
REFLECTING ON THE COMPLEXITIES OF MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE: BOOK REVIEW OF ‘RETHINKING MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE’ BY ARTHUR BENZ (2024)

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Abstract

This book review presents an analysis of the key concepts and arguments presented in the novel book by Arthur Benz. Starting with the book’s justification, the author proceeds to subsequent chapters that touch upon the conceptualization and methodological operationalization of multilevel governance (MLG), its related logics and processes, legitimacy, public participation, and the implications of identity politics. While providing a much-needed conceptual overview of its complexities, the contribution falls short in providing the required methodological guidance for some of the proposed concepts, such as the three power types and modes of governance.

Keywords

Policy; Legitimacy; Functionalist logic; Identity logic; Identity politics.

Introduction

In Arthur Benz’s (2024) book *Rethinking Multilevel Governance*, Benz, a German political scientist, dives into the most recent theoretical debates on Multilevel Governance (MLG), an ever-evolving concept. Moving across the nine chapters and covering its organizational, economic, and constructivist dimensions, shaped by several EU-wide crises, Benz (2024) argues that “*multileveling*” – progressing towards a decentralized governance system – is more reactive and resilient towards future crises than traditionally centralized systems. This review subsequently scrutinizes the major arguments presented in the book in relation to the primary theoretical debates on MLG.

1 Book Review

1.1 Reflecting on the Major Critical Streams in the Literature

The introductory chapter, titled “*Introduction: reasons for rethinking multilevel governance*”, provided a justification for why we need to pay attention to MLG and the reasons for its rethinking. The justification centers around 4 disputes/issues related to the concept:

1. absent definition of the concept that would be recognized within academia,
2. a big variety of diverse theoretical approaches used to study MLG,
3. under-researched constellations enabling and facilitating the multilevel interactions, and

4. the need to address up-to-date MLG dynamics, which have been previously changed and shaped by major crises.

While acknowledging the fluid and evolving nature of the concept, Arthur Benz (2024) contributes to the ongoing academic debates and criticisms regarding MLG. He follows up on the foundational contribution provided by Gary Marks in 1993, subsequently joined by Liesbet Hooghe in 2001, who reflected on the EU's developments brought about by the institutional and policy changes in the 1980s and 1990s (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). Touching upon the absence of a settled definition of the concept and the engagement of too many theoretical approaches, Simona Piattoni (2009, p. 163) expressed the concept's "*risk of becoming an umbrella term*". Due to the frequent accounts lacking theoretical and methodological definitions and delimitations, MLG is often criticized as conceptually ambiguous, e.g. (Faludi, 2012; Alcantara et al., 2016). Another criticism that was partially elaborated upon is the constantly shifting, multidisciplinary nature of MLG (Papadopoulos et al., 2025), resulting from various crises and developments within and beyond the EU – hence the book's title. One of the criticisms that was not addressed at all is the debate on the concept's Eurocentric nature (Allain-Dupré, 2020), objectively stemming from its development background, when Gary Marks assessed the progression of European integration efforts, with a special focus on structural funds and their governance across the levels (Marks, 1993).

Nevertheless, as the book's key focus was to provide a conceptual and methodological guidance for MLG, primarily used in the context of the EU, it is understandable that addressing the Eurocentric claims was not a priority. Nevertheless, conducting such an assessment on concrete non-EU cases could have provided a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the concept, which would be practical for future academic debates within and across the EU. One such example is the contribution by Ravikumar et al. (2015, p. 912), who analyzed "*23 subnational REDD+ initiatives in Brazil, Peru, Indonesia, Tanzania, and Cameroon, and Vietnam*" and reflected on the different challenges' perception from the stakeholders across the analyzed countries, shaped by the different power and institutional dimensions.

1.2 Theoretical Underpinnings and Tools of MLG

To provide a rich theoretical assessment of MLG's components and ongoing debates, Benz employs actor-centered institutionalism, while also offering society- and policy-centered perspectives. He reflects on various country cases, e.g., the bottom-up dynamics between the German states (Länder), which "*typically seek an agreement before they negotiate with the federal government*" (Benz, 2024, p. 133), or policy areas, e.g., the fiscal policy and the related centralized tool of fiscal equalization used to "*de facto restrict the autonomy of governments and invigorate identity politics in multilevel fiscal policy*" (Benz, 2024, p. 108). This helps to provide a broader yet clearer, multifaceted assessment of the concept, illustrated through concrete examples. Following the process of reading and rereading the significant contributions on MLG, including those by Hooghe & Marks (2001, 2009), Scharpf (1999, 2001), Zürn (2010), and Benz (2024) provides a synthesis across several chapters covering individual dimensions of the concept.

