its own distinctive merits, limits, and vulnerabilities (Offe, 1975b). Bureaucratic routines were unsuited for complex public programmes requiring the mobilization of diverse resources and commitments (e.g. ‘wars on poverty’, a space programme). Yet purposive action is often made difficult by an absence of clear-cut, uncontroversial, and operationalizable goals and of a stable economic and political environment as well as by the problems facing the state in winning acceptance of the social and fiscal costs required for effective planning. In turn, democratic participation tends to generate demands that are inconsistent with capital accumulation and is also prone to politicize the process of administration. Offe noted that different modes of policymaking are better for some purposes than others and that, as policy objectives change, so does the preferred mode of policymaking. Matters are nonetheless complicated because even the most appropriate form has its own problems and will generate problems in turn. This raised the crucial question of how the state manages to survive in the face of the resulting tendency towards state failure. Offe’s answer was that the state survives through a continual fuite en avant: i.e. in this context, an escape from an emerging crisis in one mode of governance by moving onto another mode of policymaking that is also likely to fail. This depends on a certain flexibility within the state such that it can escape the contradictions linked to one policymaking mode by changing policy objectives, adopting another mode from the existing repertoire, or, more generally, by modifying the relative weight of objectives and modes of policymaking to maintain at least the appearance of political success (1975b). This analysis clearly anticipated later studies on the nature of state failure, the role of metagovernance or collibration (see below), and the most appropriate way to respond to metagovernance failure. But its concern with the basic contradictions involved in the capital relation and the problems in governing that relation that derive from the separation of the economic and political spheres within a capitalist social formation systems has been largely neglected in later work on governance.
Some of the earliest contemporary reflections on metagovernance emerged in work on the challenges of guiding the operations of relatively closed, self-organizing systems and/or coordinating interdependent systems of cooperative behaviour. Continental European work on ‘autopoietic’ (self-constituting, self-reproducing, and self-referential) systems illustrates the first theoretical paradigm; the latter is associated with ‘socio-cybernetic’ analyses of the interaction between observed social systems and the systems that observe them. I consider these cases in turn.

First, in the 1980s, some German researchers argued that functional differentiation in modern social formations had created a complex ecology of self-organizing but interdependent social subsystems. Each of these ‘autopoietic’ subsystems has its own form of calculation (code) and mode of operation (programme). As such, these systems are resistant both to external control exercised by one subsystem that is superordinate to the others and to integration into a single, all-embracing horizontal network of coordination. Nevertheless, the material interdependence of these self-organizing subsystems also implied that a purely laissez-faire approach could (or would) lead to crises of societal integration and social cohesion (e.g. Braun, 1993; Luhmann, 1984; Teubner, 1984, 1985). This encouraged the conclusion that, while such entities could not be controlled through direct intervention from the outside, it might be possible to steer them ‘at a distance’ by modifying the environment in which a given self-referential, self-organizing system operated. For example, whereas economic actors may engage in illegal activities if they believe it would be profitable to ignore legal prohibitions, they may well respond to financial incentives and penalties. Influential concepts in this regard are dezentrierte or dezentrale Kontextsteuerung (decentred context steering) and societal guidance (see Glasgow and Willke, 1983; Willke, 1988). Success in this regard was said to depend on an adequate, albeit necessarily incomplete, understanding of the sui generis dynamic of the system to be guided so that any measures taken would serve as positive system-modifying perturbations rather than being dismissed as trivial irritations or leading to the disintegration of the targeted subsystem. These grand metatheoretical concerns were initially less marked in Anglo-American work on governance in this period. Instead the latter type of work focused on more immediate and substantive problems of effective policymaking or issues of (neo-)corporatism. As later Anglo-American work moved from critique and problem-solving to sui generis theorization, however, its research agenda also integrated broader systems' theoretical concerns.

