Chapter 2: Policy Network Theory

Introduction: Policy Networks and the Language of Governance

Today it is widely believed that we live in a world of networks, a world in which policy-making and governance are ‘only feasible within networks, providing a framework for the efficient horizontal coordination of the interests and actions of public and private corporate actors, mutually dependent on their resources’ (Börzel, 1998: 262–3). Governance, in this brave new world, involves a plurality of actors interacting in networks that cut across the organizational and conceptual divides by means of which the modern state has conventionally and all too conveniently been understood: notably, the distinction between state and civil society, and the distinction between public and private sectors.

If we accept this view of the world, policy network theory is an analytical, critical, and – for want of a better word – emancipatory enterprise. Theories of policy networks point to an alleged mismatch between received concepts and theories of governing, on the one hand, and what is taken to be the current realities of governance, on the other. A high degree of complexity and functional and sectoral differentiation in society and politics are presented as indubitable facts, while it is also stated or implied that these facts have been covered over or misrendered by outdated concepts and theories. While critics have remained unconvinced by ‘pointless theorizing about policy networks’ (Dowding, 2001: 102), the point of theorizing about policy networks has usually been to liberate us from such concepts and theories, making us perceive more clearly the conditions under which we are governed, and pointing in the direction of more sustainable forms of governance. Governing Complex Societies, the title of a book by two prominent scholars in the field (Pierre and Peters, 2005), supposedly calls for more complexity in governance than has hitherto been allowed, or as Rod Rhodes has pithily put it in what
could be a slogan for the entire field, ‘messy problems need messy solutions’ (1997a: 21).

Insofar as there is relative agreement today on the existence and nature of this messy world of networks, such agreement is quite recent. Unquestionable as all this might seem today, only two decades ago talk of policy networks did not necessarily imply belief in a ‘distinct new governing structure’ (Adam and Kriesi, 2007); its recent adoption – or [p. 20 ↓ ] abduction – into the language of governance to one side, the policy network concept has long been used to describe and analyze ‘different types of empirically possible patterns of interaction among public and private actors in policy-specific subsystems’ (Adam and Kriesi, 2007: 130; cf. Börzel, 1998). So, there were policy networks before there was governance, or better, there were concepts and theories of policy networks before there was a language of governance, a language in which the term ‘governance’ is often used as shorthand for ‘self-organizing, interorganizational networks characterized by interdependence, resource exchange, rules of the game and significant autonomy from the state’ (Rhodes, 1997a: 15).

This chapter seeks to assess the past, present, and prospects of policy network theory by unpacking the generic policy network concept around which the field has been formed and transformed. Admittedly, there is no shortage of reviews and overviews of policy network theory. Assessing the state of the art has even become a thriving subgenre (see, for example, Freeman and Parris Stevens, 1987; Jordan, 1990; Rhodes, 1990; Jordan and Schubert, 1992; van Waarden, 1992; Klijn, 1997; Börzel, 1998; Thatcher, 1998; Mayntz, 2003; Adam and Kriesi, 2007). The range of perspectives, research interests, theoretical and methodological options, and empirical findings are all well covered in the literature. But the same cannot be said about the core concept that informs research, irrespective of perspective. Therefore, here, I approach policy networks and the theories devoted to them by way of the concept used to describe and analyze policy networks in the language of governance, rather than treat policy networks as empirically given in the world to which that concept is supposed to refer.

The reason for this take on the field is simple: concepts are the most fundamental tools of the trade in any academic discipline or field, and the best way to evaluate concepts is usually not to debate their match or mismatch with the world, which is the scantily clad empiricism of most policy network theory. Instead, the best way to evaluate concepts is
to ask whether or not they are adequate for whatever task we want to use them for. In the present case that appears not to be the case, insofar as students of policy networks today may want to expand their field of inquiry to cover a broad range of policymaking phenomena not only within but also beyond the nation-state framework handed down with received concepts and theories. The problem, I suggest, is not that the policy network concept has come to cover too much, or the ‘ever-increasing ambitions’ that allegedly follow with the gradual extension of the scope of this concept (Thatcher, 1998: 390), but rather that it still encompasses too little, in the sense that it is premised on a nation-state model of politics no longer reflected by research interests in the field, let alone in the social sciences generally. While policy network theory is arguably best seen as part of a long and broad pluralist legacy in modern political discourse, it still remains statist in its implications for empirical, theoretical, and normative inquiry.

In the first and second sections, I trace the career of the policy network concept in influential varieties of policy network theory, past and present. This chronicle is far from original and necessarily selective, covering three odd decades. In the third section I then unpack what I take to be the main components of the generic policy network concept with which these theories have left us: interdependence; coordination; and pluralism. These notions have become a hard core of the policy network concept in all varieties of policy network theory, subject to different interpretations but without which the concept would be difficult to make out or make sense of. The fourth section offers some suggestions as to what arguably needs to be done with the policy network concept today in order for policy network theory to remain a fruitful form of political inquiry in the immediate future, beyond the nation-state framework within which the field has evolved.

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Discovering Policy Networks, Circa 1978–1990

For present purposes the story about policy network theory began in the late 1970s with two largely independent transatlantic developments, both part of a general shift in
focus in political research in the twentieth century, from formal hierarchy and jurisdiction to informal constellations of power and interest. In America in the 1970s, a sizeable literature emerged on ‘subgovernments’, ‘subsystems’, or ‘iron triangles’, essentially synonymous terms designating ‘clusters of individuals that effectively make most of the routine decisions in a given substantive area of policy’ (Ripley and Franklin, 1984: 10; Freeman and Parris Stevens, 1987). With no discernible influence from overseas, the term ‘policy community’ came to serve a similar purpose in British research on public services, signifying a stable network of actors sharing interests and attitudes in relation to a specific policy issue or area (Jordan, 1990: 327).

