Governance, Space and Politics: Exploring the Governmentality of Planning

Enrico Gualini

Introduction

Moving from the conviction that reflecting on ‘governance’ has (still) something to say to planning theory, this chapter presents an attempt at focusing on three key critical implications of governance discourse and practices: the redefinition of the spatiality of planning practices; the redefinition of the political dimension of planning; and the redefinition of the public and of civil society as a domain of social struggles. The aim is to highlight some possibly undervalued consequences of governance research for planning theory, to indicate possible elements for re-framing its heuristics, and to address new terrains for trans-disciplinary inquiry.

‘Governance’ – whether viewed as an analytical-descriptive, theoretical, or policy-oriented concept – is a difficult, possibly not very rewarding subject. As a summary term for the evolution of forms of public action in late capitalism, it has gained wide currency in both research and policy. Its diffusion, however, goes hand in hand with difficulties in translation and with a broad amenability to interpretation. Not surprisingly, this is among the reasons for its very success. ‘Governance’ has come to signify, in Rhodes’ words, either ‘a change in the meaning of government, referring to a new process of governing; or a changed condition or ordered rule; or the new method by which society is governed’ (1996: 652–3), or even much else besides. Its sensitizing power makes it easy to appropriate as well as liable to ambiguity and manipulation. Discomfort with the use and misuse of the notion is therefore widespread among scholars in general and among planning theorists in particular. This is, in my view, understandable, but also revelatory of a dual difficulty in dealing with it: the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between governance as an epistemic and discursive construct, on the one hand, and governance as a set of concrete practices, on the other hand; and the difficulty of assuming a reflective attitude towards governance discourses and practices while being constitutively involved in their very construction.
It is precisely by pointing at the traps that lie along its path that reflecting on ‘governance’ still has something to say to planning theory. This is true in at least three fundamental ways. In the first place, attempts at conceptualizing policies and planning practices in terms of ‘governance’ are not a mere fashion, but stem from an interest in emergent phenomena ‘which make … new conceptualizations necessary’ (Le Galès 1998: 495). Secondly, despite the inflationary diffusion of the term, an analytically grounded understanding of historical-concrete processes of governance is needed, and will be a research task for years to come. Thirdly, the planning enterprise needs to deal reflectively with the implications of governance discourse and practices, as these are constitutively linked to its cognitive frames as well as to its material possibilities.

This chapter tries therefore to highlight what can be seen as key implications of governance for planning theory and its further development. In doing so, it will draw attention to two important aspects: the need to consider both the discursive and material dimension of governance practices, as their complex and often ambiguous intertwining is part and parcel of their legitimating construct; and the need not to avoid making interpretive choices with regard to the political meaning and scope of this construct. Only on the basis of a critical interpretation – rather than on received understandings – can a reflection on ‘governance’ contribute to a progressive planning-theoretical inquiry. One key implication, as we shall see, is the need to reject any unreflective normative assumption of the term, and rather to deconstruct it, questioning what conception of politics lies behind it.

The argument develops in three steps. First, a discussion is presented of the genealogy, domains of meanings, and theoretical contributions which make the notion of ‘governance’ relevant for planning theory. Then, the focus turns to key implications of governance discourse and practices for understanding the nature of policy objects and spaces and of the relationship between politics and spatiality. Finally, some possible consequences are drawn for framing a critical perspective within planning theory.

Genealogy and Domains of Meaning of ‘Governance’

‘Governance’: Semantic Shifts and Interpretive Options

The term ‘governance’ is not so much new, as it is novel in its currently prevailing meaning. This novelty can be traced back to a dual development: a shift in understanding of the nature of state steering, from central delivery to decentralized regulation – a shift which is sometimes referred to in the literature by a distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ governance discourse; and a shift in the object of analysis, from institutional structures and political regimes to policies and processes and to actors and networks. As a joint result of these conceptual developments, the term governance has come to be increasingly referred to actual, emergent policy
practices rather than to formal ‘regimes’, intended as stable, institutionalized patterns of distribution of authority.

Secondly, since about the early 1980s, as a result of changes in state-society relationships in Western welfare democracies, ‘governance’ emphatically expresses a re-assessment – and often a more or less ideologically biased critique – of the effectiveness of public action and of the role and functioning of governments. Reference to ‘governance’ conveys attention towards practices and abilities of achieving governing effects as the complex but ordered combination of a variety of inputs from different societal domains. A convergence has therefore emerged on understanding governance as – in principle – an ‘inclusive’ mode of decision-making, whereby public and private interests converge via negotiation and/or deliberation towards integrative problem-solving. It denotes a mode of policy-making that is constitutively multi-actor and multi-level, stressing interconnected (strategic, ad-hoc) rather than hierarchical (‘nested’, authority-based) patterns of relations. Governance settings are thus seen as defining emergent relationships between policy actors in situations where a ‘logic of command’ is no longer viable or desired, and where structural dispersion of resources requires coordination as an exercise of mutual adjustment ‘among peers’.

Thirdly, this conception expresses a shift in focus from state-centered rationales of public policy towards collective modes of problem-solving situated along a continuum between ‘government’ and society. While it would be incorrect to infer from this some sort of theoretical consistency, it is hence fair to say that, in an analytical perspective, ‘the various approaches to governance share a rejection of the conceptual trinity of market-state-civil society which has tended to dominate mainstream analyses of modern societies’ (Jessop 1995: 310). At their basis stands a dissatisfaction with top-down explanations of the exercise of power as well as an interest for inquiry into forms of socio-political coordination which broaden the field of traditional relations between the public and the private, constituting new forms of interdependencies in the public sphere: hence their emphasis on the shift from a restricted conception of ‘government’ to an enlarged conception of ‘governance’ as governing activity, characterized by the demise of the presumption – typical of classical political theory – of public action being grounded on an exercise of authority and on decision-making mechanisms anchored in national-state sovereignty. This suggests that ‘governance’ is a useful analytical framework particularly for inquiring into change in policy processes as are taking place within emergent, non-conventional, extended policy arenas, and across hierarchy, market and self-governance mechanisms, passing through forms of co-decision and co-management. As I will point out, however, a commonsensical, unreflective assumption of these features also bears the potential for mystification of what ‘governance’ is about.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that the fortune of ‘governance’ as a material and discursive practice is strictly related to a paradigmatic change in public policies introduced since the 1980s along with references to ‘reinventing government’ and to ‘new public management’ models (Osborne and Gaebler 1993). It conveys therefore a distinctive, if often implicit, normative meaning, in as far
as it stems from a critical assessment of a model of public intervention that has
dominated post-war economic reconstruction and has come to be increasingly seen
as ineffective, calling for change in public policy rationales and forms of intervention.
This has also generated distinctive normative interpretations of ‘governance’ as a
concept amenable to policy transfer and exportation, as is most notably the case in
the politics of international organizations, such as the World Bank, or in initiatives
for enhancing ‘performance management’ in the public sector, such as the OECD
programme on ‘Public Management and Governance’.

As a result, reference to ‘governance’ is at risk of appearing not only theoretically
undetermined, but also normatively overdetermined, and this makes attempts
at balancing between analytical and normative attitudes often ambiguous.
This ambiguity can also produce a fertile critical tension, obviously. But even if
acknowledging that this line may be sometimes dangerously thin, it is important to
distinguish ‘governance’ as an analytical-theoretical concept from its understanding
as a normative policy concept. This is a necessary, if not sufficient condition for
countering ideological instrumentalizations of governance discourse. There
is a difference, in other words, between assuming ‘governance’ as a conceptual
framework for critical inquiry into state change, and assuming it as an ideological
‘anti-statist’ recipe.