One of the two authors most often cited as the originator of the term ‘metagovernance’ is the Dutch scholar, Jan Kooiman, who belongs to a broader national tradition of sociocybernetic inquiry (e.g. Kickert et al., 1997; Klijn and Edelenbos, 2007; Meuleman, 2008; see also Deutsch, 1963). Interested in the problems that states faced in governing complex societies, he drew on sociocybernetics to explore state–society interactions not only in terms of automatic cybernetic mechanisms but also in terms of conscious guiding actions (Kooiman, 1993; 2003). Rather than assuming that the state stands over and against society, he viewed governments as cooperating with key societal actors to guide societal development. Accordingly, he stressed the need for requisite variety among modes of government–society interactions that range from hierarchically governed (top-down intervention) through co-governance (joint action) to self-governance (societal self-organization without government interference). Whereas Kooiman recognized that each mode has its own specific properties, he argued that they also interact to produce hybrid, or mixed, patterns of governance (Kooiman, 2003: 7). He further noted the importance for effective governance of cultivating the capacity to reflect on, and rebalance, the mix among these modes in response to changes in...
the challenges and/or opportunities that exist at the interface of market, state, and civil society. Governing in modern society requires an interactive perspective concerned to balance social interests and facilitate the interaction of actors and systems through self-organization, co-arrangements, or more interventionist forms of organization. Thus, for Kooiman, the key problem is how best to ‘strike a balance’ among different kinds of actors and steering mechanisms at the micro, meso and macrolevels of society. He distinguished first-, second-, and third-order governing in this regard. First-order governing is directly oriented to problem-solving and, for Kooiman, comprises the ensemble of governance forms ranging from hierarchy to self-governance; it is evaluated in terms of its effectiveness. Second-order governing occurs when attempts are made to modify the institutional conditions of problem-solving when they seem outdated, dysfunctional or harmful to governance and is evaluated in terms of legitimacy. Third-order governance, which Kooiman also calls metagovernance, involves efforts to change the broad principles that affect how governance occurs and to give it a clear normative rationality. Thus, it refers to the governance of governance and/or of governors by modifying the material or normative framework in which first- and second-order governing activities are pursued. It is judged in terms of moral responsibility (Kooiman, 2000; 2002; 2003).

About the same time, Andrew Dunsire introduced the notions of co-libration and ‘collibration’ to refer to what others term metagovernance. Although this has not yet become a standard term in the field, it has become more frequent and, as I will argue below, is especially apt for third-order governance (or metagovernance in its most precise sense). His 1993 lecture at the Max Planck Institute of Social Research (the home of the so-called Cologne School of Governance, on which, see next two pages) described collibration as a ‘useful mode of state intervention’ that enabled the state to secure some influence when faced with the growth of functional systems (such as law, economy, education, politics, and health) marked by operational closure and self-referentiality that made it hard for the state (or any other outside force) to regulate such systems. The result, other things being equal, was growing regulatory failure. Dunsire identified four main responses to this situation: (1) government subsidies that depended on compliance; (2) public–private partnerships and other forms of corporatist intermediation; (3) reflexive forms of law that require attention to the circumstances and consequences of their implementation; and (4) the use of various measures to indirectly influence the balance of forces. Each mechanism is said to transform in its own way the self-referentiality of functional systems from a problem into an asset that can be used to steer modern societies. But each also creates its own problems and must therefore be used reflexively and incrementally, monitoring effects and engaging in further rounds of intervention. Arguing that this useful set of tools lacks a general name, Dunsire initially proposed a phrase inspired by cybernetics: namely, ‘selective inhibition of opposed maximisers’ (1978, 1986). Later, and more elegantly, Dunsire referred to co-libration, i.e. the action of contributing with others to equilibration and, to ‘collibration’, a process that involves the state in ‘the manipulation of balancing social tensions, the controlled shifting of a social equilibrium, the fine tuning of an oscillation of near-equal forces’ (1993: 11). When this is successful, an unstable equilibrium of compromise (to use a Gramscian rather than Dunsirean phrase) is established within which the state can continue to exercise some influence (see Dunsire 1993, 1996; Gramsci, 1971).

The Cologne School has undertaken many studies of Steuerung (steering) and has developed thereby a distinctive approach to the problems of governing functionally differentiated, organizationally dense and complex societies. Its leading figures recognized that these problems involved both the Steuerungsfähigkeit (steering capacity) of governing
subjects and the *Steuerbarkeit* (governability) of the objects to be governed (Mayntz, 2003: 29; cf. 1993). Whereas these problems can lead to ‘steering pessimism’ (for example, in the work of Niklas Luhmann), the Cologne School was more optimistic, influenced, perhaps, by specific examples of successful administrative reform and the overall record of neo-corporatism in Germany in promoting economic development and sustaining a high-waged, high-tech, globally competitive ‘Modell Deutschland’. Two key figures in developing these ideas were Renate Mayntz and Fritz Scharpf who co-directed the Institute at Cologne for many years. A distinctive feature of this school is its actor-centred institutionalism, i.e. its interest in how the interaction between micro- and meso-level actors and institutional factors shapes the possibilities of effective governance. Indeed, Mayntz (2004) later emphasized that the actor-centred political steering (*Steuerung*) approach to policymaking was quite distinct from the governance (*Regulierung*) approach, which is more institutionalist and deals with regulatory structures combining public and private, hierarchical and network forms of action coordination. In this spirit, the Cologne School explored how to (re-)design the interaction between institutions and actors to improve the chances of overcoming policy problems. This is yet another way in which the topic of metagovernance (or, in this context, metasteering) has emerged. For example, Scharpf once observed that:

> considering the current state of theory, it seems that it is not so much increasing disorder on all sides that needs to be explained as the really existing extent, despite everything, of intra- as well as inter-organizational, intra- as well as inter-sectoral, and intra- as well as international, agreement and expectations regarding mutual security. Clearly, beyond the limits of the pure market, hierarchical state, and domination-free discourses, there are more — and more effective — coordination mechanisms than science has hitherto grasped empirically and conceptualized theoretically (Scharpf, 1993: 57, my translation).