In an explicit critique of the iron triangle metaphor, Hugh Heclo argued in an influential essay in 1978 that American policymaking was in fact less a matter of ‘closed triangles of control’ and more a matter of relatively open and flexible ‘issue networks’, whose composition and ambitions were relative to the issues at hand. An issue network, Heclo explained, ‘is a shared-knowledge group having to do with some aspect (or, as defined by the network, some problem) of public policy’ (1978: 103). Heclo's image implied that policymaking was ‘fragmented’ in a more or less ad hoc manner, rather than ‘segmented’ into relatively permanent, cohesive triangles involving members from departments, interest groups, and congressional committees. Echoing the conclusion of Robert Dahl's pluralist classic *Who Governs?* (1961), he noted that '[r]ather than groups united in dominance over a program, no-one, as far as one can tell, is in control of the policy and issues’ (Heclo, 1978: 102; cf. Jordan, 1990: 329).

These Anglo-American literatures left latter-day students of policy networks with a conceptual legacy within which much of the debate in the field still moves. First, the policy network concept came to cover a continuum along which different kinds of network can be plotted according to their relative cohesion, inclusion, and permanence, ranging from cohesive and stable policy communities to loosely integrated and ad hoc issue networks in declining order (see Rhodes, 1986; Bevir, 2009: 156). This continuum is largely a consequence of the different research interests, empirical cases, and concepts that precariously coexisted in these early literatures, and it has left a lasting imprint, not least as conceptual ambiguity between different conceptions of policy networks (cf. Börzel, 1998).
Secondly, in the early literatures, network interaction was typically conceived of as interpersonal rather than interorganizational, the networks studied being supposedly composed of individuals rather than of organizations. Soon, however, policy network theory took a decisive turn from the former to the latter position; at least since the early 1990s a conception of policy networks as interorganizational has been dominant, a dogma that only now appears to be loosening. In a recent volume where several contributions cross over from network governance into Foucauldian studies of governmentality and back, the editors suggest that whether policy networks are best seen as interpersonal or interorganizational should be an empirical rather than a conceptual question (Sörensen and Torfing, 2007: 11).

The legacy of early policy network theory has also influenced current notions of what networks are, and what is going on within and between them. In the 1970s terms such as ‘clusters’ or ‘groups’ were often used synonymously with ‘networks’, with no perceived difference between these labels. But as soon as Heclo and others made the move from subsystems or policy communities to more loosely integrated issue networks, the group concept became an awkward presence in the field. When we speak of groups we tend to assume that their members join together on the basis of shared interests or identities in order to act collectively on the latter, or at least that a sense of shared interest or identity will evolve among the group members in the course of interaction, an assumption that runs through the successive phases of our pluralist legacy (for an analysis, see Enroth, forthcoming).

Networks, on the other hand, seem to be a different and less communal matter. In networks we typically expect to find actors with interests or identities of their own, interacting not necessarily on the basis of anything they share with other actors, save the mere condition of interaction and whatever we believe that entails. Rather, actors interact in networks because network interaction is presumably facilitating or even necessary in order for them to pursue their own objectives. Under the name of interdependence, this has been a defining feature of policy networks since the 1980s and 1990s when British, German, and Dutch scholars systematically put the concept to empirical use.
Analyzing Policy Networks, Circa 1990–2010

So much for the prehistory of policy network theory. Let us now turn to more recent developments. The following subsections trace the changing ambitions in the field, in roughly chronological order, from typologies of policy networks to various efforts at explanation, management, understanding, interpretation, and normative revaluation.

Typologizing policy networks: The Anglo-governance school

What is known as the Anglo-governance school has, arguably like no other approach to policy networks, ‘formed into an authoritative theory of how new methods of governing society have emerged’ (Marinetto, 2003: 592). Its chief proponent, Rod Rhodes, has noted that in Britain ‘[p]olicy networks changed after 1979’, changes summed up terminologically as a turn from ‘government’ to ‘governance’. ‘Functional policy networks based on central departments […] expanded to include more actors, most notably from the private and voluntary sectors. The institutions of the state were fragmented’ (1997a: 45). Reflecting this fragmentation of the research object, Rhodes has described policy networks in terms of ‘the structural relationship between political institutions’ at different levels. This is the embryo of his later insistence that the policy network concept is best construed as a ‘meso-level’ concept, designating ‘the variety of linkages between the centre and the range of sub-central political and governmental organizations’ (1997a: 36–37).

The essence of those linkages is interdependence, which Rhodes has referred to as the ‘explanatory motor’ in policy network theory; mutual dependence on decentralized and asymmetrically distributed resources is the reason ‘why different levels of government interact’, as well as the explanation for ‘variations in the distribution of power within and between networks’ (1997a: 9). A policy network, on this view, is thus ‘a cluster or complex of organizations connected to one another by resource
dependencies’, and network interaction is a ‘game’ in which the participants ‘manoeuvre for advantage’ (Rhodes, 1997a: 37). These are the essentials of what Rhodes has described as ‘a broadly neo-pluralist argument’ to the effect that ‘power is structured in a few competing elites, which includes the private government of public policy by closed policy networks’ (Rhodes, 2007: 1250).