‘Governance’: Discursive Tropes and Theoretical Propositions

Despite a variety of conceptual underpinnings, comprehensive theorizations of
governance are rare. Only a few attempts have been made at meta-theoretical
generalizations of the concept or at embedding it in distinctive theoretical
perspectives. Under such conditions, proposed definitions often bear a ‘stipulative’
character, meant to confer on the notion a specific, if ‘local’, heuristic or explanatory
role, circumscribed to defined objects of analysis (Rhodes 1996).

Despite the lack of a consistent, let alone dominant, ‘governance theory’,
significant constants may be recognized in its domain of reference: recurrent
structuring elements, or ‘tropes’, of governance discourse. First and foremost
– and possibly key to its fortune – is the distinction between ‘governance’
and ‘government’. Governance, intended as a complex of activities implied
in governing, relying on, but not exhausting structures and forms of action of
statutory governmental authorities, is assumed to express some kind of autonomy
in relation to government. Contrary to traditional state-theoretical assumptions of
political steering theory, governance discourse puts emphasis on the centrality of
agency, on the background of a redefinition of institutional rationales framed by
a conception of the ‘cooperative state’ as the basis of legitimacy for governmental
action. Non-institutional actors, as an integral part of the policy-making process,
if not as its initiators, are seen as filling in a void in action and steering capacity by
governmental institutions.

Along this line, a divide can be identified between two different positions: one
that emphasizes a dichotomy between ‘government’ as state-centered governmental
activity and ‘governance’ as an alternative mode of governing, implying a ‘retreat’ or ‘withdrawal’ of the state; and one that points to ‘governance’ as the emergence of new modes of public policy-making lying at the very core of the state. The former position, which emphasizes a government-governance dualism or even advocates it – in terms of a (neo-)liberal model of the ‘minimal state’ – is mostly represented by normative definitions of ‘governance’ and is, as such, particularly liable to political instrumentalization. The latter position, conversely, emphasizes the (re-)articulation of the dual relationships between government and society and is found in research grounded on the analysis of late-capitalist societies – in institutional economics, political economy, economic sociology, policy analysis and other disciplines – with a particular emphasis on state change. In this sense, while rejecting methodologically state-centric assumptions, ‘governance’ intended in the latter sense does not imply either a-priori assumptions on the ‘hollowing out’ of the state or ‘the neo-liberal rhetoric of delegitimizing governments and politics’ (Le Galès 2001: 172) that characterizes some of the more ideological approaches; rather, it is concerned with local, context- and situation-specific processes of reconstruction of policy-making in fragmented, competitive, multi-actor and multi-level policy environments which challenge and transform the rationale and meaning of state action.

A further remarkable trope focuses on governance as a new mode of public action in the pursuit of collective problem-solving. ‘Governance’ is seen as a form of exercise of power and authority no longer identifiable with forms of action and with guidance-and-control functions of governmental institutions alone. Accordingly, the management of public issues is seen as being premised upon an extended but loose framework of interdependencies between governmental and non-governmental actors. In this sense, ‘governance’ can be defined as a public activity ‘concerned with the resolution of (para-)political problems (in the sense of problems of collective goal-attainment or the realisation of collective purposes)’ under new emergent configurations of actors, organizations and institutions (Jessop 1995: 317) that structurally involve decentralized non-state actions and initiatives stemming from the field of economic and social activities.

A particular consequence of such understanding resides in dissolving distinctions between the state, market(s) and civil society as distinct spheres of agency. Particularly where an understanding of governance as the emergent outcome of complex interactions in the public sphere is emphasized, a dual relationship is posited between politics and society, between governmental institutions and ‘civics’. Such a perspective questions an idea of civil society as either the expression par excellence of bourgeois-individualism or the residual place of expression of communitarian ties, in an implied dualism with the sphere of the state. In a governance perspective, ideal-typically, ‘[t]he state becomes a collection of interorganisational networks made up of governmental and societal actors with no sovereign actor able to steer or regulate’ (Rhodes 1996: 666). The challenge of government and administrative action thus becomes one of co-production, of the pursuit of public aims through the joint activity of social actors.
In this perspective, a key question for research concerns the extent to which potentials for collective action and for democratic and emancipatory social practices are actually introduced through new modes of governance. On the one hand, in the domain of governance practices, problem-solving becomes a central motivation and source of legitimation for public action. By the same token, on the other hand, governance practices redefine arenas for addressing public problems in terms that are less dependent on state structures and on their rationales of authority, control and accountability. Governance arenas are characterized as multi-actor environments, with complex implications in terms of blurring divisions among societal sub-sectors, increasing mutual dependence, and redistribution of responsibilities. Through governance practices, public action becomes thus less dependent on abstract and generalized state-centered welfare imperatives, and more dependent on concrete but contingent and situated constellations of actors and interest. Meanwhile, the sites for public accountability become decentralized and less clearly defined. This obviously bears profound implications for the effectiveness and legitimacy of public action (Stoker 1998; Swyngedouw 2005).

This introduces a further divide among approaches to understanding ‘governance’. A significant strand of governance research features a convergence of theoretical and normative attitudes with regard to change in rationales of public action. This is most evident in socio-cybernetic approaches that view governance as the outcome of interactive socio-political forms of governing. ‘Governance’ is intended here as more than a mere theoretical alternative to competing analytical-interpretive models of public policy, like pluralism and corporatism. ‘Modern governance’ (Kooiman 1993a) is rather explicitly seen as a way out of an effectiveness crisis of governing activity – characterized by decreasing returns, sub-optimal outcomes, and implementation constraints – and as an alternative to classic liberal models of the ‘minimal state’ as well as corporatist or neo-liberal models of ‘lean’ government based on privatization of governing tasks. Rather than between ‘government’ and ‘governance’, a distinction is emphasized between ‘governing activity’ as the complex of governmental interventions directed to scope, and ‘governance’ as the coevolutive outcome of this activity, as the result or sum of the effects of interventions and interactions of a socio-political-administrative nature which are implied in governing and which contribute to its eventual prospects of effectiveness. Accordingly, if ‘[g]overning in contemporary society is mainly a process of coordination, steering, influencing and “balancing”’ of interactions between public and private actors, governance ‘can be seen as the pattern or structure that emerges in a social-political system as “common” result or outcome of the interacting intervention efforts of all involved actors. This pattern cannot be reduced to one actor or group of actors in particular ... This emerging pattern forms the “rules of the game” within a particular system or, in other words, the medium through which actors can act and try to use these rules in accordance with their own objectives and interests’ (Kooiman 1993b: 255, 258). Governance, while system- and context-dependent, is thus above all an interactional outcome. According to the idea of a ‘duality of structure’ (Giddens 1984) ‘in which a pattern of governance is not only the unintended outcome of social (inter)action but also the mechanism through
which actors have the capability to act and govern, ... governing and governance are subjected to a permanent process of mutual interaction. Actors who govern, or try to govern, also influence the governance structure of a subsystem. Some (more powerful) actors have the possibility to rewrite some "rules of the game" but no one has complete control. There is always some intended and unintended change, which creates manoeuvring space for actors willing to change the existing pattern' (Kooiman 1993b: 258). In this interaction, the possibility is given for an open balance between creativity and order, innovation and control.

Despite its important emphasis on the co-evolutionary character of governance practices and outcomes, the critical scope of this interpretation is limited. Others point more explicitly to the potential democratic deficit of governance practices. A notable example is Rhodes' understanding of 'governance' as a complex of governmentally promoted practices challenging democratic politics. According to his 'stipulative definition' of governance as the 'public management of networks' – embedded in analysis of the neo-liberal turn in 1980s British politics – governance refers to 'self-organising, inter-organisational networks' (Rhodes 1996: 660) complementary to markets and hierarchies in allocating resources and in exercising coordination and control. The public management of inter-organizational relations thus operates in a field which extends beyond the traditional boundaries of the public, the private and the 'third' sector, constituting an alternative for public action rather than a hybrid between given forms of market-based or hierarchical regulation. On the other hand, however, the networks in question feature important and diffuse elements of self-coordination and self-governing capacity. This turns them into organizational and operational forms capable of creating their own action environment, and tendentially resilient to external guidance by democratically legitimated public authorities.