He identified in particular the role of networks and added that their effectiveness could be enhanced ‘by virtue of their “embeddedness” within hierarchical structures’ (1993) or, put differently, through ‘negotiated self-coordination where actual negotiations are embedded within hierarchical organisation’ (1994). The idea that networking or self-regulation in the shadow of hierarchy could be more effective than either mode on its own anticipates the notion of metagovernance (see also Mayntz and Scharpf, 1995). Despite the influence of this approach, Mayntz later identified three crucial deficits: its methodological nationalism; its selective focus on domestic politics and policies; and, above all, its concern with policy effectiveness. The third of these deficits, which also characterizes many other approaches to governance and metagovernance, is evident in its concern with ‘the output and outcome of policy processes, neglecting the input side of policy formation and the relationship between both’ (Mayntz, 2003: 32). She also noted that the problems to be solved and/or crises to be managed were seen as shared, societal problems (Mayntz, 2001). Generalizing this observation, we could say that studies of governance tend to focus on specific collective decision-making or goal-attainment issues relative to specific problems without asking how these problems are socially and discursively constructed (cf. Jessop, 1995). For Mayntz, this bias leads students and practitioners of governance to neglect the problems generated by asymmetric power relations and domination. She therefore asked whether it is possible and, if so, worthwhile, to produce a single macro-theory that integrated the problem-solving approach with a concern about power asymmetries (Mayntz, 2001). This is a key question to which we will return.

The other scholar identified as the initiator of the current notion is the present author, whose analysis is grounded in critical theories of the state and political economy together with
theories of autopoiesis and context-steering (Jessop, 1990) and subsequent empirical research on local governance and private–public partnerships. Metagovernance was introduced to describe a counter-tendency to the shift from government to governance: namely, the shift from government to metagovernance, i.e. the ‘organization of the conditions of self-organization’ (Jessop, 1997). Later work has seen a more complex typology of modes of coordination of complex reciprocal interdependence (or governance in the broad sense); identified different forms of governance failure; considered different forms of metagovernance in response to the different forms of governance failure, and argued that metagovernance in turn was prone to failure (Jessop, 2002, 2003). Some of these ideas are elaborated below.

Modes of Governance

The approach to governance and metagovernance proposed in this chapter involves three analytical steps: first, identify the broad field of coordination of complex reciprocal interdependence with which governance practices are concerned; secondly, provide a narrow definition that identifies the differentia specifica of governance within this broad field; and, thirdly, distinguish forms of metagovernance that correspond to these broad and narrow meanings. The literature on governance identifies several forms of coordination of complex reciprocal interdependence, with three being especially prominent: ex post coordination through exchange (e.g. the anarchy of the market); ex ante coordination through imperative coordination (e.g. the hierarchy of the firm, organization, or state); and reflexive self-organization (e.g. the heterarchy of ongoing negotiated consent to resolve complex problems in a corporatist order or horizontal networking to coordinate a complex division of labour). ‘Governance’ in the narrow sense is most commonly equated with the third form of coordination. Occasionally a fourth form of coordination is identified: namely, solidarity based on unconditional commitment to others (e.g. loyalty within small communities or local units or across imagined communities in times of crisis).

Governance as reflexive self-organization can be distinguished from exchange and imperative coordination in terms of its basic operational rationale and its institutional logic. Market exchange is characterized by a procedural rationality that is purely formal, ex post, and impersonal and oriented to the efficient allocation of scarce resources to competing ends. It prioritizes an endless ‘economizing’ pursuit of profit maximization. Imperative coordination has a substantive rationality. It is goal-oriented, prioritizing ‘effective’ pursuit of successive organizational or policy goals. In contrast, reflexive self-organization is concerned to identify mutually beneficial joint projects from a wide range of possible projects, to redefine them as the relevant actors attempt to pursue them in an often turbulent environment and monitor how far these projects are being achieved, and to organize the material, social, and temporal conditions deemed necessary and/or sufficient to achieve them. It does not require actors to accept substantive goals defined in advance and from above on behalf a specific organization (e.g. a firm) or an imagined collectivity (e.g. the nation). Instead it has a substantive, procedural rationality that is concerned with solving specific coordination problems on the basis of a commitment to a continuing dialogue to establish the grounds for negotiated consent, resource sharing, and concerted action. To distinguish such an approach from the anarchy of the market and the hierarchy of command, governance in this narrow sense is often referred to as heterarchic.