Benz's book is clearly organized by topic, with each chapter providing a puzzle that is necessary for the development of a complete image. Following the first introductory, justificatory chapter, Benz (2024) strives to define the concept and its vertical and horizontal architectural premises in the second chapter "*Understanding multilevel governance*". Different "*modes of governance*" (Benz, 2024, p. 18) are considered, a combination of which may be applicable for the concrete MLG dynamics, surpassing the boundaries of such modes. While we may observe the relatedness of governance modes to vertical and horizontal MLG processes, as addressed by Martin Jänicke (2015), they fail to provide a clear conceptual and methodological distinction

vis-à-vis the major logics guiding MLG. While naming concrete instances of vertical and horizontal governance modes, e.g. “*top-down regulation in hierarchy, competition in markets or market-like contests, trust and exchange in networks, loyalty and shared norms in communities, or negotiations or discourses in organizations or inter-organizational relations*” (Benz, 2024, pp. 17–18), the proposed examples provide a further generalist, all-encompassing processes which may be methodologically unclear for the researchers. The book clearly treats MLG as a polycentric, decentralized phenomenon, where the engaged governance levels are intrinsically interrelated and subjected to mutual influence, instead of a nested, strictly delimited one – following MLG2 instead of MLG1 logic according to Saito-Jensen’s (2015) contribution.

Nevertheless, while separately elaborated upon later in the book, the proposed governance modes comprise what can be identified as both functional and identity logics, stemming from the significant contribution by Hooghe & Marks (2020), rather than separating them for the sake of methodology. Although interrelated, such constructivist and functionalist accounts should be separated and, if possible, clearly distinguished. One of the more concrete accounts is also the comment on possible influences of internal municipal organization and its effects on governance in multilevel constellations (Benz, 2024). Although this is certainly relevant for governance processes, such as municipal cooperation under the Covenant of Mayors, some readers may view it as unnecessarily bypassing the concept by engaging in the theoretical waters of organizational theory without providing greater methodological inputs and guidance. It may also be perceived as a shift in focus between governance and government, which can confuse the reader with the evolving knowledge in this research area. Doing so could mistakenly divert attention to the governmental architecture and, at the same time, detract from consideration of the more substantial coordination and policymaking that occur within such an architecture. Conversely, what I find highly beneficial in the chapter is the inclusion of both public and private actors in MLG processes, representing different types of interests within society, which is vital for governance democratization – a goal desired by MLG and related participatory efforts. Moreover, while MLG always pertains to the EU level, it is important not to forget that both regions and cities are part of these dynamics and should not be avoided when engaging in such research (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Heinelt & Neiderhafner, 2008; Kern, 2019, as cited in Benz, 2024). This is important to avoid possible deceiving narratives of municipal level exclusiveness for the public governance research domain and to pay attention to local networks that can “*bypass regional and national governance to coordinate policies at the European or global level*” (Acuto & Rayner, 2016; Kern & Bulkeley, 2009, as cited in Benz, 2024, p. 24).

The consecutive chapter, titled “*Dual politics: division of authority and coordination*”, starts with the distinction of functional and social logic (functionalist and identity logic), which were missing in the above part on governance modes. More precisely, the governance modes were conceptualized, but a more thorough foundation vis-à-vis the logics they are established and/or guided by is missing. Their combination may facilitate the progression of MLG measures and avoid the path dependency continuously reinforced by the existing governance constellations and processes. The chapter continued with 3 subchapters, designating 3 developments in MLG, related to governance and authority:

1. “*Layering of Governance*” (Benz, 2024, p. 34) – encompassing the creation of new governance levels and the associated institutional development, with the two logics “*...driving the formation and evolution of levels*” (Benz, 2024, p. 38).
2. “*Distribution and Redistribution of Authority*” (Benz, 2024, p. 38) – in the framework of “*...social, environmental and technological developments*” (Benz, 2024., p. 39), distinguishing the division of authority as a zero-sum game while treating the “*differentiation of levels as arenas*” as a positive-sum game (Benz, 2024, p. 38).