These interpretations are consistent with an assumption of governance as pertaining to – and not distinct from – governing practices of the state. While pointing at the role of the state in developing governance practices, they imply relations between state and non-state practices not defined in terms of opposition, but rather of a government-governance continuum. By this, however, they also lend themselves to 'exogenist' explanations. According to these, governance is seen as the result of transformations allegedly exogenous to classical 'government', typically referring to phenomena such as market-driven economic neo-liberalism, 'globalization', 'Europeanization', and the like, to which governments respond with an 'extension' of their governmental rationales to structurally include non-governmental practices.

A further important theoretical divide emerges here: that between an understanding of 'governance' as a mere extension of the paradigm of political steering, and an understanding of 'governance' as implying a paradigmatic change in the conception of public policy. In the latter perspective, analysis of change in the nature and provision of public goods leads to understanding governance discourse and practices, in their own right, as an expression of a substantive rather than merely procedural change in public policy: as an expression, that is, of an endogenous change in normative frameworks concerning the aims and forms
of public intervention and state agency. This aspect bears important interpretive implications, and is therefore worth a more detailed discussion.

‘Governance’ and Political Steering

It has been in particular Renate Mayntz (2005) who has recently raised the question whether attempts at theorizing on governance simply represent an extension or a further stage in established theories of political steering. The question, as she argues, is of relevance despite the fact that attempts at translation – like with the German Steuerung and with similar terms from other languages – often equal ‘governance’ to current notions of ‘steering’, suggesting that only a fashionable but unreflective Anglicism may be at hand. Her answer, however, is not unambiguous, and hints at a crucial interpretive alternative. In this section, I will review related arguments, putting the basis for further analysis and for finally advancing my own interpretation.

‘Governance’: Extending or Challenging Political Steering Theories?

The genealogy of the notion of ‘steering’ in sociology and political science highlights two distinct lines of ascendancy: on the one hand, a system-theoretical and cybernetic paradigm of societal control – strongly influenced by Parsons – in which ‘steering’ is seen as a function of social systems relatively independent from the agency of concrete actors; on the other hand, an increasingly actor-centered orientation of political analysis, which can be related to developments in empirical research in organizational sociology and policy analysis since the late 1960s. In this latter tradition, the notion of ‘steering’ specifies an understanding of politics as the expression of a normative orientation of the state towards the achievement of collective welfare goals. In this perspective, the meanings of ‘governance’ and ‘steering’ converge upon a rationale of ‘active politics’, expressed by the centrality of the state’s steering function in the context of a dramatic extension of its welfare tasks. The rise of this ‘old governance’ discourse, as Mayntz (2005) argues, represents a change in normative framework in as far as it stems from recognition of the failure of a liberal-democratic tradition of public policy, assuming exchange among individuals as autonomously capable of defining a socially acceptable aggregate of preferences, and markets operating under conditions of ‘perfect competition’ as the ideal-typical mechanism for the social allocation of values and resources.

Problems with this ‘zero option’ of public intervention obviously arise when these exchange mechanisms ‘fail’: in the face of natural monopolies, structural asymmetries, negative externalities, and the specific dilemmas posed by the delivery of goods characterized by non-rivalry and non-excludability from access and consumption. Against this background, public intervention is seen as necessary in order to guarantee optimal supply and equal distribution of public
goods, according to the definition of a social utility function. This in turn provides the ratio for an institutional design of public policies in which the production and allocation of public goods are politically regulated and publicly administered.

‘Governance’ as steering, in this sense, relates to an institutional framework of public policy as defined in a classic, Eastonian model of the political system, in which the state takes an active and direct role in the production of public goods. It conveys an understanding of political steering embedded in a holistic conception of the steering capacity of the state – an important expression of it being the ‘rational-comprehensive’ planning ideal. Political steering is a notion grounded on an understanding of the state as a structured form of agency in pursuit of the ‘public interest’, as the democratically legitimated welfare-theoretical vehicle for realizing a ‘just’ society. As state-centred and mainly concerned with the forms, means and processes of goal-oriented state intervention, political steering theory thus conceived implies a systematic distinction between the subject and the object of steering: between the ‘steering capacity’ (Steuerungsfähigkeit) of state actors, and the ‘amenability to steering’ (Steuerbarkeit) of existing social sub-systems, the relatively autonomous path and dynamic of development of which is the object of purposive (and legitimate) political agency as performed by the state (Mayntz 1987).

Belief in the legitimacy and effectiveness of state steering remains dominant in political science as long as it is not empirically questioned. As welfare-state societies enter their late-modernization stage, however, such a conception of the ‘steerability’ of society is challenged on both empirical and theoretical grounds. The ‘producer state’ as agent of the central delivery of public goods faces increasing dilemmas. Theories of democratic choice (Downs 1957; Arrow 1963) and of collective action (Olson 1965) undermine beliefs in the viability of a social utility function in directing public choices. Policy analysis highlights the involvement of non-state actors in their definition, and thus unsuspected potentials for heterodirection and manipulation. Implementation research draws attention to the behaviour of the addressees of public policy (societal and political actors and related sub-systems), pointing to their relative autonomy as a challenge to purposive state agency (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Bardach 1977; Barrett and Fudge 1981). Questions about the effectiveness of the central planning and delivery of goods and services arise, as a reality of goal displacement (Selznick 1949) and unintended effects (Boudon 1977) undermines the legitimacy of the pursuit of a ‘social optimum’ and reference to the ‘public interest’. Similarly, planning theoretical reflection points to the increasing divide between authoritarian state practices, based on expert knowledge hegemony, and grassroots civic movements. Overall, public policy appears as the outcome of complex mechanisms of delegation and co-production, the expression of polycentric patterns of power rather than of a centralized authority. Through the development of neo-corporatist structures, networks and ‘private governments’, significant degrees of self-regulation are functionally embedded into the sphere of public policy (Streeck and Schmitter 1985). Further research explores mechanisms that make the emergence of governing effects possible. In political economy, redefining the role of the state goes hand in hand with defining alternatives to neoclassical postulates. New institutional economics addresses
the role of coordination through private firm institutions as a regulatory input to markets (Williamson 1975, 1985; North 1981, 1990). Mechanisms of market-based self-regulation are set by new institutional economics on the background of the historically contingent systems of institutionalized rules and routines in which they are embedded. Forms of ‘corporate governance’ and alternative coordination approaches in business relations – such as relational contracting, organized markets in group enterprises, clans, networks, trade associations and strategic firm alliances – point to non-state modes of regulating complex markets. Mechanisms for regulating issues of public interest extend beyond the agency of state structures but are institutionally embedded and co-determined (Hollingsworth and Boyer 1997). The ‘governance of the economy’ is therefore conceived as defined by the constitution and functioning of institutional regimes that are interdependent with state regulation in an enlarged ‘public sphere’.

All this bears an impact on views of public steering and on normative models of public policy. At the same time, it introduces a distinction from traditional political steering theory. Political steering is no longer identifiable with state action as expressed by its political-administrative structures, but is rather the result of interactions between different forms of regulation that converge towards a new, ‘cooperative’ definition of the ‘public interest’. ‘Governance’ now refers to the effect of variable combinations of different forms of state and non-state regulation in the functioning of complex economic sub-systems.

