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Editorial: Geography and governance

Pieter Saey and Petr Dostál

- 1 The link between geography and governance is easy to establish. Social geography can be defined as the discipline that investigates how human beings have spread over the earth's surface and settled in the various parts of the world by making use of the physical environment and organizing themselves spatially in a great variety of ways. Governance is the management – in the broadest sense of the word – of collective affairs, and relates to the political (spatial) organization of society. In the last few decades, the term has been increasingly used to refer to «a flexible pattern of public decision-making based on loose networks of individuals». In this sense «[t]he concept conveys the idea that public decisions rest less with hierarchically organized bureaucracies, but take place more in long-term relationships between key individuals located in a diverse set of organizations located at various territorial levels» (John, 2001, p. 9). The set of organizations includes elected authorities, as well as non-elected state agencies, and sections of what is frequently called civil society.
- 2 This multi-scalar, networked governance is opposed to hierarchical government, which is said to characterize earlier forms of political decision-making. However, the contrast should not be overstated. On the one hand, it is doubtful whether hierarchical government will disappear from all policy areas and, on the other hand, sections of civil society have always been involved in political decision-making. Belgium is a case in point. In Belgium, services for the collective good are provided at all government levels by central, regional and local governments. The system of social services is regulated by the public authorities, with a wide variety of non-governmental organizations taking part. These include professional social organizations, trade unions, medical insurance associations, employers' federations, farmers' associations and associations of small business operators, which participate not only in the execution and management of social services but also in policy-making. This is done by means of a network of deliberative, advisory and governing bodies, conceded administrative executive services, and local initiatives. The state creates the legal

framework but, to a large degree, social organizations formulate and implement initiatives. This model typifies education (community, provincial, municipal and private education), social housing (local social housing companies), health care (medical insurance associations, public and Catholic hospitals), welfare (public centres and non-profit associations) and social security.

- 3 This reflects the development of the Belgian welfare state from its beginnings in 19th-century local initiatives, mainly workers' organizations (Deleeck, 1992, pp. 189-190). Neocorporatist deals and pacifying pacts between pillars and political families are familiar features of Belgian political history. However, this kind of participation of sections of civil society in political decision-making is not the sort of flexible and multi-scalar governance that has been in the ascendant since the last quarter of the twentieth century. As Cooke says – referring to the states in which some combination of Keynesianism and Beveridgism informed large areas of state activity – political parties, pressure groups and the like, in seeking to establish state apparatuses aimed at correcting distributional imbalances, were transmuted into instruments of a paternalistic and patronizing delivery of services. This divorced the perceived experiences of proposed beneficiaries from their actual conditions and turned the beneficiaries into passive recipients of services who were denied reasonable direct influence over the form and content of their entitlements and became subject to social control by the state (Cooke, 1983, pp. 254-255, 285).
- 4 This syndrome of statism (as Cooke calls it) has undoubtedly contributed to the persuasiveness of the neoliberal rhetoric that considers society as a generalized market and individual subjective utility as the sole criterion of value (Van Trier, 1985, p. 102). In this way, it rationalizes the multifaceted, multiscalar dynamic of neoliberalization, to use the words of the radical geographers who contributed to the volume of *Antipode* on the spaces of neoliberalism. Processes of deregulation, liberalization and state retrenchment have loosened or dismantled «the various institutional constraints upon marketization, commodification, the hyperexploitation of workers, and the discretionary power of capital that had been established through popular struggles prior to and during the postwar period.» These processes of «creative destruction» (Brenner and Theodore, 2002b) take place over the full range of spatial scales, «from the global and the continental to the national and the local, [but] always in context-, territory-, and/or place-specific forms» (Brenner and Theodore, 2002a, pp. 342-343). One need not fully agree with the radical geographers in order to draw the conclusion that – although the shift in the management of collective affairs to multiscalar networked governance should not be overstated – it should not be underestimated either.
- 5 The articles of this volume deal with two key issues on the interface between the study of governance (as opposed to hierarchical government) and political geography: the capacity of territorial organization to adapt to the growing complexity of problems and the uncertainty of conditions emerging at different scales (Barlow, Dostál, Loopmans *et al.*), and the way in which territorial policies – which try to shape the spatial organization of society – exhibit the characteristics of governance (Verhetsel *et al.*, Cabus, Saey).
- 6 Barlow discusses the nature of administrative space and outlines some implications arising from developments associated with globalization and state restructuring. Until recently, new developments in society could be matched, in accordance with the

traditional model of administrative space, by changing the number of tiers, redistributing the tasks among tiers and/or adjusting boundaries. Barlow argues that this model becomes less relevant for a variety of reasons, the most important being the tendency towards deterritorialization, i.e. the reduction in the territorial responsibilities of government.