3. “*Modes of Coordination and Dynamics of Power Structure*” (Benz, 2024, p. 41) – outlining various types of governance playing their roles in MLG, including “*new modes of ‘soft’ governance*” (Benz, 2024, p. 44), indicating specific measurable objectives in a decentralized policy area, e.g., governance actors competing within “*best practice models*” (Benz, 2024, p. 44).

1.3 Actors in MLG

The fourth chapter, named “*Complex governance: actors, institutions and linkages*”, assessed the different roles of actors engaged in policymaking processes. The proposed distinction is between generalists, represented by government officials such as ministers or mayors, legitimized by votes and, ideally, public trust, and specialists, who are policy experts in the field and not subjected to the public’s influence and future election results (Benz, 2024). Such a distinction may serve as a valuable tool for the governance analysis vis-à-vis these types of actors, which are constantly engaged in the governance processes. Moreover, the generalists, perceived as bearers of social logic stemming from their representative role among citizens, together with specialists, who are bearers of functional logic, may provide sound methodological guidance regarding the concept’s operationalization. At the same time, just like any theoretical underpinning, this may not be 100% valid, e.g., in the case of ministers appointed as temporary policy experts rather than being selected and legitimized through elections. This should be part of the conceptualization, serving as guidance for the subsequent operationalization. Benz (2024, pp. 55–56) also reminds readers of the importance of the “*power of scrutiny*”, which encompasses indirect processes affecting MLG by actors who “*do not directly participate but are indirectly involved in multilevel governance*”. Including this aspect is justified, as the respective actors gatekeep the different stages of policymaking processes and provide oversight in case of their eventual violation. This includes: parliamentary actors, i.e. “*parliaments, parliamentary committees, or parties in parliament*”, who are “*holding executives accountable for their decisions and actions*” and “*monitor multilevel policymaking*” (Benz, 2024, p. 55); courts providing a legal oversight over the decisions taken; and non-governmental organizations, who “*usually send specialists to participate in multilevel policymaking*” (Benz, 2024, p. 56). Since Benz (2024) previously mentioned local government as a relevant actor not to be omitted in MLG studies, this chapter further elaborates on its importance for achieving more democratic participation and, overall, better governance. This is underlined by its greater proximity vis-à-vis citizens, which may further serve to incentivize mutual trust (Benz, 2024).

1.4 Policy Areas and Legitimacy in MLG

Chapter 5 “*Economic disparities and fiscal equalization*” and Chapter 6 “*Identity politics and differentiated division of authority*” further elaborated on the functional and social logic of MLG. Reconvening the debate on the two logics presented in the third chapter, they are further addressed based on their influence on either facilitating or hindering the progression of MLG processes. Thus, “*depending on the wealth of a person and the region he lives in, he may be supportive of either power centralization or power decentralization*” (Pablo Baramendi, 2012, as cited in Benz, 2024, p. 88). Identity politics, which we may notice in the political arenas, “*is the driving force of the ‘social logic’ in multilevel governance*” (Hooghe & Marks, 2016, as cited in Benz, 2024, p. 104). The author makes a valuable point for the researchers studying MLG, as identity politics and its effects may be easily overlooked. It is crucial not to overlook them, as they may affect policy preferences across various policy areas. At the same time, identity politics may serve as a double-edged sword. While having the capacity to represent specific, local identities and interests, it is also a source of horizontal conflict in MLG settings, which may lead to shifts in authority and erode trust as a facilitator of MLG processes.

Before concluding, the last two book chapters—Chapter 7 “*Policy coordination and power*” and Chapter 8 “*Legitimizing power in multilevel governance*”—paid attention to power and legitimacy considerations alongside the organizational and institutional settings. The conceptualization of 3 power types – *bargaining power*, *epistemic power*, and *power of the last resort* – was one of the main reasons the author of this review has purchased the book, as was interested in this particular part based on the freely available introductory section of the book available under the DOI link in (Benz, 2024). While providing certain instances of these power types, the book falls short in detail a conceptualization of the terms needed for a more profound analytical contribution to such power for subsequent researchers. The author of this review would suggest Arthur Benz would engage more in conceptualizing the 3 power types in the context of the other chapters in his future volumes. This would also facilitate the future operationalization of the concept by establishing concrete connections to other illustrated concepts. What can be really appreciated in the contribution is the author’s take on legitimacy and public participation. He makes it brief yet clear that the combination of legitimacy types – input, throughput, and output is important for the sustainability of MLG processes (both the ones with an existing history and those emerging ones).

