1. Introduction

Edoardo Ongaro, Andrew Massey, Marc Holzer and Ellen Wayenberg

INTRODUCTION: THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The rationale for this book is the proposition that there is a need for a major transatlantic social science dialogue on the status of the academic research on intergovernmental relations (IGR) and multi-level governance (MLG). Through the medium of this book and its companion volume (Policy, Performance and Management in Governance and Intergovernmental Relations: Transatlantic Perspectives) we present a series of scholarly and research-based papers intended to explore the status of the theories employed for explaining the dynamics of IGR and MLG and interpreting the developments relevant to both streams of research. Our purpose is to contribute to the academic debate, but also to engage practitioners in order to contribute to the process of assisting good governance and the positive development of public administration on both sides of the Atlantic. The concept of intergovernmental relations broadly refers to relations within the public sector, and enjoys a wider currency within US political science. The second concept, multi-level governance, is more pertinent to the study of the ‘crossroads’ of the vertical (intergovernmental) and horizontal (state-society) dimensions, found in Europe generally and the EU in particular. Consequently, the primary objective of this book is to build a bridge between the two academic communities and their particular research streams. Such an academic bridge is designed to interconnect the two sets of ‘cognitive maps’ employed by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic (see the arguments of Sbragia 2005 and this volume). This book seeks to further our understanding of relations among levels of government and argues that the public sector-society interface can be improved by bringing together the two threads; ‘American’ IGR and ‘European(EU)’ MLG. The book examines this through a set of contributions by prominent scholars who have specifically sought to deepen our understanding of the core elements in IGR and MLG and by exploring the interconnections between the two.

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Clearly, when we associate the terms ‘American’ with IGR and ‘EU’ with MLG we must take into account that we are considering two radically different polities: the US is a nation-state, the first democratic federal state, and has displayed constitutional stability throughout its history. The European Union is a ‘polity-in-the-making’; indeed, the very notion of MLG is so intimately related to the study of the European integration process that it has also been proposed as an approach to overcome the dichotomy between neo-functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism in the study of European integration; at the same time, it has also been considered as an approach that will also help to overcome a perspective according to which, ‘it was generally assumed that the same forces which explained the creation and evolution of the European Union would also explain its functioning’ (Piattoni, this volume; see also Sandholta and Stone Sweet, 1998). Piattoni further argues that MLG is an approach that tries to address a number of quite different problems: explaining European integration, or at least interpreting certain dynamics of the de-structuring and restructuring of the European Union polity as a result of the interlinking and playing off against each other of different levels and arenas of decision-making; normatively assessing the (democratic) legitimacy of the EU; and describing and interpreting the ways in which decisions are made, implemented and evaluated in the European Union. It is only in relation to the third area that MLG and IGR studies are fully comparable and may be more directly integrated. As regards the second area, the notion of accountability may possibly provide a bridge to link some studies of MLG in the EU with those scholarly works in IGR concerned with political responsibility in complex intergovernmental institutional settings like the US, but to this regard the two streams do not cover the same terrain. As to the first area, interconnections may be found in those studies that address the issue of how the interlinking of arenas and levels may shape and reshape the polity, but obviously major caveats apply when trying to utilize conceptual lenses employed for the study of the dynamics of the US in the context of the investigation of a process of supranational integration like the EU.

The notion of IGR has a long history in the public administration literature, especially in the US scholarly and empirical context, as demonstrated in the chapter by Wright, Stenberg and Cho in this volume. The notion of governance, too, is in many respects as old as public administration, although its prominence in literature, especially in connection with such notions like networking and collaboration in the public sector, is a more recent phenomenon (Wright et al., this volume). In a subsequent chapter in this volume Piattoni observes that, ‘[T]he discovery of governance may be plausibly dated back to the seventies when public policy scholars...’
began to notice that governmental authoritative decisions were not easily implemented,’ although in English its usage may be traced back several centuries (Massey and Pyper 2005, pp. 4–8). In modern times the systematic involvement of a plurality of actors, sometimes referred to as policy networks (ibid) crosscutting levels of government and the boundaries of the public sector, has over time come to be considered an element in governments’ search for improving public policy and service delivery. In this the notion of governance has also become inextricably entwined with accounts engaging with the New Public Management, although often the latter are too much focused on the internal operations of the public sector, or on instruments based on market-type mechanisms.