The fourth form of coordination involves a relatively unreflexive, value-oriented rationality that is premised on unconditional reciprocal commitment and loyalty. This does not preclude processes through which such solidarity and mutual trust are established and reproduced.
(e.g. falling in love, coming to identify with fellow members of an imagined national — or other — community, or developing an even broader identification with humankind). Nonetheless, a thick form of unreflexive, unconditional support that covers many fields of social action is typically confined to small units (e.g. a couple or family) and, the larger the unit, the thinner and less intense does solidarity tend to become. Eventually it changes into more unilateral forms of ‘trust’ in the expertise of skilled practitioners providing goods and services that their clients cannot provide themselves (on trust and its failure, see Adler, 2001; Fukuyama, 1995; Gambetta, 1988; Luhmann, 1979; Misztal, 1996; Nooteboom, 2002).

**Modes of Governance Failure and Metagovernance Responses**

The growing interest in metagovernance is closely linked to (but not solely explicable in terms of) recognition that, like market exchange and imperative coordination, heterarchic governance is prone to failure. It is not a magic bullet that overcomes the problems of market and state failure without creating its own problems. Instead, each form of coordination of complex reciprocal interdependence has a distinctive primary form of failure together with typical secondary forms of failure (see Table 8.1). Market failure occurs when markets fail to allocate scarce resources efficiently in and through pursuit of monetized private interest. State failure in turn occurs when state managers cannot attain substantive collective goals determined on the basis of their political divination of the public interest (for a useful review of arguments about both kinds of failure, see Wallis and Dollery, 1999). Reflexive forms of governance were once seen as a ‘third way’ that could avoid both market and state failure and the tendency for switching between them. But they are also prone to fail — albeit for different reasons, in different ways, with different effects — with the result that governance failure has now become a topic of research. In addition, solidarity has its limits as a generalized mechanism, whatever potential it might have in small-scale social units, local groups, and tight-knit communities of fate (cf. Adler, 2001; Nooteboom, 2002).

In this regard it is tempting to agree with Malpas and Wickham (1995) that all efforts at governance are bound to fail to a greater or lesser degree — provided that we recognize, as I have noted above, that different forms of governance fail in different ways. This general propensity is due both to the general problem of ‘governability’; the question of whether a socially and discursively constituted object of governance could ever be manageable given the complexity and turbulence of the material, social, and spatiotemporal conditions in which it is embedded, and to particular issues of ‘governability’ associated with particular objects and agents of governance, with particular modes of coordination of reciprocal interdependence, and with problems of unacknowledged conditions of action and unanticipated consequences. This is particularly problematic where the objects of governance are liable to change and/or the environment in which they are embedded is turbulent, making strategic learning difficult (see Dierkes et al., 2001; Eder, 1999; Haas and Haas, 1995). A final consideration is that, in many cases, the appearance of successful governance depends on the capacity to displace and/or defer some of the unwanted effects of basic contradictions and dilemmas beyond the specific spatiotemporal horizons of a given set of social forces. Thus, an important aspect of governance success is the discursive and institutional framing of specific spatio-temporal fixes within which governance problems appear manageable because certain ungovernable features manifest themselves elsewhere (on spatio-temporal fixes, see Jessop, 2006).

**Table 8.1 Modalities of governance**
If we consider exchange, hierarchy, heterarchy, and solidarity as four forms of first-order coordination, responses to their respective forms of failure can be considered as second-order phenomena. Where these responses involve efforts to improve the performance of a given mode, they can be seen as examples of the metagovernance of that mode. Such efforts to redesign each coordination mechanism may focus directly on the mechanism itself and/or on its facilitating conditions. Thus, corresponding to the four basic, first-order modes of governance, we can identify four basic, second-order modes of metagovernance. In brief, and respectively, these involve: redesigning markets, constitutional innovation and design, changing the composition of networks and re-articulating networks of networks, and ‘therapeutic’ interventions oriented to restoring loyalty, trust, and commitment. In turn, efforts to rebalance the relative importance of different forms of governance correspond to third-order governance or what Dunsire calls collibration.