As in earlier varieties of British pluralism, this approach to policy networks ‘does not manifest a great deal of concern with the coordination of public services. Whether at a practical or a theoretical level, it has not sought to prescribe’ (Rhodes, 1990: 308). But it has certainly sought to describe. From the early 1980s through the 1990s policy network theory in Britain progressed – if that is indeed the word – more than anything through creation, critique, and revision of typologies of policy networks. Critique and revision went with the territory, as it were, since, as Rhodes and David Marsh have noted, ‘no policy area will conform exactly’ to any given list of characteristics in any given typology, which for them underscores ‘the need to retain the term “policy networks” as a generic description’ (Rhodes and Marsh, 1992: 187).

The fact that typologies of policy networks cannot aspire to be empirically exhaustive made sure that typologizing was likely to go on as long as it seemed reasonable to use the policy network concept to chart empirical variations in public–private and state– society interactions in different policy areas. Predictably, new cases provided new variations, prompting new typologies. A quaint illustration of this self-perpetuating logic is Rhodes’s erstwhile habit of referring to and revising his own publications on ‘the Rhodes typology’ in the third person. The typologies that resulted from these efforts did much to pave the way for subsequent attempts at explanation and understanding as well as normative assessment, but as Rhodes has recently remarked, in hindsight ‘typologies of networks have become deeply uninteresting’ (2007: 1249). With only slight oversimplification, it could be claimed that the Anglo-governance school and its forerunners in Britain successfully redescribed governmental policymaking, so that others could devote their attention to analyzing what is now, almost across the board, construed as a distinct new governing structure.
Explaining policy networks: The Max Planck Institute

The most influential bid when it comes to explaining policymaking in and through networks is probably to refer to institutional theory and game theory. In retrospect it seems all but inevitable that empirical attention to policy networks would be wedded both to the 'new institutionalism' as it evolved in organizational analysis and political science, and to rational choice theory. Fritz Scharpf and Renate Mayntz and their colleagues at the Max Planck Institute have made much of blending the two. For them, as for Rhodes, contemporary policymaking is marked by the prevalence of networks and by interdependence between network actors, creating conditions where cooperation is dearly needed yet delicate. 'Networks', Mayntz has observed, 'typically emerge where power is dispersed among agents in a policy field, but where cooperation is necessary for the sake of effectiveness'. Hence the key question addressed by this variety of policy network theory: 'the problem of how to agree on an effective solution without shifting the costs this implies on to outsiders' (2003: 31).

Thus construed, policy network theory is essentially about the nature and conditions of strategic action in institutional contexts that shape the perceptions, preferences, and interactions of the network participants. Policy network theory is a systematic and formalized ‘search for mechanisms that real-world actors could rely upon to increase their ability to predict each other’s strategic choices’ (Scharpf, 1991: 294). It seeks to identify the rules of the game that shape network interaction, and to account for the games network actors play in accordance with those rules (Marin and Mayntz, 1991; Scharpf, 1997). As Bevir has remarked, it is ‘arguable’ that this approach differs from the Anglo-Governance school ‘mainly in the extent to which it uses formal game theory to analyze and explain rule-governed networks’ (2009: 159).
Managing policy networks: The governance club

The members of the ‘governance club’ research program at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, likewise approach policy networks in terms of strategic action among public and private actors under conditions of interdependence. Here, too, we find the pluralist assumption that no one actor involved in any given policymaking process ‘possesses the power to [p. 24 ↓] determine the strategies of the other actors’, and that ‘[t]he government is no longer seen as occupying a superior position to other parties, but as being on equal footing with them’ (Kickert et al., 1997: 9). And here, too, the strategies of network participants are analysed as contingent on the network itself, since ‘[p]roblems, actors and perceptions are not chance elements of policy processes but are connected with the interorganizational network within which these processes occur’ (Klijn, 1997: 16). A policy network thus construed is ‘an interaction system reproduced by concrete games’, but as such it also ‘shapes the context of new games’. A game, in turn, is ‘an interaction between the strategies of interdependent actors’ (Klijn and Teisman, 1997: 103). It is the main objective of this variety of policy network theory to analyse such games in order to facilitate the management of policy networks (see Klijn and Teisman, 1997: 105–12).

The most obvious difference between Rhodes’s Anglo-governance school and the Dutch governance club is the latter’s managerial perspective, the task being precisely to prescribe where Rhodes has explicitly foresworn such an ambition (cf. Rhodes, 1997b: xiii–xiv). The research program of Walter Kickert, Erik-Hans Klijn, Joop Koppenjan and associates treats policymaking through networks not simply as an empirical datum with which we have been confronted and in the face of which we can seemingly only acquiesce, but as a novel condition calling for new forms of coordination between new policy actors. Network management, however, is not a matter of top-down steering, but a question of how to make the games network actors play run more smoothly in the apparent absence of an umpire. This means that an aspiring network manager – typically a governmental actor – needs to be able to ‘handle complex interaction settings and work out strategies to deal with the different perceptions, preferences
and strategies of the various actors involved’ (Kickert et al., 1997: 11). Ironically, then, the work of the governance club restates an old statist question about policy coordination in a language of governance that explicitly denies not only the efficacy but also the possibility of central steering. The question here is ‘how governance and public management can take shape in situations in which central steering is not possible’ (Kickert and Koppenjan, 1997: 35).