- 7 Dostál examines the claim of the decreased relevance of existing structures of multipurpose territorial government. He points to configurations of governance that usually lead to situations of diffused accountability and, consequently, limit the field of democratic accountability. His critical assessment of the notion of flexibility arrives at the conclusion that a change in the existing structures through which territorial self-government and administration are organized is not necessary in order to cope with the pressures and uncertainties of globalization. It is more appropriate to focus on a less far-reaching enlargement of the management capacities of multipurpose territorial governments, which are still the main guarantees of democracy and the only institutions able to integrate the activity of actors with divergent interests (cf. also Dostál and Saey, 2000).
- 8 The decreased relevance of existing structures is also questioned by Loopmans *et al.*, albeit in an implicit and quite different way. They use a critical approach to explain the emergence of an urban policy in Flanders. They transform the differences in emphasis on agency and structure within the critical approach into two categories of theorizing – the class-theoretical and the capital-theoretical approaches – in order to clarify their own way of reasoning, which is based on the notions of path dependency and critical conjunctures. These critical conjunctures coalesce with processes of scalar reconfigurations, because distributions of power are associated with the power of respective actors to exercise influence in diverse spatial scales. In the case of urban policy in Flanders, the processes of scalar reconfiguration come down to scale-jumping by actors concerned with the fate of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In other words, these actors are making use of existing governmental levels to build up power.
- 9 Apart from their differing modes of analysis (a theoretical reflection versus a theoretically informed empirical analysis), the articles of Barlow and of Loopmans *et al.* exemplify different ways of dealing with globalization and the associated restructuring of the state. One characterizes the discussions about these matters within mainstream administrative geography, while the other characterizes the discussions within radical geography. Barlow does not analyse globalization but takes it for granted, and focuses on some consequences of globalization for the nature of administrative space. In the paper by Loopmans *et al.*, scalar reconfigurations are not consequences but modalities of globalization. In as far as globalization can be equated to neoliberalization, the dynamics of neoliberal politics are path-dependent and deeply contradictory, partly because neoliberal strategies have created their own problems and partly because they face other, non-liberal strategies that are sometimes successful. For radical geography, globalization means the reproduction of neoliberalism, and this reproduction «has become increasingly contingent upon specifically urban strategies of various kinds» (Brenner and Theodore, 2000a, p. 345). Seen from this perspective, globalization entails reterritorialization, i.e. the increasing importance of the local and regional governmental levels.
- 10 Following Healey (1997, pp. 230-239), we can distinguish three ways in which territorial policies can exhibit the characteristics of governance: the criteria-driven approach,

entrepreneurial consensus, and inclusionary argumentation. These three ways are exemplified in the articles of Verhetsel *et al.*, Cabus and Saey, respectively.

- 11 Verhetsel *et al.* focus on the interaction of high-quality urban policy-making and the issue of the data needed to construct useful indicators. By using financial statement data of small and medium-sized enterprises in aggregate form, they can draw the conclusion that social cohesion is different from economic performance. The case study of Antwerp demonstrates that social and economic problems do not always occur together in the same urban district. Alleviating social problems does not imply that the economic problems are solved as well (and vice versa). The article is concerned with the discussion of suitable indicators and the application of an indicator for economic vitality. The authors do not embark upon an analysis of urban policy-making itself. In this respect, they show the confidence in city management that is typical of the criteria-driven approach. However, we must note that this confidence is not shared by many critical researchers, who see the use of indicators and, for that matter, urban policy-making generally, as anything but straightforward (Kesteloot *et al.*, 2002; Swyngedouw *et al.*, 2002; cf. also the book review in the present volume).
- 12 Cabus examines the evolving sub-regional governance in Flanders within the context of changing European regional policy, with a focus on development coalitions (in the shape of sub-regional platforms) and their role in decentralization of decision-making and engagement of citizens. The conclusion of his examination is that the platforms contribute to a governance structure that enables public participation in policy-making. However, he has great doubt about the impact of development coalitions on economic processes. A tangible outcome of this type of sub-regional governance appears to be territorial identification. The notion of localized knowledge spillovers is confined to academic speculation.
- 13 Saey reflects at a meta-theoretical level upon the effectiveness of networked governance, using the collaborative spatial and environmental planning of Healey as a textbook example. He tries to answer the question of how effectiveness is guaranteed by strategic consensus-building and communicative rationality, the two cornerstones of collaborative planning in this respect. The answer appears to depend on the tenability of the view of the social field of action as a field of struggle between bearers of collective interests, in spite of the recent restructuring of the mode of production (the shift from Keynesian welfare state to Schumpeterian workfare state) and the associated decline of the power of traditional interest groups. At first sight, this might seem to necessitate a fundamental reshuffling of the field of action into a field of strategic consensus building between communities of stakeholders without boundaries. As a matter of fact, this conclusion, which leaves the basic question unsolved, is reminiscent of the discussions about the institutional turn in economic geography (Amin, 2001; Jessop, 2001; MacLeod, 2001) or about the theory of structuration in relation to realism, Marxism and structuralism in Gregory and Urry (1985).
- 14 In this way, the reader of this volume gets the opportunity to become acquainted with the methodological and theoretical issues that give colour to the geographical study of governance. At the same time, the reader can get an idea of the development of the territorial policies that try to shape the spatial organization of Flanders: the urban policy (Loopmans *et al.*), the regional policy (Cabus) and the town and country planning (Saey).

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