As a response to the perceived failure of political decision-making and centralized planning, the ‘new governance’ represents a shift from a centrality of politics as the pursuit of a social utility function, defined within the political system through the mechanisms of voting and representative democracy, to the centrality of policy as the institutional framing of issue-related voluntary exchange and private market initiative.

Key to this development is a dual shift in the state’s role in supplying public goods: from direct state intervention to market-based regulation, and from their substantial delivery to the regulation of their institutional features. In order to re-establish individual choices and voluntary market exchange as a mechanism of regulation, the ‘new governance’ requires redefining and distributing property rights over public goods, and decentralizing responsibilities in their delivery. Key mechanisms for this are privatization and delegation. Privatization, as a measure of conferring property rights over public goods, is the condition for circumventing their non-excludability and for inserting them into market regulation. Delegation, as the transfer of political rights and responsibilities to private instances and independent agencies, is the condition for realizing the separation between the regulation and the production-delivery of public goods.

This, however, also changes the locus of regulation. While implementation is privatized, public control is exercised on the basis of effectiveness criteria. In its role as a principal, the state exercises direction and control on social agents in a way that is primarily output-oriented. The ideal-typical rationale pursued is that of ‘contract steering’, defined by the delivery rules specified by the contract of delegation with third-party suppliers.
Thus, the ‘new governance’ conveys a substantial change in the way of viewing and producing public policies. In an ‘active’ or ‘producer state’, public intervention is meant to prevent failures of voluntary (market) exchange by directly addressing the production and delivery of public goods. The state’s role in securing them is grounded on a public utility norm which, as a substitute for market exchange rules, is legitimated on two grounds: politically, by its underlying mechanisms of representative democracy; and technically, by being operated within a distinct, ‘rational’ and allegedly ‘apolitical’ administrative space, situated at the core of the state apparatus. In the ‘new governance’, conversely, public intervention is primarily meant to counteract the negative effects of voluntary market exchange.

Accordingly, this introduces significant changes in key functions of public policy. Direct public intervention loses the function of direct delivery of state supplied and administered public goods and services, which is increasingly decentralized and delegated. The state primarily devises the institutional rules for the functional delegation of political authority to the semi-autonomous entities endowed with their delivery. Regulation loses its juridical rationale of legitimate command, and takes the form of negotiating and private contracting practices to ensure conformance with desired objectives. Incentives and subsidies progressively lose their redistributive function of unconditional compensation for socio-economic disparities, to become selective instruments for promoting actions targeted at desired objectives. Similarly, policy discourse becomes increasingly ‘strategic’, targeted at directing and shaping actors’ preferences in order to promote distinctive behaviours, seen as conforming to desired objectives.

The consequences are crucial. Given its output-orientation, public policy becomes increasingly reliant on private sector supply and, by this, increasingly dependent on preferences expressed within the market sphere and outside the political system. As a result of delegation mechanisms, moreover, relevant decisions are dispersed among multiple decentralized actors. The range of actors involved, however, is selective if pluralistic, and access to related arenas is only formally open. An increasing asymmetry and imbalance arises therefore in favour of outcomes and of their producers. This obviously impacts on conceptions of what are politically viable public aims and on their legitimation. The legitimacy of public policy no longer resides in the way collective preferences are aggregated, but in the way expressed demands are satisfied. Legitimacy shifts from a primarily input-oriented to a primarily output-oriented emphasis, and policy effectiveness is measured by achieved results. Potential gains in effectiveness through enhanced responsiveness to expressed preferences are traded against a shift towards markets in their definition and towards contractual modes of regulation in their delivery. This makes public goals basically dependent on tradable criteria.

In this perspective, governance does not represent a simple ‘extension’ of traditional policy-making arenas, but rather a paradigmatic change in the normative orientation of public policy. Rather than an ‘exogenous’ factor of change, fragmentation of decision-making is endogenous to public policy, as the composition of preferences is emphatically externalized from the conventional arenas of the political system, and decisions on the allocation of resources (public and private)
are increasingly made to rely on end-users and consumers and, accordingly, on expressed market preferences.

While it is hence true that governance discourse reflects a ‘problem-solving bias’, as noted by Mayntz (2005), what makes this observation relevant is the fact that the definition of collective problems is tendentially ‘exogenized’ from political discourse. No longer identifiable with a social utility function, for which direct political responsibility must be born, it depends on the aggregate of voluntary (market) exchanges seen as hetero-directed, and in relation to which political responsibility is restrained to the steering of contingent, ‘local’ conditions of regulation.

The nature of governance practices appears hence in several respects as Janus-faced (Swyngedouw 2005). ‘New governance’ emphasizes less state coercion and more reliance on individual and collective choices. As such, it bears potentials for the autonomy and empowerment of society. It does so, however, in the framework of a new paradigmatic understanding of the ‘public’ that heavily relies on market-conforming performance rather than on the political expression of collective preferences. The implications are crucial for the definition of both discursive contexts and substantive objects of public policy. Altogether, they introduce potentials for subtle forms of manipulation of preferences (material and symbolic) and for a surreptitious naturalization and de-politicization of potentially contentious public choices.

‘Governance’ and the Challenges to ‘Bounded’ State Territoriality

A particular implication of this shift in public policy is that governance practices largely define their own policy spaces. ‘Governance’ comes to be understood as a mix of different forms of regulation, both state and non-state based, in a polycentric regulatory environment. State sovereignty, and territoriality as one of its key expressions, is increasingly relativized, and requires to be reinvented, in order to be effective, as a new form of negotiated and ‘pooled’ sovereignty. Accordingly, governance practices are increasingly delegated from national states to other instances, their relationship to which is defined by strategic dependence and mutual adjustment, but also by relative political autonomy.

The state-theoretical relevance of this aspect is highlighted by the emergence of phenomena that increasingly exceed the scope and influence of state territoriality. In the wake of the revival and ‘theoretical radicalization’ of neo-liberal economic theory (Mayntz and Sharpf 2005), the rise of global governance structures at the service of open market transactions increasingly restrains the steering capacity of the national state. In international relations, supra- or trans-national, ‘global’, regulatory practices thus take the form of self-regulated organizations endowed with effective authority – even in the absence of formal political legitimation – that may be interpreted as performing ‘governance without government’ (Rosenau and Czempiel 1992).

To a certain extent, the post-national institutional experiment represented by the EU and its policies is a paradigmatic embodiment of such developments. Reference
to ‘multi-level governance’ as an emergent feature of EU policy processes highlights the need for interpretations alternative to state-centric assumptions on European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2001). It points to the new position gained by both sub-national and supra-national policy-making vis-à-vis the national state, in what is seen as an upward and downwards redefinition of the nature of power and influence in the EU. By extension, it also points at the development of new policy spaces besides, if not ‘beyond’, formal-statutory government institutions, in what is seen as a ‘sideways’ movement away from ‘bounded’ territorial domains of public policy-making (Hooghe and Marks 2003). Governance practices in a multi-level environment are seen as generative of new ‘opportunity structures’ for actors to engage in European politics at different levels. The development of forms of self-organization and self-regulation in networking in non-hierarchical settings is highlighted as a specific dimension of European politics (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999; Héritier 2002). The EU appears accordingly as an in-progress construct defined by specific governance practices as well as by its sui-generis institutional features, and European ‘integration’ comes to be understood as a ‘polity creating process’ (Hooghe and Marks 2001: 124) that challenges given articulations of authority within the nested articulation of the national state.