**Understanding policy networks: A dialectical approach**

Launching a critique of the above approaches, David Marsh and Martin Smith have introduced what they refer to as a ‘dialectical approach’ to policy networks, indebted to the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens. Existing approaches, according to Marsh and Smith, have neglected that treating policy networks as an explanatory variable properly involves three ‘dialectical relationships’: between structure and agency; between a given policy network and its surrounding context; and between a given policy network and the policy outcomes generated by the network, past and present. A dialectical relationship, on this view, is ‘an interactive relationship between two variables in which each affects the other in a continuing iterative process’ (Marsh and Smith, 2000: 5). Policy network theory thus construed involves ‘looking at the institutionalization of power relations both within the network and within the broader socio-economic context’ (Marsh and Smith, 2000: 7). In alleged contrast to other varieties of policy network theory, this leads Marsh and Smith (2000, 11) to conclude that

- ‘the formation of the network is affected by a combination of external factors and the decisions of agents’;
- ‘policy outcomes are the product of the interaction between agents and structures’;
- ‘change in the network is the product of an interaction between context and networks’;
- ‘outcomes affect the network’.
Not everybody, however, has been convinced by the novelty of the dialectical approach of Marsh and Smith. ‘Who are they kidding?’, Keith Dowding responded in an acerbic critique, pointing out – accurately – that the three interactive relationships identified by Marsh and Smith have in fact been noted in much or most existing literature on policy networks (Dowding, 2001: 99). Dowding’s response and Marsh and Smith’s response to his response amounted to a heated but futile exchange not about substance – since there was no real disagreement on matters of substance, as even the interlocutors allowed – but about method and visions of social inquiry. As such, this exchange is not without interest, reflecting as it does the old clash between explanation and understanding in the social sciences, a clash forever reiterated in new contexts in virtually identical guise.

In the present context there has been an intensified criticism during the past decade of what has been presented as a lingering positivism in the above varieties of policy network theory, best replaced, critics have argued, by post-positivist or interpretative approaches. The exchange between Marsh and Smith and their critics may thus be seen as symptomatic of a general trend in the field, ostensibly a move away from substantive differences about policy networks and governance to differences of a methodological and epistemological kind. With policy networks now generally seen as indicative of a new governing structure, seemingly indubitable, old battles have subsided, as Rhodes and others have noted. With history in mind, this development evokes how mid-century political scientists successfully translated once controversial pluralist visions of politics into seemingly incontrovertible common sense, on the basis of which methodological and epistemological matters could be safely debated without putting the pluralist position itself at peril (see Gunnell, 2004: 219–52).

Decentering policy networks: An anti-foundational approach

An influential recent move in this process is the anti-foundational or decentered approach to policy networks introduced and elaborated by Mark Bevir, Rod Rhodes, and others. An anti-foundational approach to policy networks, Bevir and Rhodes have told us, attends to ‘the social construction of policy networks through the capacity of
individuals to create meaning’ (Rhodes, 2000: 78). On this view, ‘how the people we study actually see their position and their interests inevitably depends on their theories, which might differ significantly from our theories’ (Bevir, 2003: 204). Policy networks thus construed are socially constructed by virtue of the ‘contingent beliefs’ on the basis of which actors interact in them, beliefs formed ‘against the background of traditions’ and transformed ‘in response to dilemmas’ (Bevir and Richards, 2009a, 2009b).

A tradition in this context is ‘a set of theories, narratives, and associated practices that people inherit’, and a dilemma arises ‘when a new belief […] stands in opposition to their existing ones, thereby forcing a reconsideration of the latter’ (Bevir, 2003: 210). It is the task of policy network theory to reconstruct the interaction in policy networks by recovering and unpacking the beliefs of actors in terms of the traditions they inherit and the dilemmas they face and seek to resolve in and through interaction with other network participants.

This approach explicitly rejects the ambition to explain interaction in policy networks and the policy that results from such interaction in terms of institutional or structural factors allegedly conditioning or even determining agency; an anti-foundational or decentered approach to policy networks seeks to explain network interaction and policy solely in terms of the beliefs of the network participants, against the background of traditions and in the face of dilemmas. The critical view of existing explanatory ambitions in the field also implies a critical view of existing ambitions to manage policy networks, notably the efforts of the governance club. For one thing, managing networks is not, according to this approach, the prerogative of the state alone, since ‘there are various participants in [p. 26 ↓ ] markets and networks, all of whom can seek to manage them for diverse purposes’ (Bevir, 2003: 217). For another thing, and more fundamentally, the decentered theory of policy networks of Bevir and Rhodes rejects ‘the very idea of a set of techniques or strategies for managing governance’ (Bevir, 2003: 216). Policy advice, from this perspective, is best delivered by telling ‘stories that enable listeners to see governance afresh’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2007: 85; Rhodes, 2007: 1257).
Revaluating policy networks: Participation and accountability

Simultaneous with the linguistic or interpretative turn in policy network theory, there has been an unmistakable normative revaluation of policy networks during the past two decades or so, making what was not so long ago perceived as democratically dubious seem more conducive to democratic participation and political accountability. In the words of prominent members of the governance club, early policy network theory tended to conceive of policy networks as ‘synonymous with the resistance of vested interests standing in the way of effective and democratically legitimized problem solving and policy innovation’. Many latter-day contributions, by contrast, have paid more attention to ‘the potentials of the concept of policy networks for public problem solving and societal governance’ (Kickert, Klijn, Koppenjan, 1997: 2; Rhodes, 1997a: 58, 197–200; Bang, 2003; Bevir, 2003; Bevir and Rhodes, 2006: 68; Sörensen and Torfing, 2007).