Briefly elaborating on these arguments, second-order governance (or first-order metagovernance) in response to market failure can be termed ‘metaexchange’, which involves the reflexive redesign of markets (e.g. for land, labour, money, commodities, knowledge) and/or the reflexive reordering of relations among two or more markets (or submarkets) by altering their operation, nesting, overall articulation, embedding in non-market relations or institutions, and so on. Likewise, the failure of imperative coordination can lead to ‘metaorganization’ — the reflexive redesign of organizational authority structures (e.g. Beer, 1990), the creation of intermediating organizations, the reordering of hierarchical inter-organizational relations, the management of organizational ecologies (i.e. the organization of the conditions of organizational evolution in conditions where many organizations coexist, compete, cooperate, and co-evolve), and the promotion of new policy rhetorics to justify new approaches (cf. Fischer, 2009; Hood, 1998). Next, in response to governance failure in its narrow sense, i.e. the failure of self-organizing networks, inter-organizational partnerships based on negotiation, or the heterarchic steering at a distance of inter-systemic relations, we can talk of ‘metaheterarchy’ (on network management, see Jones et al., 1997; Sørensen and Torfing, 2009). This involves the reflexive organization of the conditions of reflexive self-organization by redefining the framework in which heterarchy (or reflexive self-organization) occurs and can range from providing opportunities for ‘spontaneous sociability’ (Fukuyama, 1995; see also Putnam, 2000) through various measures to promote networking and negotiation to the introduction of innovations to promote ‘institutional thickness’ (Amin and Thrift, 1995). Van Bortel and Mullins (2009) distinguish three forms of metagovernance in this context: network design, to shape the organizational form of networks; framing, to define their goals, material conditions, and narrative rationale; and participation by metagovernor(s) in network operations, to influence network activities and outcomes. To this list, Sørensen,
Torfing and Fotel (2009) add network management, which is concerned with smoothing network operations and making them more efficient and effective. Lastly, at least for present purposes, there is metasolidarity: this involves forms of therapeutic action, whether spontaneous or mediated through therapeutic intervention, to repair or refocus feelings of loyalty and unconditional commitment.

These responses are best described as involving second-order governance or, shifting perspective, first-order metagovernance. But there is no need to stop here. For there is another level of responses: one that, if it were not too confusing, could be called ‘meta-metagovernance’. Better options are third-order governance (à la Kooiman) or second-order metagovernance; and, best of all, in part because of its etymological roots as well as its conceptual precision, is Dunsire's suggestion of ‘collibration’. This can be defined for present purposes as the judicious re-articulating and rebalancing of modes of governance to manage the complexity, plurality, and tangled hierarchies found in prevailing modes of coordination with a view to achieving optimal outcomes as viewed by those engaged in metagovernance. In this sense it also means the organization of the conditions of governance in terms of their structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity, i.e. the asymmetrical privileging of different modes of coordination and their differential access to the institutional support and the material resources needed to pursue reflexively-agreed objectives.

Collibration is no more the preserve of one actor or set of actors than it is confined to one site or scale of action. Instead, it should be seen, like the various first-order forms of coordination of complex reciprocal interdependence and the various second-order forms of metacoordination, as fractal in character: i.e. as taking self-similar forms in many different social fields (on fractal relations, see, classically, Mandelbrot, 1982).

That said, now and for the foreseeable future, governments do play a major and increasing role in all aspects of metagovernance in areas of societal significance, whether these are formally private or public. This is especially true during periods of crisis that threaten system integration and/or social cohesion. They get involved in redesigning markets, in constitutional change and the juridical re-regulation of organizational forms and objectives, in organizing the conditions for networked self-organization, in promoting social capital and the self-regulation of the professions and other forms of expertise, and, most importantly, in the collibration of different forms of first-order governance and metagovernance. This role means that networking, negotiation, noise reduction, and negative as well as positive coordination often occur ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’ (Scharpf, 1994: 40).

For example, states at different levels provide the ground rules for governance and the regulatory order in and through which governance partners can pursue their aims; ensure the compatibility or coherence of different governance mechanisms and regimes; act as the primary organizer of the dialogue among policy communities; deploy a relative monopoly of organizational intelligence and information in order to shape cognitive expectations; serve as a ‘court of appeal’ for disputes arising within and over governance; seek to rebalance power differentials by strengthening weaker forces or systems in the interests of social cohesion and/or system integration; take material and/or symbolic flanking and supporting measures to stabilize forms of coordination that are deemed valuable but prone to collapse; contribute to the meshing of short-, medium- and long-term time horizons and temporal rhythms across different sites, scales, and actors, in part to prevent opportunistic exit and entry into governance arrangements; try to modify the self-understanding of identities, strategic capacities, and interests of individual and collective actors in different strategic contexts and hence alter their implications for preferred strategies and tactics; organize redundancies and
duplication to sustain resilience through requisite variety in response to unexpected problems; and also assume political responsibility in the event of governance failure in domains beyond the state (based in part on Jessop, 2002: 219; see also Bell and Hindmoor, 2009).