The implications of new governance practices in terms of emergent patterns of spatiality can be found throughout different administrative levels and spatial scales. It is at the regional-local level, however, where their potential contradictions become more tangible. In regional and local policies, governance practices – by moving away from a territorial towards a functional and issue-related rationale – offer potentials for expressing ‘local’ forms of identity and involvement. By this, however, they also detach policy processes from practices of territorially-based political representation. While institutional redundancy threatens to emerge from the proliferation of ad-hoc governance arrangements and forms of ‘delegated government’, an institutional void threatens to emerge in terms of legitimate political representation. The spatiality of governance practices must hence be considered as a constitutive dimension of their underlying, and often implicit, political project. It needs therefore to be further discussed in the following sections.

‘Governance’ and the Constitution of New ‘Policy Spaces’: Implications for Spatial Practices

Governance bears a peculiar duality of meaning. It is about processes of governing that are situated at the core of the state, but that increasingly affect the rationale of its action. It conveys ‘ideas of leading, steering and directing’, but without the primacy accorded to the sovereign state’ (Le Galès 1998: 494–5). The notion of ‘governance’, in this sense, combines an engagement in questions of institutional design – in a primarily meso-political and inter-organizational perspective – with an acknowledgement of the emergent and contingent character of socio-political
regulation. This requires the discussion of three key aspects: the way governance redefines the nature of policy objects, of policy spaces, and of relationships between politics and spatiality.

**Governance and the Constitution of Policy Objects**

In reflecting on change in modes of political steering, Mayntz and Scharpf (1995) adopt a translation of ‘governance’ as ‘regulation’ (Regelung) that hints at implications exceeding the centrality of a political will expressed by the purposive and legitimate political agency of the state, as posited in the dominant theoretical paradigm of political steering. Similar implications are crucial in the approach of the ‘French school’ of regulation theory, centred on the notion of the embeddedness of economic processes in socially constructed organizational and institutional contexts. Social relations as objects of regulation concern ‘not only the articulation of the technical and social division of labour within the circuits of capital but also the articulation between its economic and extra-economic moments’, including ‘the direct and indirect extra-economic conditions of accumulation as well as the handling of the various repercussions of commodification and accumulation on the wider society’ (Jessop 2000: 325). Far from being primarily a voluntarist activity, regulation is seen as a ‘process without a subject’, in which ‘specific modes of regulation are always emergent, evolutionary effects of a multiplicity of actions in specific, strategically selective contexts’ (Jessop 1995: 329).

Understanding ‘governance’ as a mix of different forms of regulation leads therefore to recognizing a common interest of governance and regulation theories ‘in the path-dependent, constitutive relationship between modes of governance/regulation and objects of governance/regulation. Neither regulation theory nor theories of governance can be seen as teleological in character or as committed to ex post functionalist arguments: for they imply that it is in and through governance (or regulation) that the elementary objects of their attention are transformed through complex articulation into specific moments within a given mode of governance (or regulation)’ (Jessop 1995: 326).

This has implications for understanding the nature of the objects of governance/regulation. At stake in governance/regulation processes is the constitution of their very objects. While regulation theory implies that the objects of regulation do not fully pre-exist the process of regulation, theories of governance underline that the objects of governance may be recognized as such only through efforts in governing them, through governance activity itself. Thus, ‘the very processes of regulation or governance constitute the objects which come to be regulated or governed in and through a form of self-referential self-organisation’. In this sense, ‘just as there is neither regulation in general nor general regulation, there is no governance in general nor general governance. Instead, there is only particular regulation and the totality of regulation, only particular governance and the totality of governance ... In the real world there are only definite objects of regulation that are shaped in and
through definite modes of regulation; and definite objects of governance that are shaped in and through definite modes of governance’ (Jessop 1995: 315).

A further implication can be seen in a common neo-institutionalist horizon of governance research, as it refers to ‘the complex totality of co-existent forms of collective regulation of societal relations’ (Mayntz 2004: 66, my translation). In a neo-institutionalist perspective, the outcomes of governance/regulation are seen as relatively stabilized systems of relations. Accordingly, governance and regulation concur to modes of institutionalization of an essentially emergent, co-evolutive nature. Again Jessop (1995: 322) underlines that ‘[n]ew governance mechanisms, like new structural forms, emerge from a trial-and-error search process which operates through evolutionary variation, selection and retention. It is in this context that issues of strategic selectivity and strategic capacities are so crucial and that attention must be paid to the material and discursive appropriateness of proposed responses’.

In a political economy perspective, this neo-institutionalist attitude extends well beyond the domain of institutional economics, and leads to rethinking the role of the state in its interplay with non-state forms in realizing regulation effects. ‘Governance’ appears not as ‘other’ than ‘government’, but as the situationally determined principle by which forms of regulation are re-articulated – and forms of institutional agency and policy-making redefined – in contexts that exceed formal-hierarchical arenas. Focusing on the emergent, evolutive and situated nature of modes of regulation implies a pluralist view on sites of governance. As political regulation trespasses the boundaries of hierarchical settings, relying on interaction among institutional and social, state and non-state actors, the emergence of systems of governance appears as a process of re-articulation of different modes of regulation across different social sub-sectors (Le Galès 1998). Their institutional embeddedness as well as their dynamics of institutionalization appear dependent on the specific and contextual nature of their integration and on its specific spatio-temporal dimension.

**Governance and the Constitution of Policy Spaces**

The new ‘political economy of governance’, as understood above, has profound implications for the spatiality of state authority and power. Its key effects are a spatio-temporal relativization of geographical scale and a change in the nature of state territoriality.

The constitution of territorial scales as domains of relative structural coherence between the political-administrative, the institutional and the economic sphere – the local, as the expression of the geographical range of daily reproduction, the regional, as the expression of the geographical coherence of distinct production systems, and the national, as their territorial ‘container’ and principle of sovereignty – has developed within modern processes of state formation as a function of the regulation of capital accumulation. National states embodied political-institutional compromises that defined national systems of production and reproduction as distinct ‘laws of value’ (Smith 1995/2003: 229) legitimised through national social-
cultural identities (Anderson 1991). As a neo-liberal intensification of exchanges is actively pursued among as well as within sovereign territorial entities, however, the de-nationalization, the increase in scale, and the transnationalization of economic processes redefine spatial conditions for capital accumulation in ways that increasingly challenge given territorial orderings. The relative scalar fixity of the territorial state appears thus as a contingent historical outcome of the constitution of national-state structures as gatekeepers of national economies: ‘[f]ar from neutral and fixed, … geographical scales are the product of economic, political and social activities and relationships: as such, they are as changeable as those relationships themselves’ (Smith 1995/2003: 60).

State responses to these processes emerge as necessary. But what challenges their territorial features and makes their geographical dimension contradictory is the fact that, while ‘the necessity of discrete scales and of their internal differentiation is fixed’ (Smith 1984: 147, in Marston 2000: 230), the scales themselves are not fixed, but change along with the development of capitalism. They are a systemic condition for capital accumulation processes, but also a co-evolving, contextually contingent outcome. Processes of the reconstruction of ‘spatio-temporal fixes’ around the economic and extra-economic elements of a capital accumulation regime are defined by ‘a general tension between neoliberal demands to accelerate the flow of abstract (money) capital through an increasingly disembedded space and the need for the more concrete forms of capital to be “fixed” in time and place as well as embedded in specific social relations as a condition for their valorization’ (Jessop 2000: 346). This tension accounts for the variety of forms taken by spatio-temporal fixes – and the institutional compromises to which they are associated – in various territorial contexts; it furthermore accounts for their experimental, unstable and contingent patterns (Peck and Tickell 1995; Jones 1997; Swyngedouw 1997). New ‘modes of regulation’ may only emerge from concrete regulation ‘processes’ (Goodwin 2001) redefining their scale-specific territorial and institutional rationales.

