

## Book Review

### **The Limits to Governance. The Challenge of Policy-making for the New Life Sciences**

**Catherine Lyall, Theo Papaioannou and James Smith (eds.)  
Ashgate, 2009<sup>1</sup>**

URSULA NAUE<sup>2</sup>

*The Limits to Governance* is an edited volume that questions “conventional notions of governance in response to calls for more critical debate and guidance on its application in specific policy areas such as the life sciences”. The volume is the output of the interdisciplinary research programme of the ESRC Innogen Centre at the University of Edinburgh, building on an earlier volume published by the Innogen, *New Modes of Governance*.<sup>3</sup> The starting point – as stated in the preface – was the “recognition that the multifaceted policy and regulatory situation that applies to the life sciences presents a paradox: at the core of the problems lies the fact that the life sciences do still require a considerable degree of government-led regulation which runs counter to the prevailing shift towards decentralized governance.” Hence, the government-governance relationship and top-down or/and bottom-up approaches towards governance through and of the life sciences (particularly genomics) lie at the heart of the volume.

The editors arrange 11 chapters – written by different authors with diverse scientific backgrounds – in three parts, along what the editors call the “government-governance continuum”. They argue that the ‘government-governance continuum’ is more appropriate to describe the situation with regard to the life sciences, with “different aspects of genomics technologies sitting at different points on this spectrum”.

Starting with ‘*Principles*’ in part 1, the authors contextualise the governance of the life sciences, discussing basic societal concepts such as justice, the relationship between the moral, the legal and the political, and the role of interests and values. In part 2, ‘*Processes*’, the continuum between – but also shift from – government to governance and the implications of bottom-up and top-down approaches towards the governance through and of the life sciences is the nexus between the chapters. Part 3, ‘*People*’, focuses on bottom-up and deliberative approaches to policy-making in the field of the life sciences. In structuring the volume in this way, the editors provide a multifaceted approach towards the governance of and through the life sciences and towards the discussion about the state’s role in framing and controlling debates about new technology and science.

Of particular importance is the notion of *governance* that is at the heart of the volume and formulated in the first chapter/introduction. Here, the editors outline the general approach towards governance regarding the life sciences. Governance is understood as an agenda with many complicating factors, which arise “from complex interactions between still-necessary, government based regulation and control and the main themes of the governance agenda, particularly the contrasting and sometimes incompatible

requirements for policy decisions to be evidence-based and at the same time for a greater degree of stakeholder engagement in decision-making". Governance – from this perspective – is viewed as a policy and regulatory *situation* and consequently, the focus of the analysis of governance is mainly on the role and position of political actor groups within the socio-political context.

In their chapters the editors refer to a great extent to Nikolas Rose's understanding of governance, focusing on the *outcome* "of all these interactions [of a range of political actors] and interdependencies: the self-organizing networks that arise out of the interactions between a variety of organizations".<sup>4</sup> This, of course, means also to focus on the role of political actor groups, but with an emphasis on *process*, agency and practice. And this, in turn, facilitates the discussion about governance in the field of the life sciences, which deals with the state as a "controlling and enabling *primus inter pares*" – with a focus on evolving networks and on interaction among diverse political actor groups. The "challenges of policy-making for the New Life Sciences" – the volume's subtitle – then, do not seem to point to a 'paradox' (as mentioned above). Rather, they point to the new possibilities and evolving structures within the concept, as well as to the process and the practice of governance – contextualised by the state's ability to adapt to external changes.<sup>5</sup>

The edited volume is a "mix of theoretical, empirical and case study approaches" which deal with the limits to governance at different levels. In part 1, the authors discuss 'joined up' policies of government mediated by the democratic engagement of citizens (i.e. the relationship between governance and justice related to challenges of genomics), and a model of 'reflexive' governance, meaning the development of policies acceptable to different stakeholders (case study UK Biobank). Also, legitimate and morally alive legislation (case study HFEA 1990, Human Fertility and Embryology Act 1990) is discussed in part 1. In part 2, the evolution of processes along the government-governance continuum is exemplified and discussed by way of four country/regional case studies (regulation of biopharmaceutical R&D in the US; questions of biosecurity in the UK; governance of technology as distanced from the state in developing countries; and challenges to the analysis of deeper contextual realities behind various institutional and policy responses to governance mechanisms for biotechnology in southern African countries). Part 3 examines the challenges linked to the involvement of different actor groups in policy-making processes (such as advocacy organizations' involvement in the management of biomedical research, and the role of NGOs in GM crops debates). In the last chapter – although situated within part 3 of the book – the editors provide a summary of the preceding chapters and a conclusion. Titled 'Governance in action in the life sciences: Some lessons for policy', it summarises the challenges to policy-making, namely the interrelationship between command and control styles of regulation (states), and deliberation and empowerment (diverse political actor groups). This, in the editors' view, demonstrates the "complex set of relationships between government and governance which influence all areas of science and innovation policy".

In this context, it is necessary to examine the editors' understanding of *government* along the continuum between government at the one end and governance at the other.

Government is understood as coercion (Figure 1.1, p. 6) and associated with control and command styles of regulation (p. 261). On page 262, however, the editors present government in terms of outputs (such as legal instruments). In doing so, it seems that the editors question their own notion of a continuum between government and governance. In every governance situation, legal instruments exist – mainly as outcomes of governance processes. To understand *government* in terms of regulatory mechanisms, together with *governance* as the deliberative process of negotiating, debating and agreeing upon certain legal instruments and political practices seems to be an alternative for understanding the *government-governance continuum*.

In the concluding chapter, the editors specify four lessons for policy – derived from the examples of *governance in action* described in the book: first, governance is dynamic (governance as process); second, governance is context dependent (regarding space, but also regarding (policy) content); third, governance is political (policy tools reflect cultural and political norms, governance engages politically at multiple levels and in multiple ways; and fourth, governance cannot stand alone (successful governance processes require engagement with government and the political state). This leads to the editors' conclusion that "governance can only exist in relation to the state" which overlaps with my argument formulated above.

In the first chapter the editors outline the aim of the book, namely to provide "a critique of the new governance agenda for science and innovation in the context of the life sciences, and particularly genomics". The editors and authors achieve this effectively by discussing diverse case studies related to and aspects of governance of and through the life sciences. This volume is a substantive and timely contribution to the discussion of governance as a socio-political concept and governance as a socio-political practice. The book is recommended to political scientists, STS scholars, sociologists and cultural anthropologists, but also to policy advisors and persons working in the field of public policy concerning the life sciences.

On the basis of the book's findings, the editors argue in the last sentence of the volume, "a more creative set of alternatives may emerge". It should be the task of one of the next books of the ESRC Innogen Centre at the University of Edinburgh or any other group researching the field of governance to contribute to this desideratum.

---

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Lyall, Theo Papaioannou and James Smith (eds.). 2009. *The Limits to Governance. The Challenge of Policy-making for the new Life Sciences*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate. xvi + 284 pages. Hardback £60.00 (online £54.00), ISBN: 978-0-7546-7508-2. Also available as an eBook (ISBN: 978-0-7546-9842-5).

<sup>2</sup> Correspondence to: [ursula.naue@univie.ac.at](mailto:ursula.naue@univie.ac.at)

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Lyall and Joyce Tait (eds.). 2005. *New Modes of Governance. Developing an Integrated Policy Approach to Science, Technology, Risk and the Environment*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolas Rose. 2000. *Powers of Freedom. Reframing political thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 17.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Pierre. 2000. Introduction: Understanding Governance. In *Debating Governance. Authority, Steering, and Democracy*. Jon Pierre (ed.). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press: 3.