An additional aspect concerns the role of the state itself within metagovernance, because state managers typically monitor the effects of governance failure and attempts at metagovernance on their own capacity to secure social cohesion in divided societies. In addition, the state reserves the right to open, close, juggle, and re-articulate governance not only in terms of particular functions but also from the viewpoint of partisan and global political advantage. This can often lead state managers into self-interested action to protect their particular interests rather than to preserve the state’s overall capacity to pursue an (always selective and biased) consensual interpretation of the public interest and to promote social cohesion.

Metagovernance involves not only institutional design but also the transformation of subjects and cultures. Whereas there has been much interest in issues of institutional design appropriate to different objects of governance, less attention has been paid by governance theorists to reforming the subjects of governance and their values. Yet the neoliberal project, for example, clearly requires attempts to create entrepreneurial subjects and demanding consumers, aware of their choices and rights as well as needing actions to shift the respective scope and powers of the market mechanism and state intervention. This is an area where Foucauldian students of governmentality offer more than students of governance. They have been especially interested in the role of power and knowledge in shaping the attributes, capacities, and identities of social agents and, in the context of self-reflexive governance, in enabling them to become self-governing and self-transforming (cf. Miller and Rose, 2008). This raises important questions about the compatibility of different modes of governance insofar as this involves not only questions of institutional compatibility but also the distribution of the individual and collective capacities needed to pursue creatively and autonomously the appropriate strategies and tactics to sustain contrasting modes of governance.

The Success (and Failure) of Metagovernance in the Shadow of Hierarchy

Given the tendency for first-order governance to fail, whether due to lack of governance capacities or the inherent ungovernability of the objects of governance, we can conjecture that metagovernance and collaboration are also prone to fail. This conjecture is more plausible where the relevant objects of governance and metagovernance are complicated, interconnected, and, perhaps, internally and/or mutually contradictory and where any impression of effective governance and metagovernance to date has depended on displacing certain governance problems elsewhere and/or on deferring them into a more or less remote future. This could well be one source of the ‘steering optimism’ as opposed to pessimism that one finds in the governance and metagovernance literatures — especially when such temporary spatio-temporal fixes are reinforced by the capacity to engage in fuite en avant to produce new fixes. In contrast, ‘steering pessimism’ tends to look at the underlying long-term structural obstacles to effective governance and metagovernance and that, by virtue of the simplification of the conditions of action, so often lead to the ‘revenge’ of problems that get ignored, marginalized, displaced, or deferred. This sort of simplification is evident in attempts to define problems as societal in scope and as requiring consensual governance solutions rather than as conflictual effects of exploitation, oppression, or discrimination that can be solved only by addressing fundamental patterns of domination (cf. Mayntz 2001, 2003). This
is reinforced by the normative assumptions that inform policy paradigms focused on governance, governance failure, and metagovernance — where the emphasis is on different forms of cooperation that obviate the need for antagonism and violence. In this sense, prolonged resort to organized coercion tends to be excluded from governance policy paradigms other than as a clear sign of governance failure.

Overall, considered from the viewpoint of their policy implications, this analysis of governance failure suggests three principles for metagovernance practices:

1. Deliberate cultivation of a flexible repertoire (requisite variety) of responses. This involves recognition that complexity excludes simple governance solutions and that effective governance often requires a combination of mechanisms oriented to different scales, different temporal horizons, etc., that are appropriate to the object to be governed. In this way strategies and tactics can be combined and rebalanced to reduce the likelihood of governance failure in the face of turbulence in the policy environment and changing policy risks.

2. A reflexive orientation about what would be an acceptable policy outcome in the case of incomplete success, to compare the effects of failure/inadequacies in the market, government, and governance, and regular reassessment of the extent to which current actions are producing desired outcomes.

3. Self-reflexive ‘irony’ such that the participants in governance recognize the likelihood of failure but then continue as if success were possible. The supreme irony in this context is that the need for irony holds not only for individual attempts at governance using individual governance mechanisms but also for metagovernance using appropriate metagovernance mechanisms.

Regarding the first principle, requisite variety involves informational, structural, and functional redundancies in governance practices and is necessitated by the complexity of their objects. As initially introduced into cybernetics, the law of requisite variety states that, in order to ensure that a given system has a specific value at a given time despite turbulence in its environment, the controller or regulator must be able to produce as many different counteractions as there are significant ways in which variations in the environment can impact on the system (Ashby, 1956). This principle has major implications for governance but, as specified, it is essentially static. In a dynamic and changing world the inevitable forces of natural and/or social entropy would soon break down any predefined control mechanism established using this concept. Because of the infinite variety of perturbations that could affect a system in a complex world, one should try to maximize its internal variety (or diversity) so that the system is well prepared for any contingencies. Thus it is better to reformulate the law as follows. To minimize the risks of metagovernance as well as governance failure in a turbulent environment, maintain a broad and flexible spectrum of possible responses so that the governance mix can be modified as the limits of any one mode become evident. While this requirement might seem inefficient from an economizing viewpoint because it introduces slack or waste, it also provides major sources of flexibility in the face of failure (Grabher, 1994). This involves the monitoring of mechanisms to check for problems, resort to collibrating mechanisms to modulate the coordination mix, and a commitment to the reflexive, negotiated re-evaluation of objectives. Moreover, because different periods and conjunctures as well as different objects of governance require different kinds of policy mix, the balance in the repertoire will need to be varied as circumstances change.