It is within this political and administrative context that we can locate the emergence of multi-level governance, a ‘term which describes the simultaneous activation of governmental and non-governmental actors at various jurisdictional levels. . . . coined in the context of EU studies, it has in time acquired wide currency as it appears to capture dynamics that take place in many fields and many contexts,’ (Piattoni, this volume). The term was first used by Gary Marks (1992; see also Marks 1993) in the context of a study of European structural (that is, regional development) policy, and elaborated in a joint way by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (see, inter alia, Hooghe and Marks 2001 and 2003) through a long-standing collaboration.

The study of MLG has taken root rapidly and has elicited an array of scientific works. Quite surprisingly, however, its interconnections with ‘mainstream’ IGR studies have been relatively limited. One possible explanation for this might be that, whilst MLG is an ‘emergent’ (and nowadays quite well-consolidated) stream of research, IGR, however noble might be its history and significant its legacy, is a ‘declining’ one; the two streams, the argument runs, are destined not to interconnect because they belong to different epochs. We disagree with this view, preferring Wright, Stenberg and Cho’s perspective as outlined after a systematic review of almost 70 years of usage in literature regarding the notion of IGR. This led them to consider that ‘IGR offers itself as a promising, not an obsolete, concept for continued attention and utility in the field of public administration in the United States and beyond,’ (Wright et al., this volume). Following on from this, it is fruitful to ask how may the concept of IGR be further developed as a useful conceptual tool for the study of public administration? What could be the benefits of a closer interchange with the expanding MLG corpus of research works?

This book revisits a wide range of themes, encompassing ‘traditional’ IGR and intergovernmental management (IGM) studies, federalism, MLG as a theoretical perspective overcoming the ‘International
Relations-Comparative Politics’ dichotomy, as well as addressing topics in public administration and public management like decentralization (Pollitt 2005), coordination (Bouckaert et al., 2010; Peters 1998), collaboration, and networking. The seven contributions, individually and jointly, provide a novel view on the two overarching streams of IGR and MLG. This volume is to be read in an integrated way with the companion volume (Ongaro, Massey, Holzer, and Wayenberg (2010), Policy, Performance and Management in Governance and Intergovernmental Relations: Transatlantic Perspectives), that revisits issues of policy-making across levels of government (policy formulation; policy implementation; evaluation; performance and accountability; and IGR in the welfare sector) and issues of public management and governance in intergovernmental settings, through a vast array of empirical and theoretical works.

THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS

Sbragia’s contribution (Chapter 2) starts from the consideration of some basic features of the two ‘unique’ polities of the EU and the US, and by comparing them it revisits the differences in the intergovernmental relations in the two systems. If a substantive similarity between the two polities may be found in the way they divide power, not just vertically but also horizontally (in a way unknown within European national states), a major dissimilarity may be found in the feature that the EU does have at the state and regional-local levels executive governments that provide a unitary representation of interests; in the EU it is possible to identify in a clear way the ‘levels’ in the MLG system. The US system, on the contrary, does not have the same kind of unitary representation, since the executive-legislative split (and other forms of the division of power) are reproduced at state, regional and local tiers of government; in this respect, the US is not a system of MLG (because clearly identifiable levels, at least in the sense of a ‘territorial level of governance,’ are missing), whilst the EU is such a system. This is a core issue and will represent food for thought for all scholars studying IGR in the two systems, and especially for comparatists engaged in cross-continental analysis. In developing the themes and arguments of her essay, Sbragia expands these points, reflecting not only at the level of the theoretical models through which to analyse the two politico-institutional systems, but also at the ‘meta-level’ of the different ‘cognitive maps’ employed by European and American scholars when investigating the two polities.

In Chapter 3, Toonen attempts to bridge the two streams of research; ‘American’ IGR and ‘European’ MLG. He revisits the historical evolution
of the EU polity over the last three decades, highlighting the centrality of the European regional policy and the new regionalism. He explores the rapid, indeed dramatic transformation of the European polity when compared to the stable US institutional system, providing the empirical evidence from which the notion of MLG originated and evolved into a field of research per se. By adopting a comparative ‘transatlantic’ perspective in examining the interplay between ideas and facts as regards the evolution of the notion of MLG in Europe, Toonen suggests how theoretical frames adopted for the analysis of IGR in the US (see particularly Wright 1990, and the chapters by Agranoff and by Wright, Stenberg and Cho, this volume) might be applied to the study of EU MLG. The notions of intergovernmental constitution, intergovernmental system and intergovernmental management are at the core of the proposed framework. The proposal advanced by Toonen may constructively inform the European debate and nudge it to progress in new and innovative ways. It may also provide an added benefit of cross-fertilization; adding to the American debate through allowing the findings of studies of EU MLG to be set out in a more accessible way for scholars engaged in research on IGR in the US. An application of the proposed framework of analysis is in the chapter by Steen and Toonen contained in the accompanying volume to this book (Steen and Toonen 2010).