Policy networks, on this recent view, ‘allow citizens to express more nuanced preferences in a more continuous way than they can when restricted to electing representatives’, and governance ‘opens up new possibilities of participation and devolution in democracy’ (Bevir, 2003: 217). Thus, the rise and spread of policy networks is not only or even mainly inimical to democracy but also an ‘opportunity’ to ‘reimagine’ or ‘redefine’ it (Bevir, 2003: 217–18). Rhodes has explicitly pointed out the ‘normative implications’ of his approach, leading him in the direction of a ‘republican’ theory of democracy that emphasizes ‘local ownership and a degree of independence from central government’, qualities held to be ‘defining features’ of network governance (Rhodes, 2007: 1257). This vision seems to come close to the ideals of participatory democracy, especially in its pluralist varieties. Paul Hirst’s ‘associative democracy’ is one such theory of relevance in the present context. According to Hirst, however, contemporary governance is marked not so much by loosely knit networks as by ‘large hierarchically controlled institutions on both sides of the public-private divide’. Such institutions can only be rendered more democratic by ‘devolving as many of the functions of the state as possible to society’, turning organizations ‘from top-
down bureaucracies into constitutionally ordered democratically self-governing associations’ (Hirst, 2000: 28), a vision very much in the spirit of G.D.H. Cole and other British pluralists around the turn of the last century.

John Dryzek has similarly drawn out the implications of his work on discursive democracy for policy network theory. According to him, networks may – ideally – function as sites for ‘engagement across discourses in the public sphere’, a kind of engagement which may in turn ‘influence more formal authority structures’ as well as ‘be intrinsically valuable in its constitution and reconstitution of social relationships’ (Dryzek, 2007: 271). Following Iris Marion Young, Dryzek refers to this as ‘inclusive political communication’, meant to ‘connect the particular to the general’ (Dryzek, 2007: 268). Of course, as Dryzek himself acknowledges, there can be no guarantees that policy networks will in fact allow for engagement across discourses rather than remain stuck within the particular by putting a premium on a single, hegemonic discourse as a ‘low-cost way of coordinating the actions of members of a network’ (Dryzek, 2007: 272).

What is immediately striking about these and similar visions of network democracy is that they are just that: visions, begging questions about how alleged democratic potential is to be actualized. Yet to remind ourselves of the importance of asking about the point, the point here is not so much description as prescription, giving normatively more forceful accounts of policy networks than those hitherto on offer. The recent revaluation of policy networks is best understood as a response to what Hirst has called ‘the ad hoc pluralization of political authority’ (2000: 24): i.e. an uneasy feeling that the alleged turn from government to governance has put cherished democratic values in peril.

In keeping with the entrenched fear of faction and self-interest in Western political thought, networks are, as Jon Pierre has put it, often ‘assumed to cater almost exclusively to the interests of those actors that participate in the network, a scenario which raises questions about the long-term legitimacy of such governance instruments’ (2000: 245). Today, by contrast, it has been suggested that ‘political theorists and central decision makers to an increasing extent tend to view governance networks as both an effective and legitimate mechanism of governance’ (Sörensen and Torfing, 2007: 4). So, on an upbeat reading of recent developments in policy network
theory, policy networks now help to address the very problems they have long been thought to cause or exacerbate – problems such as societal fragmentation, deficits in democratic participation and political accountability, and a declining public sphere.

Unpacking the Policy Network Concept

Whether aimed at description, explanation, management, understanding, interpretation, or revaluation, the above varieties of policy network theory all share the same generic policy network concept, a concept which these approaches have significantly shaped as well as been shaped by. To summarize, at a minimum in this literature, policy networks are characterized by:

- **Interdependence** — network participants are mutually dependent on each other’s resources in order to realize their objectives;
- **Coordination** — network participants need to act jointly in order to realize shared objectives;
- **Pluralism** — networks are relatively autonomous vis-à-vis other networks and the state.

Before we consider what arguably needs to be done with the policy network concept today, we need to take a closer look at each of these conceptual components as they have been fashioned and refashioned in the above theories.

**Interdependence**

Interdependence is commonly construed as mutual resource dependence, meaning simply that the actors in a network are believed to be dependent on each other’s resources – whatever resources – in order to realize their objectives (Bevir, 2009: 114). This notion of interdependence is implied by the narrative of societal complexity and functional differentiation that is integral to most if not all theories of policy networks. Strategic action based on interdependence has become the standard account of what keeps networks together, and as we have seen, network interaction has frequently, and more or less metaphorically, been described as ‘games real actors play’, as
'bargaining’, or ‘negotiation’ (Dowding, 1995; Rhodes, 1997; Scharpf, 1997). Klijn has even suggested that ‘[i]nterdependencies cause interactions between actors, which create and sustain relation patterns’ in policy networks (1997a: 31).

Even if we generously take ‘cause’ to mean something like ‘is a condition of’, ‘interdependencies cause interactions’ nevertheless seems an awkward way of unpacking the dynamics of policy networks. It is difficult to envision a situation in which actors in a policy network act strategically based on their interdependence with other actors in the network without first having come to perceive their interdependence as such, through interaction. So, this must be a two-way street: if interdependence may be construed as a condition of interaction in networks, then network interaction seems to be a condition of interdependence as well, a point in fact acknowledged by Klijn himself. Interdependence, he has also pointed out, ‘is something actors discover in interaction and which is changed in interaction’ (1997: 31).