From a state-theoretical perspective on regulation, the ‘political economy of governance’ and its spatial implications appear as a response to the need for the state to redefine its role as a key site of regulation. Emergent governance processes reflect change in the forms of agency by which the state attempts to provide conditions for the regularization of economic processes under the pressure of changing accumulation regimes. Accordingly, phenomena of relativization and reconfiguration of scale express a struggle for the reconfiguration of the spatial dimension of state agency that questions the territorial relationship between local, regional and national levels of government.

This leads to a variety of state-promoted forms of ‘scale differentiation’ into which governance practices take form as a response to scale relativization. Their spatial nature increasingly diverges from traditional principles of territoriality. New governance practices redefine their own spatiality. Rather than being the outcome of hierarchical modes of state coordination and control embedded in ‘bounded’ territorial entities and in ‘nested’ territorial systems, they express spatially specific forms of social organization and mobilization, involving variable actors’ arenas and constellations. As such, they often bear an unstable, provisional
and weakly institutionalized character. However, state territoriality and territory, place- and scale-specific modes of governance are non-mutually exclusive dimensions. A constant tension exists between them, as extant territorial structures persist next to emergent ones. As they exceed ‘bounded’ territorial arenas and their formal-institutional jurisdictions, governance practices contribute to the ‘de-territorialization’ of modes of socio-political regulation. As they are stabilized in new policy rationales, they contribute to their spatial reconfiguration or ‘re-territorialization’.

Rather than being sidelined, the state plays an active role in promoting de- and re-territorialization. Inquiry into these phenomena requires therefore rejecting ‘methodological territorialism’ and relaxing assumptions of state centrality, but also focusing on the specific role of the state in promoting (re-)scaling processes. ‘The state’ cannot be assumed in this respect as a given, independent unit of analysis. Rather, viewing the state in an ‘integral sense’ (Jessop 1995), as a construct articulating relations between the economic and extra-economic in a dynamic and strategically selective way, directs attention to the co-evolution between policy rationales and territorial features of state agency. Acting on scale organization, state policies attempt at redefining a ‘spatial fix’ (Harvey 1985) as a new condition for exerting its role as an instance of regulation. By this, however, their spatial boundaries are ‘discursively constituted, institutionally materialized, structurally coupled to other institutional boundaries, essentially contested and liable to change’ (Jessop 2002: 37). (Re-)scaling processes by which the state promotes the enactment of governance practices are a constitutive part of a process of change in its nature. What defines a ‘politics of scale’ is hence a struggle involving, on the one hand, a potential opening to new forms and arenas of collective action and, on the other hand, a potentially radical redefinition of the rationale and purpose of state agency.

This has important interpretive consequences for understanding ‘glocalization’ processes as an expression of the political construction of spatiality. Unlike a ‘mono-directional implosion of global forces into sub-global realms’ (Brenner 1997: 159), or ‘a unitary causal mechanism’, globalization ‘should be understood as the complex, emergent product of many different forces operating on many scales’ (Jessop 2002: 114). It implies change in the rationales of state agency, rather than merely causing it. In globalized capitalism, the state contributes to organizing the spatio-temporal conditions for the operation of economic systems at all levels: world-economy formation and the rescaling of state territorial power are hence two dimensions of the same process. Accordingly, transnationalization and the production of new ‘policy spaces’ are interrelated phenomena. On the one hand, locality is (re-)constructed within the context of ‘broader’ capitalist relations that exceed the national domain of political-economic and social relations. On the other hand, its ‘institutionalization’ increasingly relies on ‘global’ relations of capitalist accumulation as well as on their discursive appropriation. As such, it involves mobilizing new discursive and symbolic frames of identification (Appadurai 1996; Paasi 2001). Significantly, it also involves an ideological quasi-naturalization of ‘globalization’ as a legitimating narrative for neo-liberal developments in local
and regional policy: a ‘mythical’ view that disguises ‘globalization’ as a strategic-discursive construct related to a profound re-organization of capitalism, and the restructuring of geographical scales – the ‘local’ and the ‘regional’ – as its spatial expression (Harvey 1995; Swyngedouw 2000; Massey 2005).

**Governance and the Redefinition of Relations Between Politics and Spatiality**

The constitution of new governance spaces redefines the nexus between politics and spatiality. The changing spatiality of governance practices, in fact, conveys a change in the way the public interest is defined. The rescaling of governance may be seen in this respect as an expression of a renewal of politics in which interest representation is being redefined – beyond sovereignty and territoriality rules – through new spatialized relationships among state and non-state actors.

Governance practices in cities and regions – particularly in European socio-economic contexts – have developed in the last few decades along a shift ‘from welfare-distributive modes of governance to localized supply-side measures aimed at enhancing economic performance’, ‘from nationally-based, process-oriented governing arrangements to locally based, product-oriented ones’, and ‘from vertical integration, standardised rules, clear lines of authority, accountability and national equity to horizontal integration, flexibility, networking, problem solving and the realisation of economic potential through strategic competition and collaboration’ (Harding 1997: 295). Territorial policies have been accordingly characterized by a broadening of issues – to include structural political-economic strategies, active labour and human capital policies, RTD policies, locational and environmental policies, territorial marketing – and by a parallel broadening of actors and organizations involved.

Parallel to a narrowing-down of governmental role to formal institutional competencies, the intermediate space between state and market rationales has expanded and increasingly become crowded with representatives of private interest associations, corporatist organizations and stakeholders. The governance settings provided for their representation and involvement are seen as alternatives to centralized public action and to its perceived deficits in effectiveness and problem-solving capacity. The result, however, is the emergence of highly fragmented and volatile policy arenas.

In this perspective, reference to a distinction between government and governance, to a dualism between statutory settings and actual practices of governance and regulation, gains a peculiar semantic bearing. If in fact ‘local-regional government’ is defined as a field of public action structured into statutory levels of competencies and roles coincident with a definite territorial articulation, according to a classic model of sovereignty, ‘local governance’ is rather defined as an activity of regulation and decision-making of which local government is only one of the players, of the actors possibly involved. The notion of the ‘local’
governance refers therefore to a fundamental discontinuity in the practices of

Rather than representing a given socio-spatial order, the meaning of the ‘local’ and
the ‘regional’ is re-shaped according to a tension between de- and re-territorialization
processes. By this, the meaning of territoriality itself is redefined. No longer primarily
defined as the domain of exercise of state sovereignty through a hierarchical spatial
articulation of its authority, territoriality re-emerges as a social construction and a
processual outcome. In the politics of neo-localism and neo-regionalism, inscribed
in a discourse of territorial competition and competitiveness, the operation of public
actors and institutions is redefined as a reflective and interactive contribution to the
effective integration of multiple forms of regulation within concrete action spaces
(Bagnasco 1988). The promotion of new forms of territorial governance descends
therefore from an understanding of the spatial embeddedness of modes of regulation.
It implies ‘an understanding of the linkage of different types of regulation in a
territory in terms of political and social integration and at the same time in terms of
capacity of action’ (Le Galès 1998: 495).

Redefining local-regional politics as a question of governance, therefore, implies
a properly political dimension, related to a radical restructuring of relations between
public institutions and social actors.