Robert Agranoff’s magisterial review of the literature in Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the transformations of IGR by looking at four major epochs of development:

1. legal and jurisdictional IGR;
2. welfare state interdependency;
3. government/nongovernmental organizations partnerships; and
4. network era IGR.

He argues that each ‘of these IGR phases emerged at different times in different countries, in some cases over centuries and in others over decades’ and that the ‘dominant paradigm, politics and policy emphasis, normative concerns, issues of adjudication, prevailing bureaucratic or administrative organization, major IGR transactional modes, and IGR style’ constitute the framework of analysis for the investigation of each phase (Agranoff, this volume); a specific focus on the case of mental disability serves for illustrating and deepening the proposed framework. A crucial conceptual point raised by Robert Agranoff, in our view, is that ‘in practice one phase does not replace another, but creates overlays of simultaneous action’ and ‘[t]o say that in IGR officials now work in NGO partnerships or networks is to stop short of what is important, inasmuch as each era’s dominant paradigm,
policy emphasis, normative concerns, judicial concerns, bureaucratic organization, IGR transactions, and IGR style *cumulate and remain alive*. Replacement is not in order. That has not happened despite the fact that in the four are analytical categories they are very much alive in the real world. That means officials must constantly think across the boxes' (Agranoff, this volume, emphasis added). The work is conceptual, and spans an array of countries, providing indications for future comparative studies aimed at deepening the proposed conceptualization ‘in action’ in different countries; for example, it would be interesting to go in depth into the transformations of IGR that occurred in ‘centralistic’ Napoleonic states (for a recent overview, see Ongaro 2008 and 2009) like France, Italy or Spain. Agranoff’s chapter is a major contribution to the theoretical literature and it promises to stimulate significant new research in the field of IGR.

Agranoff’s conceptualization of IGR governance in the network era provides a link to Chapter 5 by Farrelly, Jeffares and Skelcher. Their contribution approaches the topic from the perspective of a discursive analysis of democracy in network governance: ‘Democratic network governance . . . becomes the study of the way in which the core challenges of democratic practice are addressed – how is legitimacy awarded, by what mechanisms are decisions reached, and how is accountability enabled?’ (Farrelly et al., this volume). They revisit and apply to local level public policy analysis three approaches to discourse analysis (argumentative, intersubjectivity, and genre analysis), thus illustrating how these approaches ‘can be used to gain insights into the sets of ideas and causal theories that inform the way in which actors engage with democracy under conditions of network governance . . . It provides a way of establishing how coalitions of actors are held together through common narratives, based on underlying ideas and theories’ (Farrelly et al., this volume). The implications for both MLG and IGR studies are discussed. They argue that:

The value for the study of MLG/IGR is to complement existing forms of analysis by opening up the communicative and ideational aspects of interactions between levels of government and other actors. For example, it can help to illuminate the different ways in which actors at different levels in a system of governance frame the world in which they operate . . . The potential and limitations of policy processes in multi-level systems is not just a matter of economically-motivated behaviour, nor of the pursuit of political advantage, but is also shaped by the way in which possibilities for action are enabled and constrained through the power of ideas and their relationship to sets of theories that frame the way actors understand the world around them (Farrelly et al., this volume).

This perspective then leads into the final chapters of the book. In these chapters we focus more directly on the two respective sides of the Atlantic. The
essay by Wright, Stenberg and Cho (Chapter 6) examines the evolution of American IGR, IGM and federalism, three established concepts that have helped to frame governance and management thinking for several decades. The authors have undertaken the systematic exploration of all papers on the topic that have appeared in the ASPA (American Society for Public Administration) journal, Public Administration Review. This chapter provides a major analysis of the relevant literature, one that gives depth and density to the study of this topic, providing a benchmark for future works, since ‘[l]eadership articles across 67 volumes offer lessons for theory and practice, research and applications, information and instruction’ (Wright et al., this volume). The chapter is also a fascinating journey through the administrative history of the US from the important perspective of IGR, exploring the dynamics transforming the nature of US federalism. Consequent to this, it is a powerful lens through which to read the contemporary debate in public administration, which emphasizes the notions of governance, collaboration and networking. One ‘aim of this essay . . . is to explore the antecedents and foundation stones on which the triumvirate of governance-collaboration-networking is erected’ and the new questions that arise. That is:

First, governance, collaboration, and networking stress processes. Where do institutional capacity, democratic accountability, and performance responsibility fit in? Second, intergovernmental and multi-level approaches stress cooperation and lean toward bottom-up approaches. Yet contemporary IGR in the United States has currently been characterized as coercive federalism that features regulations, unfunded mandates, and preemptions of a top-down nature. Where is the intersection of and balance between subnational autonomy and devolution with increased centralization? (Wright et al., this volume).