For Bevir and Rhodes in their recent collaborative efforts, as for others who have taken a linguistic and interpretative turn in the study of policy networks, interdependence is more about communicative than strategic action. On this view, interdependence is contingent on the beliefs and interactions of ‘situated agents’ in networks, and is thus what actors make of it in the policy networks in which they interact (Bevir and Richards, 2009a). Interdependence is never, on this view, objectively given by the structure of the network or the institutions in which network participants interact, let alone by societal complexity or political differentiation in general; this is a point well made in relation to the governance club and others who find it difficult to account for intersubjective – as distinct from supposedly objective – aspects of interdependence.

Still other scholars have argued that ‘there might be other reasons for the development and existence of networks than interdependence between actors’ (Hoff, 2003: 45). Cited examples include a perceived need among actors to reach a common understanding on policy issues or to pool resources in order to implement policy; initiatives from public authorities; legal and financial incentives; and the intended or unintended diffusion of norms relevant for public policy (Hoff, 2003: 45; Triantafillou, 2007: 190–4). It is far from clear that these indeed constitute counter-evidence against interdependence as the explanatory motor in policy network theory, yet the point of suggesting that they do is
clear: namely, to point beyond strategic action as the sole conceivable dynamic in policy network interaction. This brings us to our next conceptual component.

**Coordination**

‘Coordination’, Bevir has explained in an introduction to key concepts in governance, ‘occurs whenever two or more policy actors pursue a common outcome and work together to produce it’ (2009: 56–57). Coordination is not a given in policy networks, but rather, as Bevir has put it, ‘both a driving force of governance and one of its goals’ (2009: 56). This is a matter of what we make of network interaction. Simply put, the more the participants in policy networks are believed to be able to coordinate their own interactions the less we need to worry about coordination as a condition for interaction, and the less we need to worry about ‘network management’, or ‘metagovernance’, and whether and how such practices might involve the state.

If we take network interaction to be essentially about strategic action under conditions of interdependence, then nothing much seems certain about coordination. Whether and to what extent the actors in a given network are capable of coordination would seem to be a purely empirical question, turning on negotiation, compromise, and alignment of the respective objectives with which the actors enter the network. But not so fast. Some degree of cooperation would seem to be implied in the very notion of interdependence, without which, again, it seems difficult to make sense of the policy network concept. Yet in order for cooperation to be in some sense successful, and in order for shared objectives to emerge out of the process of network interaction, it would seem that something more is required. Just what this ‘more’ is has long been a sticking point in policy network research, just as it has long been a sticking point in the various forms of new institutionalism, and just as it was a persistent sticking point in earlier forms of pluralism.

Here we should note the prevalence in policy network theory of trust as a lubricant in network interaction. If, on the standard account, interdependence is the explanatory motor in policy network theory, and strategic action provides the dynamic in network interaction, then, still on the standard account, ‘[t]he medium of coordination appears indeed to be something like trust in the context of interdependence’ (Bevir,
Facilitating and debilitating conditions of network interaction have also been broached in terms of the relative degree of conflict and consensus in policy networks, since the possibility of conflict between network actors with objectives of their own seems omnipresent, while at the same time at least relative consensus on objectives seems necessary in order for the network to persist and actually produce policy. As Sørensen and Torfing have noted, '[t]here is a permanent risk that conflicts between network actors will reduce or even destroy the self-regulating capacity of a governance network' (2007: 170). As always with conflict and consensus, the consensus view seems to be that we need a bit of both. Joop Koppenjan has argued that networks that suffer from ‘excessive consensus’ will tend towards ‘the systematic suppression or exclusion of problems, interests, parties and innovations’, while, on the other hand, excessive conflict may result in network disintegration (2007: 150; cf. Peters, 2007).

Theorists who opt for communicative rather than strategic action tend, justifiably or not, to make less of a problem of coordination, assuming that policy networks go it alone. And conversely, those who do believe that network interaction is tantamount to strategic action tend to doubt that policy networks can, or indeed should, go it alone when it comes to coordination between network participants. As Klijn and Jurian Edelenbos have succinctly put it, ‘most of the time, self-steering will not be enough. Since we are dealing with autonomous actors, each with their own perception of the problem and their own chosen strategy, we need to address the question of collective action’. For Klijn and Edelenbos, addressing the question of collective action means that ‘cooperation and the coordination of actors require more active and deliberate managerial strategies’ (2007: 200). The question of what such active and deliberate managerial strategies might be, and whether such strategies are at all viable and desirable, brings us to our next, intimately related point: the question of the nature and role of the state in policy network theory.

**Pluralism**

To many students of policy networks, where state actors participate in policy networks, ‘they are a very special and privileged kind of participant’ (Mayntz, 2003: 31). Rather than being simply a player among others, pluralist-style, the state ultimately sets the
rules of the game for network interaction by furnishing the legal and organizational framework within which networking takes place. Policy networks thus inevitably go about their business in ‘the shadow of hierarchy’, to contribute to the dissemination of Fritz Scharpf’s rampant metaphor, the reception and use and abuse of which in the field deserves an essay of its own (Scharpf, 1994).

For others, however, network management is very much an away game for state actors, since coordination is ‘difficult to promote at a distance’, whereas, on the other hand, direct involvement in policy networks requires state actors to play ‘by the horizontal rules inherent in network governance’, thus obtaining influence only ‘with reference to the resources that they put into the network, and not [...] on the basis of their formal hierarchical authority vis-à-vis the network’ (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007: 170–1). Drawing out the pluralist implications of these observations, Rhodes has argued in *Understanding Governance* that the state in contemporary governance thus ‘becomes a collection of interorganizational networks made up of governmental and societal actors with no sovereign actor able to steer or regulate’ (Rhodes, 1997a: 57).