The transition from a Fordist to a flexible regime of capital accumulation, from
relatively enclosed and protected national economies to ‘globalized’ competition
between firms, is accompanied by a progressive ‘withdrawal of the state’ from the
role previously assumed in social welfare policies. This also involves a revision of
the territorial division of labour between state and local governments in reproducing
conditions for economic development. Cities and regions become increasingly
dependent on decentralized forms of self-governance and self-promotion, and
new forms of performative pressure frame the changing relationship between
institutional and economic actors at the local level (Harvey 1989; Jessop 1990,
1995). In the framework of local-regional governance arrangements aimed at the
promotion of territorial development, the active inclusion of non-institutional
actors and of intermediate, informal and associative forms of action expresses the
role played by the state in enacting a ‘local state’ defined around new enlarged and
‘inclusive’ political arenas. Aggregation of interests, commitments to development-
oriented partnerships and, eventually, consolidation of development ‘regimes’
and ‘coalitions’ become crucial factors for local-regional politics (Stoker 1990;
Stoker and Mossberger 1994). ‘Meso-level’ neo-corporatist settings take the place
of former generalist welfare-oriented corporatist systems of representation and
are redirected towards local forms of concerted action (Heinze and Schmid 1997;
Schmitter and Grote 1997). The resulting policy initiatives develop peculiarly
‘experimental’ forms of localism and regionalism, featuring high levels of self-
organization and low levels of institutionalization, which frequently situate them
in an intermediate, transitional domain between classic governmental settings and
emergent governance regimes. Similarly, these new forms of territorial governance
appear defined by a shift in the conception of public action: from social control to
social production, from compliance to collective action, from top-down direction to
local concerted initiative. As forms of collective action, they are reliant on, and at the same time constitutive of, specific socio-political milieux and identities: ‘artificial communities’ (De Rita and Bonomi 1998) or ‘invented spaces’ (Liepitz 1994), as it were, constituted through their very enactment.

Thus, local-regional societies are set in a tension between ‘exogenous’ imperatives of economic attractiveness and competitiveness on one side, and ‘endogenous’ aims of social integration on the other. This bears potentials for innovative forms of cooperation and collective action, but also uncertainties and threats connected to an increasing dependence on a ‘coercive consensus’ with regard to the quasi-natural imperatives of economic competitiveness and performance. Local governance does not in fact only represent an (unequal) horizon of opportunities, but also an (unequal) distribution of benefits and risks. Under conditions of increasing territorial self-reliance, ‘a progressively more concrete interdependence is constituted between local economic processes and welfare-state processes’, which may result as such in ‘a fragmented and potentially highly unbalanced supply of social services tied to the respective economic “performance” of the region and dependent on the abilities, political priorities and mobilization of local political actors’ (Mayer 1996: 22–3).

These shifts in governance practices may thus bear significant potentials for the empowerment of local societies, but also significant challenges to democratic representation and accountability. Governance structures – as highlighted by network-theoretical interpretations (Rhodes 1996) – may develop tendencies to autonomization and resistance to external control and regulation. Moreover, the distribution of resources for influencing policy agendas, organizational settings and regulatory inputs is relatively independent of political representation and liable to structural inequality in opportunities, with potential for conflicts of interests and representation (Painter and Goodwin 1995). In this respect, the local dimension of governance most vividly highlights the need for a renewal of democratic theory and practice.

Governance, Space and Politics: Implications for Planning Theory

In discussing ‘governance’, I have pointed out the importance of distinguishing between its assumption as a policy concept – with its normative undertones – and as an analytic concept, with an emphasis on its critical-interpretive implications. It is now time to draw some conclusions on the latter. For this purpose, it is useful to get back to the question earlier introduced, whether ‘governance’ is a notion that simply ‘extends’ our understanding of political steering, or rather one that implies a paradigmatic change in understanding the state, politics and the nature of public policy. Critical governance research, in fact, points to a more radical interpretive dimension.
Key to this is understanding governance in the light of changing conceptions of the state. As Mayntz (2005) points out in reviewing its genealogy, political steering theory – as the expression of a central steering function by the state – remains a dominant paradigm in thinking about ‘governance’ as long as belief in the effectiveness and legitimacy of state action is not questioned. Political steering theory, as defined within this paradigm, however, is dependent on a contingent, continental-European notion of the state: in it, the state as the steering subject and its purposive action is at the forefront of attention, while the nature of this purpose and of its objects is conveyed by a welfarist idea of the ‘public interest’. The nature of this purpose and of its objects comes into question as a late result of the emerging effectiveness and legitimacy crisis of the state. Governance discourse arises therefore from a fundamental crisis of this conception. This happens in connection with the increasing fragmentation and relativization of both the subject (the state as a site of regulation), and the object (domains and forms of regulation) of public steering.

This leads to the crux of the matter. If we are to understand what is specific in governance discourse and practice, we need to look for its foundation in a changing understanding of the state; and, if we are to understand its spatial implications, we need to look at change in the spatiality of state action.

Assuming steering as the function of a political actor, and assuming the ‘public’ as its object and recipient, implies assumptions about a distinction between the subject and the object of politics, and this distinction strictly relies on a peculiar conception of the legitimacy of state action. In the wake of the emergence of the idea of a ‘cooperative state’, and of its embodiment in governance discourse, however, such a distinction between subject and object of regulation begins to blur. Political steering is no more identifiable with state action as expressed by its political-administrative structures, but is rather the result of the contingent interaction between different forms of regulation. It is a pervasive but emergent mode of agency, a construct that stresses the co-constitutive relationship between structure and agency, between governance as regulatory structure and governance as regulatory process, and the ‘cooperative’ pursuit of the collective goals defined by the involvement of market and societal actors.

In this sense, reference to ‘collective goals’ in defining governance practices (Jessop 1995: 317) must be understood no more as the expression of a normative orientation of the state towards the achievement of a collective welfare function, assumed as the foundation for a politics of the ‘public interest’, but as an emergent construct defined by specific policy arenas and specific policy objects. Accordingly, governance is no more primarily defined by a focus on regulatory structures, but rather by a focus on regulatory effects taking contingent forms through a combination of different regulatory means in a variety of policy arenas.

This leads to another key issue: that of the ‘problem-solving bias’ common to political steering theory and most current governance theory. Their dominant assumption – despite their relative shift in perspective – is that of an orientation of political action to the solving of collective problems. While political steering theory conveys this bias through assumptions on the motivation of the political system
– the pursuit of a ‘public interest’ – governance theory conveys it ‘through the functionalist misassumption that existing institutions have emerged in the interest of solving collective problems’ (Mayntz 2005: 18). But this view, as we have seen, is radically challenged by the fact that the production and delivery of public goods is increasingly co-determined by or delegated to market exchange rationales, and by the fact that this is reflected in the institutional design of decentralized and fragmented partnership arrangements and delegation mechanisms.

In as far as it remains ‘trapped’ in its ‘problem-solving bias’ – that is, in the assumption of a centrality of agency towards the resolution of collective problems – the notion of ‘governance’ shares in the same, if extended, paradigmatic horizon as theories of political steering. If, however, governance research questions this assumption, and points to a more general dynamics of hegemony formation, then a paradigmatic break with this tradition is in view. An alternative understanding of the way in which public policy is defined and discursively constructed becomes possible.

What is at stake here is a question which, if addressed in its full implications, bears a crucial importance for planning theory: the question of how far governance practices may represent not only, or primarily, an emergent form of institutionalization of interest-based politics – and governance discourse a creeping legitimation of it – but also an expression of the decline of democratic politics. If loosened from the assumption of the centrality of regulation of collective interests, and if rather directed towards understanding the selective, power-dependent effects of its practices on the definition of the ‘public’, governance research opens the way to a critical interpretation of the dynamics of political power and hegemony. It emphasizes the post-political and post-democratic dimension of state action and the governmentality effects realized in and by state-promoted policy spaces that are increasingly ‘externalized’ from of the political system.

In this sense, it shows affinities with research on the post-political and post-democratic dimension of contemporary governing practices (Crouch 2004) as well as with research inspired by Foucault’s late work (e.g. 1991, 1997) on the ‘governmentality’ effects of modern political practices and on their role in the definition of political power and hegemony (Dean 1999; Lemke 2002; Swyngedouw 2005; Huxley, this volume).