In this way the chapter provides a theoretical and contextual link between the works of the last few decades, leading to the kind of analysis, both empirical and theoretical, that will be central to an understanding of the topic in the years ahead. The authors argue that ‘IGR offers itself as a promising, not an obsolete, concept for continued attention and utility in the field of public administration in the United States and beyond’ (Wright et al., this volume).

The chapter by Piattoni (Chapter 7) provides a powerful review of the literature of European Union MLG. Although MLG is (or aspires to be) a paradigm or at least a model of analysis applicable in a universal way (beyond the EU), the development of MLG studies and the politico-institutional and public policy transformations of the EU have in many respects co-evolved. The MLG literature is a relatively recent stream, when compared to the ‘mature’ American stream of IGR literature. The work of Piattoni, however, has the merit of ‘unbundling’ the different threads (like
implementation literature) that link it to older fields of work (for example Pressman and Wildavsky 1973), as well as to a range of seminal works, like those by March and Olsen on the integration between democratic theory and organization theory, or by R.A.W. Rhodes on policy networks. She also demonstrates the links to important related schools of thought such as the Scandinavian and the Dutch schools of organization theory. The chapter highlights key theoretical issues in the MLG stream, and provides a major overview of the MLG scientific debate.

The final chapter is by Adrienne Héritier and it addresses a key issue: how policy decisions are made in the EU MLG system, by providing an innovative interpretation of the linkages between ‘horizontal decision-making among sovereign states on the one hand and vertical decision-making across supranational, national and subnational levels on the other’ (Héritier, this volume). This essay also brings together two streams of literature that had often been distinct; intergovernmental decision-making in international relations and decision-making across levels in federalist states, the latter being part of IGR studies, whilst the former belonged to another area of social science research. It then applies this analysis to a discussion of the EU polity and MLG. The chapter follows significant elements of rational choice institutionalism and explores how this theoretical approach may prove useful in the study of the EU (see also Peters 1999). The chapter continues by considering a specific mechanism triggered by the intersection of intergovernmental decision-making and MLG in the EU, that is, political and economic regulatory competition among actors at the horizontal level. Héritier then elaborates a model of analysis of the dynamics of public policy-making in the EU that takes into account the peculiarity of the EU governance system ‘which simultaneously incorporates traditional national governments and the decision-making process of the EU’ (Sbragia 2002, cited in Piattoni, this volume). The work of Adrienne Héritier thus provides an original contribution to the study of how the unique EU system produces policy decisions, and why ‘European regulation tends to lack coherence and acquire the features of a policy patchwork’ (Héritier, this volume). Besides its intrinsic value, the chapter by Adrienne Héritier is also a powerful reminder of the importance and fruitfulness of considering horizontal intergovernmental relations systematically when studying MLG/IGR systems, a perspective which is often advocated but much more limitedly carried out.

FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the aims of this book and its companion volume is to clarify the current position of academic research in these fields and prepare the
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ground to recommend fields and topics for future research. The theoretical and empirical work in these two volumes would suggest the need for a broad-scope research agenda from a public administration perspective to reflect on the themes of governance and intergovernmental relations. It requires an agenda covering those major areas that have so far been under-researched, as well as work linking those distinct fields identified in these volumes, that is there is a need to join together those strands of political science that began apart or unravelled over the years, and there is a need to seek the coherence that often lies dormant within our separate fields of study.

A public administration perspective clearly suggests both a continuing series of research projects charting and analysing the administrative reforms of EU institutions, and new areas of investigation. There is a long academic history engaged in this type of approach (see for example Peterson and Shackleton 2002), but it needs to be deepened and added to in a comparative way, seeking comparisons and contrasts with the mature federal structures of the US, exploring overlaps and lessons that may be learned from each other. An example of how this may proceed is provided by the systematic attempt by Carolyn Ban to investigate the joint effects of administrative reforms and enlargement on personnel management in the European Commission (2008, 2009, http://www.pitt.edu/~cban/). Projects that take a systematic approach and incorporate a comparative approach will add a great deal to our knowledge in this field.