With the state described entirely in terms of networks, it is but a short step to the claim — sustained by the critical and emancipatory thrust in the language of governance — that the state was in fact always a network of networks. In a classic pluralist move a number of theorists have argued that we are now, with the benefit of hindsight, in a position to see that ‘that is what nation states have always been, formal sovereignty disguising the complex of organizations and actors within the state’ (Hirst, 2000: 25). Or, as Bevir and Rhodes have remarked, ‘the notion of a monolithic state in control of itself and civil society was always a myth’, a myth that ‘obscured the reality of diverse state practices that escaped the control of the center because they arose from the contingent beliefs and actions of diverse actors at the boundary of state and civil society’ (2007: 89; Bevir and Richards, 2009a).

I believe these statements are indicative of a shift during the past decade, from a concern with the state’s capacity to govern policy networks to a concern with its identity as a governing subject. In 2000, Jon Pierre noted in an introduction to an authoritative volume that ‘the state’s capacity to impose its will on society has become challenged by cohesive policy networks’ (2000: 1). Today many seem to question the composition and even the existence of a unitary ‘will’ that might be ascribed to ‘the state’ as a unitary
subject. And if the identity of the state as a governing subject seems less than clear, the same must be said about society as an object of governance. The very meaning of the distinction between state and society seems an open question in the field today, with policy networks supposedly criss-crossing the interface.

Yet a delicate consensus nevertheless seems to have developed to the effect that talk of ‘the decline of the state’ is overstated or premature. Rhodes, an erstwhile proponent of this notion, has lately granted critics that ‘the traditional instruments of government co-mingle, compete and conflict with the new instruments of governance to variable effect’ (2007: 1253), a picture that might be compared with his assessment in Understanding Governance (cf. Mayntz, 2003: 32). Similarly, Pierre and Peters have argued that ‘networks, in order to be effective, must be connected to government organizations responsible for making policy’, since networks without such connections ‘are most unlikely to have any real influence over policy’ (Pierre and Peters, 2005: 78).

Occasionally, and on variously functionalist assumptions, coordination in and through policy networks is even made to look very much like state governing by proxy, in a situation in which conventional forms of governing through hierarchy no longer seem effective. ‘Through network governance’, Tanja Börzel and Diana Panke have argued, ‘governments can mobilize resources in situations where they are widely dispersed among public and private actors at different levels of government, international, national, regional, and local’ (2007: 157). Similarly, policy networks can be seen as means of reclaiming the state’s will and ability to govern in the wake of a neoliberal penchant for markets as the primary means of coordination in society and politics in general. Again Rhodes is a fine example. ‘Governance’, he has explained, ‘is part of the fight back’, allowing us to give an account of ‘the unintended consequences of corporate management and marketization’, ‘a response, therefore, to the perceived weaknesses of marketization’ (2000: 54).

Judging from the current state of policy network theory, then, the state seems to face quite a challenge: namely, to ‘regulate networks and other self-regulating actors without reducing their space for manoeuvering in any radical way’ (Sörensen and Torfing, 2007: 169), that is, network management as pampering. Jan Kooiman anticipated this challenge already in 1993 when he called for ‘a state that governs in other, more apt ways’, seeking ‘to influence social interactions in such ways that political governing and
social self-organization are made complementary’ (1993: 256). Needless to point out, this complementarity still remains to be achieved, as it remains to make good sense — empirically, theoretically, and normatively — of the notion [p. 31 ↓] that this entity called ‘the state’ is still very much in place in the world, albeit transformed into so many networks networking with other networks.

Reconceptualizing Policy Networks

To recapitulate the story so far, our generic policy network concept has come to designate the following: mutual resource dependence among network actors, objectively given or intersubjectively perceived; strategic or communicative action as a consequence of interdependence; governmental actors in networks are either on a par with other actors as a consequence of mutual resource dependence, or in a privileged position to influence or even determine the rules of the game in network interaction; as a consequence of the prevalence of networks in policymaking, the state is itself best seen as a network of networks, rather than as a system of formal hierarchies. This is the hard core of the policy network concept that is today widely believed to signify a new governing structure in Western societies in general.

What is striking, and somewhat surprising, about all the varieties of policy network theory reviewed here is that in spite of frequent talk of governance as a distinct new governing structure, the policy network concept remains confined to its nation-state origins. As Mayntz has perspicaciously pointed out, at the global level, in contrast to the regional level paradigmatically illustrated by the European Union, we can no longer readily picture a policy process ‘with its input and output aspects’, since ‘there exists no identifiable steering subject, and no institutionalized framework containing the object of steering’; that is, there is no state within the institutions of which policy is made and no easily identifiable society for which policy is made. This state–society constellation has provided, throughout the developments chronicled here, the general framework within which the policy network concept has made sense and within which it has been put to use. As Mayntz has concluded from her observation, in order for a theory of governance to encompass phenomena at a global level, ‘governance’ would have to be construed ‘in the widest sense as basic modes of coordination, because only in that case is the
concept not tied to the existence of some sort of a political control structure’ (2003: 34–5).