The second principle reflexivity, involves the ability and commitment to uncover and make explicit to oneself the nature of one's intentions, projects, and actions and their conditions of
possibility, and, in this context, to learn about them, critique them, and act upon any useful lessons that have been learnt. Complexity requires that a reflexive observer recognizes that she cannot fully understand what she is observing and must therefore make contingency plans for unexpected events. In relation to governance, this involves inquiring in the first instance into the material, social, and discursive construction of possible objects of governance and reflecting on why this rather than another object of governance (or the policy problems with which it is associated) has (have) become hegemonic, dominant, or simply taken-for-granted. It also requires thinking critically about the strategically selective implications of adopting one or other definition of a specific object of governance and its properties, a fortiori, of the choice of modes of governance, participants in the governance process, and so forth (on these particular issues, see Larmour, 1997). It requires monitoring mechanisms, modulating mechanisms, and a willingness to re-evaluate objectives. And it requires learning about how to learn reflexively. There is a general danger of infinite regress here, of course, but this can be limited, provided that reflexivity is combined with the first and third principles.

Finally, given ‘the centrality of failure and the inevitability of incompleteness’ (Malpas and Wickham, 1995: 39), the third principle highlights respect for what can be defined as ‘the law of requisite irony’ in approaching governance and metagovernance. Irony is required to avoid the temptations of fatalism, stoicism, opportunism, and cynicism in tackling the often daunting problems of governance in the face of complex, reciprocal interdependence in a turbulent environment. Fatalism leads to inaction, stoicism rests on passive resignation in the pursuit of familiar routines, opportunism is expressed in avoiding or exploiting the consequences of failure for self-interested motives, and cynicism leads to the stage management of appearances to claim success in the face of failure. Cynicism is the realm of symbolic politics, accelerated policy churning (to give the impression of doing something about intractable problems), and the ‘spin doctor’ — the realm of ‘words that work but policies that fail’. This is particularly evident in the highly mediatized world of contemporary politics. In contrast to these other responses to the prospects of failure, the ironist is a sceptic. If one is likely to fail, one can at least choose one’s preferred form of failure. This is irony in the Rortyan sense but it has a public, not private, form. Rortyan irony primarily concerns a contrast between public confidence about the permanency and validity of one’s vocabulary of motives and actions and private doubt about their finality and apodicticity (Rorty, 1989: 73–4). Translated into the public domain of self-reflexive, deliberative governance and metagovernance, this could be expressed in terms of the need to combine ‘optimism of the will’ with ‘pessimism of the intelligence’. The ironist accepts incompleteness and failure as essential features of social life but acts as if completeness and success were possible. She must simplify a complex, contradictory, and changing reality in order to be able to act — knowing full well that any such simplification is also a distortion of reality and, what is worse, that such distortions can sometimes generate failure even as they are also a precondition of relatively successful interventions to manage complex interdependence. The only possibility open for political ironists, then, is to stand apart from their political practices and at the same time incorporate this awareness of their ironic position into the practice itself. Thus, the public ironist is more romantic than cynical, committed to continuing public dialogue rather than a privatized world of laissezspencer, and also opposes passive resignation and opportunistic behaviour. For the law of requisite irony entails that those involved in governance choose among forms of failure and make a reasoned decision in favour of one or another form of failure. In this respect it is important to note that, in contrast to cynics, ironists act in ‘good faith’ and seek to involve others in the process of policymaking, not for manipulative purposes but in order to bring about conditions for negotiated consent and self-reflexive learning. In line with the law of requisite variety, moreover, they must be prepared to change the modes of governance as
appropriate. But for good philosophical reasons to do with empowerment and accountability, they should ideally place self-organization at the heart of governance in preference to the anarchy of the market or the top-down command of more or less unaccountable rulers. In this sense, self-reflexive and participatory forms of governance are performative — they are both an art form and a life form. Like all forms of governance they are constitutive of their objects of governance but they also become a self-reflexive means of coping with the failures, contradictions, dilemmas, and paradoxes that are an inevitable feature of life. In this sense participatory governance is a crucial means of defining the objectives as well as objects of governance as well as of facilitating the co-realization of these objectives by reinforcing motivation and mobilizing capacities for self-reflection, self-regulation, and self-correction.