At the national level the administrative reforms occurring in European countries are the subject of a plethora of academic investigations, including a greater number of comparative studies. Indeed, the study of the EU from a public administration perspective encompasses a growing literature on public management reform with a repertoire of conceptual tools. Those who study Europe, however, have some way to go before they match US colleagues in interchangeably studying the EU bureaucracies and the various national public administrations. This is even more the case if we focus administrative interaction among the bureaucratic bodies of the European Union and those of the member states, a relatively under-investigated area in Europe when contrasted with the US. The question of administrative interaction in the European Union is an essential dimension of the more general debate about MLG in Europe. Closer ties between various sub-groups of public bodies, for example national functional agencies that cooperate with their homologues in transnational networks, may, at the same time, bolster (supranational, transnational) integration and national disintegration as national bodies are getting more distant from their national practices and lose their emplacement in national structures.
More broadly, substantiating the notion of the European Administrative Space appears a goal far from being achieved. This perspective requires a major joint intellectual effort, as Pollitt argues:

One longer term strategic vision which I would myself like to add is that public management scholars could get together to formulate an even more ambitious project – one that compares the different ‘families’ of countries or ‘traditions’ of administration. Thus we might envisage a broad comparison of the Napoleonic systems with the Scandinavian systems, the post-Communist states of Eastern Europe, Germanic federalism and British centralism. This would require a team effort and substantial funding, but it would give substance and depth to what has hitherto been a prominent but somewhat intangible concept, that of a ‘European administrative space’ (Pollitt 2009, preface).

Attempts at substantiating the notion of European administrative space include European-wide joint research efforts on key themes like that of convergence of administrative systems (Olsen, 2006), or that of coordination in the public sector. Coordination is a topic as old as public administration (Peters 1998), although in the EU polity-in-the-making, differently from the US, it may also be interconnected to the topic of European integration (‘coordination and integration perspective’), at both system-level and individual public policies level. An exemplar of comparative research in this area is Bouckaert, Peters and Verhoest (2010), that investigates coordination in the public sector of many European states as well as the US, but not the EU: exploring the potential of their approach to the study of coordination when applied to the EU level appears to be a promising path of investigation.

A related theme is that of the agencification of the public sector (Pollitt and Talbot 2004; Pollitt et al. 2004). The dismantling of ‘monolithic’ public bureaucracies through structural disaggregation and the establishment of public agencies is a major trend (and one of the main causes for a higher need of coordination in the public sector). Investigating the forms of autonomy of public agencies, the patterns of steering and control, the organizational development and the ultimate impact of public agencies on public policymaking is another major area for research. A major difference here is that in most (but not all, for an exception consider the Swedish case, Pierre 2004) European states as well as at the EU level the expansion in number and functions of public agencies is a relatively novel phenomenon, whilst public agencies have populated the US landscape since the very beginning of the establishment of the American administrative system. In this area too, it seems that research work in the field of public administration at the national level is nourishing subsequent research projects aimed at investigating the same phenomenon, namely public agencies, at the EU level.

Finally, but importantly, the theme of governance broadly intended
should be the target of research, an example being the work by Liesbet Hooghe (2001), who investigated the manifold visions of EU governance, by adopting a mild social constructivist approach.

A crucial step for this ambitious, broad-scope, integrated research agenda to be brought to existence is the systematic collection, structuring and analysis of data on the phenomena to be investigated: a sort of Observatory is what we envision, an instrument for the interconnection of research teams sharing data and instruments of analysis, and open to diverse angles (perspectives, approaches, underlying rationale) in the theoretical interpretations. It should be a pluralistic network, characterized by certain shared values and beliefs, about the substantive value of the research for the development of the public sector and the progress of its responsiveness to society, and about the significance of the public sector for the society at large; it should also be characterized by certain ‘procedural’ values about the importance of collecting data in a homogeneous way, structuring them according to different frameworks (even though in general for the individual researcher engaged in such effort not all will be equally convincing and worthwhile), and sharing the data; all this for the ultimate sake of the progress of a systematic knowledge of the dynamics and the deeper transformations of the public sector.

NOTE

1. See the academic network named ‘COBRA’ (COmparative data Base for Research and Analysis) and the European project ‘Comparative Research In Public Sector Organization’ (CRIPO – funded by the European Science Foundation) focused on the themes of coordination in the public sector and of the autonomization and the steering and control of public agencies, both national-level agencies and the EU agencies.

REFERENCES

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