Of course this is a conceptual, not an empirical point. Clearly not all governance is global governance, nor do all policy networks have transnational, let alone global, connections. Yet as policy issues and areas increasingly cut across the divide between the domestic and the international, just as policy networks have long been thought to cut across the divides between state and society and public and private, the prospects of the field turn largely on the will and ability of its researchers to go mobile, to conceptualize policy networks in such a way as to transcend not only the particular national contexts in which the concept has been put to empirical use (see Rhodes, 2007: 1258) but also the entire nation-state framework within which policy network theory evolved as part of the pluralist legacy in modern political discourse. Mayntz has hinted that that would point in the direction of ‘an altogether new field’ (2003: 38). Perhaps. However, the future of the field as we know it arguably depends on whether policy network theory can revisit, unpack, and rethink the policy network concept as it has been handed down to us. I would like to conclude with a few tentative suggestions as to what that might entail, based on the observations above.

First, we should turn the pluralist approach on its head. Instead of starting with the state and disaggregating it into its constituent networks, top-down, as it were, we should start by positing, for analytical purposes, a global, territorially undifferentiated social space as the most basic setting for human intercourse. Then, instead of individuating units of analysis in that global space by reference to existing geopolitical boundaries or political institutions, we should define our units of analysis in terms of an indefinite plurality of wills to govern, emanating from a broad variety of actors, individual and collective, in a broad variety of contexts, ranging from the kind of ‘everyday makers’ studied by Henrik Bang and his colleagues (Bang, 2003), to social movements, new and old, to corporations, associations, organizations, and institutions in what used to be known as state and civil society. These heterogeneous wills to govern may then, in turn, be aggregated into networks, bottom-up, insofar as the actors involved interact under conditions of interdependence, and policy results from their interactions.

Secondly, we should then conceptualize the state and hierarchies in general as being, themselves, networks (cf. Bevir and Richards, 2009a: 12). This suggestion is far from
original; variations on this theme have reverberated in academic political discourse at least since the 1920s. This is not to deny relevant differences between formal hierarchies and networks, but it is to insist that in both cases, as in most other cases we encounter in the social sciences, we are dealing with interdependent — rather than simply independent or dependent — actors and the interactions between them. Much would be gained, then, from abandoning the specious notion that human interaction is ever wholly independent or dependent. The typology independent–interdependent–dependent should be taken for what it is: less an accurate representation of different forms of human interaction, and more a conceptual-cum-rhetorical device that helped scholars in organization theory carve out a network approach to the study of organizations, unmistakably distinct from what was then described as the conventional approaches to markets and hierarchies (Powell, 1990).

Thirdly, following Bevir and Rhodes, we should then conceive of interdependence not as something objectively given but as something intersubjectively created and recreated in interaction. As I have already suggested above, in the absence of actors perceiving their interdependence as such it is difficult to think of the actors in question as constituting a network, as opposed to a crowd, a mob, or something similarly indistinct. Networks thus construed would still be premised on interdependent action, but interdependence should arguably be conceptualized in as noncommittal a fashion as possible, simply as mutually enabling and constraining conditions of action, conditions that arise from the sheer fact of interaction but may be construed differently by individual actors as well as by observers. This makes the nature and degree of interdependence relative both to the perceptions of the actors involved and to the concepts, theories, and research interests of students of policy networks, which is precisely the point.

Fourthly, this would have consequences for our understanding of network autonomy as well. Autonomy could then no longer be equated with ‘insulation from state power’, as Peter Triantafillou has aptly noted has tended to be the case in much literature on policy networks. Instead network autonomy might then be construed, pithily, as the ability to do something, rather than anything (Triantafillou, 2007: 190), meaning simply that network autonomy arises from the enabling and constraining interactions between networks and their surroundings, including other networks, just as interdependence arises from the enabling and constraining interactions between actors within networks.
Fifthly, and perhaps most daunting, we would need a notion of the policy process that would not presuppose either established political institutions or territorially defined societies. As Marten Hajer and Hendrik Wagenaar have remarked, whatever ‘new spaces of politics’ we may need to reckon with today in the study of policy networks will ‘initially exist in an institutional void’ (2003: 9). David Easton, presupposing both political institutions and territorial societies, once explained that his concept of political system was intended to encompass ‘all those kinds of activities involved in the formulation and execution of social policy’ (1953: 129). That might be a start, allowing us to get ‘process’ at least provisionally out of the way by making the existence and nature of institutions for policymaking subordinate or secondary to the existence of interaction from which policy results.

‘Policy’ itself might be trickier. One challenge would be to pluralize popular qualifiers such as ‘public’ and ‘social’, having these signify not singular predefined spheres or territorially demarcated domains, but human populations affected by policy in each actual case. The question of scope would then be an open empirical question, to be settled after the fact, rather than by reference to territorially demarcated societies. What would likewise be an open empirical question, rather than an object of wishful thinking, is the potential of policy networks thus construed for democratic participation and political accountability.

Conclusion: Policy Networks beyond the Nation-State Framework?

Clearly these suggestions are at least as contentious as anything I have reviewed in this chapter. I offer them not under the illusion, and certainly not in the hope, that they will be universally accepted, but as a way of prompting or provoking debate about what I take to be some of the most pressing yet also disregarded conceptual issues in the field. In all varieties of policy network theory to date the selling point of the policy network concept has been its supposed match with the current realities of policymaking: its capacity to address, better than its rivals, the conditions under which we are being governed. In the words of Rhodes, this concept ‘directly confronts, even mirrors, the administrative and political complexity of advanced industrial societies’ (1990: 313).
What has happened lately, as the policy network concept has been turned into a centerpiece in the language of governance, is that complexity now seems territorially and institutionally unbound; the conditions ‘confronted’ or ‘mirrored’ by the concept are no longer obviously confined to what is going on within nation–states. What has yet to happen is a conceptual revision, taking these ostensible changes into account. If this chapter might contribute in any way to such an effort, then much has been gained.

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