Conclusions

This chapter has distinguished a set of first-order variants concerned with the reflexive redesign of individual modes of governance (such as markets, hierarchies, networks, and solidarities) and a set of second-order metagovernance practices concerned with the collibration, or rebalancing, of different forms of governance and their metagovernance. Metagovernance comprises a complex array of more or less reflexive social practices concerned with the governance of social relations characterized by complex, reciprocal interdependence. Interest in the topic has grown in step with recognition, even among its strongest advocates, of the limits of heterarchy (self-organization) as a solution to the failure of other forms of governance (such as the anarchy of the market or the hierarchy of command) (cf. Peters, 2008). It is always hard for critical scholars to engage with governance and metagovernance because of the normative bias in the definition of governance problems and governance solutions. Although there is a theoretical literature on governance and metagovernance (especially in the fields of critical political economy and governmentality studies), most research on governance is concerned with organizational and/or policy issues in the private, third, and public sectors and connected to irenic modes of problem solving. This is especially clear in current concerns with ‘democratic network governance’ and ‘good governance’. This has discouraged, as Renate Mayntz has noted, inquiries into the grounding of ‘societal problems’ in economic and political domination (see above) and, as I have argued in my own contributions to the critique of political economy, serious neglect of the extent to which the sources of governance failure are deeper rooted than issues of cognitive capacities, the discursive framing of problems, institutional design, the tools of governance, or the willingness to engage in co-governance. These are fundamental questions that must be integrated into the governance research agenda and that require more work on the theoretical assumptions rather than policy implications of interest in governance and metagovernance.

Failure to address these issues is part of the explanation for the messiness of this field. For it is located uneasily at the interface of competing theoretical paradigms, their translation (and simplification) into policy paradigms, and the efforts of experts and consultants to market specific approaches and panaceas. They are also complicated by the strategic dilemmas involved in metagovernance design and the basic contradictions that often characterize specific objects of governance. For these reasons it is also a highly contested field, with significant ideal and material interests at stake, and one with major implications for the role of the national territorial state as the addressee of demands to act as ‘metagovernor’ in the last resort. When this is combined with the growing complexity and turbulence of world society, governance and, a fortiori, metagovernance are deeply problematic practices. This is why I have argued that metagovernance and, above all, collibration require a degree of romantic public irony if they are to stand some chance of success in producing a less conflictual,
unequal, and unjust society. This leads to one final concluding remark: the continuing temptation to reduce disinterested theoretical work on governance and metagovernance into interested policy-driven work risks throwing the whole notion of metagovernance into disrepute. Nonetheless, in the light of my preceding remarks, these threats to the theoretical paradigm should not be approached fatalistically or cynically but in the same ironic spirit that is appropriate to metagovernance as practice.

Notes

1 The first two definitions are relatively commonplace and obvious; on the third, see van Bortel and Mullins (2009); on the fourth, see Bovaird (2005).

2 This observation is based on an ‘all text’ search of the complete index at the journal website, 20.09.2009. The same holds for the new journal, Regulation & Governance, which was first published in 2006.

3 For an earlier review, see Jessop (1995).

4 ‘Police’, ‘policey’, or Polizei concern the governance of conduct in ways that will enable those in charge of ‘affairs of state’ to produce an orderly ‘state of affairs’ in a given state’s territory. This is an issue much debated in early doctrines of statecraft and discussed more recently in Foucault’s work on governmentality.

5 This balance will vary in the light of specific sectoral problems.

6 Steuerung is the main German equivalent of governance, a term derived from the medieval Latin word, gubernantia, In turn, this is related to the Greek word for steering, piloting, or guiding.

7 Sørensen, Torfing and Fotel (2009) explicate these principles as follows: (1) network design, which endeavours to determine the scope, character, composition, and institutional procedures of networks; (2) network framing, which seeks to define the political goals, fiscal conditions, legal basis, and discursive storyline of networks; (3) network management, which attempts to reduce tensions, resolve conflicts, empower particular actors, and lower the transaction costs by providing different kinds of material and immaterial inputs and resources; and (4) network participation, which aims to influence the policy agenda, the range of feasible options, the decision-making premises, and the negotiated outputs and outcomes.

8 One implication of this is that one should not be too hasty in destroying alternative modes of coordination — for they may need to be reinvented in one or another form in response to particular forms of coordination failure. This lesson is being relearnt in the current financial crisis.

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References


Social Complexity, ChelmsfordEdward Elgar; pp. 111–47.

- metagovernance
- governance
- governance failure
- coordination
- heterarchy
- state failure
- steering