Additionally, civil society is recognized as an important actor in this regard, which, however, cannot fully substitute for the legitimizing process that ought to be fulfilled by publicly elected government actors – stemming from a free, fair, and transparent election. Nevertheless, by making such a contribution, he makes it conscious for the researchers that the governance goes beyond the officially elected leaders and stretches to civil society, including the informal processes and interactions that are not a direct and/or visible part of the policymaking processes, e.g., public discussions between local governments and civil society representatives. Moreover, the horizontal networking of actors, such as among municipalities, civil society organizations, or regional governments, may further facilitate knowledge exchange and impact legitimacy.

Conclusion

To conclude, the book by Arthur Benz provides a much-needed and up-to-date assessment of MLG, serving as a handy guide for both emerging and more advanced researchers engaged in the topic. Alternatively, it may also serve as a textbook for the non-academic audience to get a grasp of the complex governance processes present in the EU (although the language and concepts used may require additional sources).

While exploring a vast array of different concepts, processes, and constellations subjected to MLG theorizing and practice, it ultimately fails to address the major criticisms regarding conceptual muddiness, all-encompassing nature, and Eurocentrism. Thus, while readers will undoubtedly benefit from the improved theoretical knowledge on MLG, reflected in diverse examples, they will still need to make a considerable research effort to operationalize the concept. This is crucial to avoid falling into methodological traps by clearly indicating the research scope and conceptual delimitation, and, at the same time, to avoid supporting criticisms related to the concept’s vagueness.

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ÚVAHY O SLOŽITOSTI VÍCEÚROVŇOVÉ SPRÁVY VĚCÍ VEŘEJNÝCH: RECENZE KNIHY „RETHINKING MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE“ OD ARTHURA BENZE (2024)

Tato recenze knihy představuje analýzu klíčových pojmů a argumentů uvedených v nové knize Arthura Benze. Autor nejprve zdůvodňuje vznik knihy a poté v následujících kapitolách přechází k pojmové a metodologické operacionalizaci víceúrovňové správy (Multi-Level Governance – MLG), související logice a procesům, legitimitě, účasti veřejnosti a dopadům identitární politiky. Přestože příspěvek poskytuje velmi potřebný pojmový přehled o složitosti dané problematiky, neposkytuje dostatečné metodologické vodítko pro některé z navrhovaných pojmů, jako jsou tři typy moci a způsoby správy.

ÜBERLEGUNGEN ZUR KOMPLEXITÄT DER MEHRSTUFIGEN VERWALTUNG ÖFFENTLICHER ANGELEGENHEITEN: REZENSION DES BUCHES „RETHINKING MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE“ VON ARTHUR BENZ (2024)

Diese Buchrezension stellt eine Analyse der Schlüsselbegriffe und Argumente aus dem neuen Buch von Arthur Benz dar. Der Autor begründet zunächst die Entstehung des Buches und geht dann in den folgenden Kapiteln zur konzeptionellen und methodologischen Operationalisierung der Mehrebenenverwaltung (Multi-Level Governance – MLG), der damit verbundenen Logik und Prozesse, der Legitimität, der Beteiligung der Öffentlichkeit und den Auswirkungen der Identitätspolitik über. Obwohl der Beitrag einen dringend benötigten konzeptionellen Überblick über die Komplexität des Themas bietet, liefert er keine ausreichenden methodischen Leitlinien für einige der vorgeschlagenen Konzepte, wie beispielsweise die drei Arten von Macht und die Formen der Verwaltung.

ROZWAŻANIA NA TEMAT ZŁOŻONOŚCI WIELOPOZIOMOWEGO ZARZĄDZANIA SPRAWAMI PUBLICZNYMI: RECENZJA KSIĄŻKI „RETHINKING MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE” AUTORSTWA ARTHURA BENZA (2024)

Niniejsza recenzja książki stanowi analizę kluczowych pojęć i argumentów zawartych w nowej książce Arthura Benza. Autor najpierw uzasadnia powstanie książki, a następnie w kolejnych rozdziałach przechodzi do operacionalizacji pojęciowej i metodologicznej wielopoziomowego zarządzania (Multi-Level Governance – MLG), związanej z tym logiki i procesów, legitymizacji, udziału społeczeństwa i skutków polityki tożsamościowej. Chociaż artykuł zapewnia bardzo potrzebny przegląd pojęciowy złożoności danej problematyki, nie dostarcza wystarczających wskazówek metodologicznych dla niektórych z proponowanych pojęć, takich jak trzy rodzaje władzy i sposoby zarządzania.