Foucault notoriously based his notion of ‘governmentality’ on a rejection of a traditional focus on a juridical model of power and on its institutionalized expression – the constitutionally or contractually sanctioned apparatus of state sovereignty. In contrast, his heuristics and methodology are a plea for turning the philosophical foundations of political analysis upside down (Foucault 1997). In his approach to the analysis of political power, the question addressed by Foucault is no longer how power is based on the constitution of sovereignty at the centre, at the core of political institutions, but how effects of power result from the regulation of social practices at the periphery of political institutions, in their diffuse, everyday-life effects on conduct. In this perspective, the primary domain of analysis is not juridical right, but human sciences, and the code of power is not juridical norm, but concrete practices of normalization, of regularization of social conduct. Sovereignty
rights and regulatory apparatuses and practices both represent constitutive parts of mechanisms of power: but Foucault invites us to rethink their interaction and mutual influence as well as to understand their relative shifts in the process of constitution of a modern conception of political power.

As a paradigmatic expression of politics in late modernity, governance appears to fulfil, in both discourse and practice, what Foucault hinted at, in a broader genealogical perspective, as a shift from a logic of sovereignty to a logic of regulation in defining political power.

A logic of regulation defines the way by which politics is primarily inscribed in actual rules of conduct, frames and practices, rather than by the way it fits a system of rights and deeds. Within a logic of regulation, political power finds its expression through the institution of a ‘body of practice’, rather than by defining and applying a legal framework of sovereignty. Its foundation is hence a technology, rather than a juridical model, and its effectiveness and legitimacy are increasingly defined as inherent to the selective contingency of concrete practices and of their goal- or performance-orientation, rather than by reference to a universal system of rights.

The ‘governmentality’ of governance appears to be precisely defined by the constitution of a regime of practices that becomes increasingly quasi-autonomous from sovereignty rule and that – even more importantly – tendentially reverses the criteria for effectiveness and legitimacy that are typical of representative political institutions. Governance discourse and practices become a new technology of government that mirrors Foucault’s notion of governmentality in that they are both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ to the state: they redefine the meaning of politics and the state from the inside out, but do this essentially by decentralizing and by ever more externalizing the locus of politics. Governance appears hence as the expression of a state governmentality based on practices that mark a progressive autonomization of public policy from a politically accountable pursuit of collective ends.

The spatial dimension of governance practices is a remarkable embodiment of this trend. It expresses a shift from a general juridical model of territorial relationships, based on hierarchical, ‘nested’ relationships between ‘bounded spaces’ and on the public policy arenas they define, towards a negotiated or contractual model based on non-hierarchical, ‘interconnected’ and ad hoc relationships among public, private and civic actors that contingently define their policy arenas.

In such governance arrangements, we experience a shift in the logic of the social contract. Recourse to contractualization is functionalized: it is based on a functional, ‘working model’ rather than on a constitutional or ‘political’ model of the social contract. Moreover, contractualization is ‘localized’. Recourse to contractualization is context specific: it is not territorially bounded, but aimed at bounding actors and interests to a specific territorial policy initiative. Its territoriality is therefore not a framework condition, but the expression of a ‘local’ agreement defined – and valid – within a specific constellation of actors and interests. As a result, the conception of territory as a policy domain is also revised. It is the activation of resources in a spatialized, ‘local’ frame of cooperation practices which constitutes the territory, rather than a juridical system of spatial relationships based on sovereignty rule. In this process of relativization of a nested hierarchy of sovereignty, territory becomes
redefined: from a juridical object – as, for instance, a unit of administration – to an active subject – as, for instance, a performative ‘unit of competition’.

What is particularly important, in a spatial perspective, is that this change in conception, as it is conveyed by governance discourse and practices, pervades the way public policy is conceived throughout all scales, through its embodiment in a variety of new spatial configurations that are being constituted with the active support of the state. Governance entails a redefinition of policy objects and policy arenas as well as of their constitutive spatial features. These are increasingly independent from rules of territorial sovereignty and from related territorially-based representative democratic rules politics, and increasingly dependent on ad-hoc, selective and negotiated policy arrangements. But this entails a radical change in understanding of public policy. The relative self-referentiality by which governance arrangements define their own policy spaces and arenas, largely in autonomy from representative political institutions, redefines the meaning of democratic participation and accountability. In this, they bear significant contradictions but, above all, a potential redefinition of the political.

The planning enterprise, as it shares in governance discourse and practices, should be concerned with a critical reflection on its manifestations and consequences. This is anything but easy, as everyday planning practices are mutually implied in constituting this form of governmentality. In this perspective, three aspects emerge from governance research that may serve as critical entry points of inquiry for planning theory.

The first concerns the need for a peculiar ‘re-spatialization’ of planning theory. If governance is defined by complex sets of practices which, to an increasing extent, define their own spatiality, and constitute themselves as new policy spaces, then understanding planning practice requires awareness of the emergent spatial configurations in which it takes place. As these spatial configurations increasingly overlap and even challenge formal-institutional rationales of space and territoriality, it becomes key to direct inquiry towards the role of governance practices in defining new modes of ‘production of space’ and their trajectories of institutionalization – both material and discursive.

The second concerns questioning governance practices and their spatial features as the expression of a collective endeavour, inquiring into the way they constitute and express collective identities and preferences. If governance practices become mainstream, in contemporary politics, as an approach to collective problem-solving, and if governance actors and arenas are increasingly defined by the contingent interests and forms of representation expressed in those practices, then the ‘everyday’ dimension of governance is likely to become a framework for new ‘local’ forms of hegemony. This is, to be sure, not something happening ‘out of the state’. State agency, rather, is increasingly legitimized precisely by procedurally enabling and facilitating such collective practices, in contrast to directly performing collective tasks: by its ability to exert a ‘meta-governance’ function, rather than by the direct pursuit of a collective function. By this, however, collective problem-solving progressively moves away from a representative-democratic perspective on
the definition of the ‘public interest’. This changes not only traditional arenas and forms of political deliberation and agency, but the essence of political discourse.

The third concerns the role of the public and civil society. Beyond the rhetoric of the ‘cooperative state’ and of problem-solving oriented collaborative relationships between societal sub-sectors, a critical, state-theoretically grounded approach to governance should recognize that the way markets and civil society are involved in governance discourse and practices is anything but an alternative to government and the state, but rather an expression of how the state as a materialization of social relations is currently undergoing change. In a neo-Gramscian perspective, understanding governance as an expression of state change is key in order to understand how civil society and the public sphere are being redefined as a site for expression of social and political struggles.

Along a critical reflection on these issues, planning theory can re-establish the link with a tradition of critical theory as a form of theorizing projected towards alternative practices. This, however, is unlikely to be effective, in the current post-political conjuncture, if addressed in abstraction from the pervasive presence of governance discourse and practices. It is unlikely to be effective, in other words, if addressed either by adopting a neo-pragmatist ideal of collective problem-solving that does not question its embeddedness in governance discourse and practices and the way these frame the meaning of the ‘public’, or by advocating an ethics of rights and political citizenship that neglects a reality of governance practices in the name of a juridical model of the ‘public’. Rather, if it has to play such a role in critical theorizing, planning theory should commit itself to reflective experimentations. It should address the issue of how spatial practices can actively contribute to (re)defining arenas for the expression of collective preferences and political interests – at all spatial scales and across spatial scales – in a domain of practices that appears increasingly defined in post-political, post-national and post-territorial terms. It should address the issue of how spatial practices can contribute to (re-)establishing an effective and legitimate linkage between different societal roles – producer/consumer, decision-maker/constituent, supplier/end-user, and the like – within specific policy contexts, beyond reliance on a juridical model of territorially-based representative democracy.

References


