23. Exogeneity and convergence in policy formulation: contested theories, approaches and perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, scholarship into policy formulation has been strongly influenced by Weberian-legal-rationalist conceptions of bureaucracy. At the apex of bureaucratic hierarchies, political leadership and senior bureaucrats formulate policy, while ministries and other organs of the state manage functional issues associated with implementation and day-to-day administration (Bach, 2012). Policy scientists have thus largely focused their theory building and analytical efforts on a generic set of elite bureaucratic actors: rationalist functionaries that manage the policy formulation process, control information inputs, structure and interpret the policy problem, and provide frameworks of analysis for their management and political accommodation (Kay, 2011; Reimann, 1973; Ritzer, 1975). Much scholarly effort has therefore focused on the sources of policy advice and the information directed at senior policy makers, and how this advice is filtered, utilized, disseminated and impacts policy outcomes (Craft & Howlett, 2012; Maley, 2000; Rich, 1997; Verschuere, 2009). A similar literature has focused on elite policy knowledge and its impact on policy formulation, problem definition and policy design, highlighting biases in the use of instrumental, technical and scientific knowledge at the expense of other social, political and economic knowledge (community, participatory, stakeholder knowledge sources) (Daviter, 2015; Fischer, 2003; Freeman & Sturdy, 2014; Mead, 2015; Oh, 1997; Radaelli, 1995; Weiss & Gruber, 1984). Still other approaches have focused on mapping the Weberian legal-procedural contours of the policy-making process, highlighting the political relations between actors (legislators, lobbyists, analysts) and institutions that produce policy (legislative bodies, the executive, bureaucracy, political coalitions), and the juridical frameworks that facilitate the implementation of policy and its operation (laws, regulations, institutions, procedures) (Hill, 1997; James & Jorgensen, 2009, p. 142).

Such Weberian-inspired approaches to understanding policy formulation, however, have become increasingly problematic. In large part, this reflects a structural reconfiguration in the nature of political organization – in particular, the movement from government to governance (Levi-Faur, 2016; Rhodes & Rhodes, 1996; Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992). The emergence of the post-Weberian state has transformed the nature of government and the location of political authority, and with it the domains within which policy formulation occurs and the processes by which policy is made. Centralized, hierarchal bureaucracies that transmit policy decisions downwards through cascading processes of command and control have been increasingly disrupted by policy processes that span across sectors, issue areas, professional networks, institutions and geographical space. These reflect the emergence of transnational policy regimes that govern increasingly complex exchange relations; for example, trade, product certification, food safety standards (handling, storage, transportation), food tracing regimes, product and manufacturing standards (chemicals, pharmaceuticals, electrical components), toxic waste management, nuclear safety, phytosanitary standards, and various enforcement regimes associated with human trafficking, drugs, child exploitation and criminality, among many others. Policy formulation, in other words, has passed increasingly from the hands of senior bureaucrats and centralized bureaucracies into more complex, diffuse and decentred policy environments. In the post-Weberian state, political management is attained through the use of 'negative' instruments – coordination, political delegation and regulation – rather than 'positive' instruments associated with direct control and intervention (Balla, 2011; Jayasuriya, 2005; Majone, 1997).

These developments have had important consequences, transforming both the location of policy making and the sources of policy-making knowledge. Relatively closed, national systems of policy formulation in which knowledge inputs were managed and filtered through endogenous stratums of policy mandarins and internal bureaucratic expertise have largely dissipated. Increasingly, policy making and the sources of policy knowledge reflect greater levels of exogeneity, where sites of expertise and knowledge inputs are often extraneous and situated in specialist communities of practice or complex networks of technicians, advocacy groups and civil society. Policy formulation associated with competition practices, regulatory reform, tax, trade facilitation, corporate governance, innovation, science and technology, industry policy and numerous others, for example, are as likely to be based on policy knowledge filtered through the technical committees of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Trade Organization or the scientific committees of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) as they are on policy knowledge held by senior bureaucrats of the relevant national ministries (Finnemore & Barnett, 2004). Macroeconomic policy too is just as likely to emanate from ideational perspectives filtered through organizations like the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank as it is the national treasury. Indeed, policy formulation in respect of bank capital adequacy ratios, macroprudential regulatory standards, financial compliance and enforcement regimes, and reporting and transparency standards increasingly reflects the standards and policy positions mediated by the BIS, while the ideational perspectives of central bankers towards monetary policy, interest rates and currency valuations are largely derived through the collective views forged at BIS gatherings and annual meetings at Jackson Hole. Similarly, the policy regimes on which accounting and finance practices now rest (how financial assets, liabilities and contingencies are counted; reporting and disclosure requirements; financial forecasting methods; and the systems of classification by which assets are allocated to specific categories) now emanate largely from organizations such as the International Standards Accounting Board (IASB) rather than from national statistical bureaus or accounting offices (Carroll & Jarvis, 2013; Koppell, 2010).

By their very nature, post-Weberian governance regimes thus reflect an existential movement from *endo*geneity to *exo*geneity in policy making and policy knowledge, a process that has been coterminous with the rescaling of governance across geographic space but also across increasingly complex, diffuse sets of knowledge communities, stakeholders, practitioners and civil society organizations.

Post-Weberian governance systems thus display three dominant and ubiquitous trends: first, processes of transnationalization in terms of the sources of policy knowledge; second, a repositioning of the role of government in relation to policy formulation; and third, the dislocation of government and bureaucracy from the apex of policy making as non-governmental bodies, private associations and professional networks play an increasingly important role in policy development and standards-setting (Büthe & Mattli, 2013; Colebatch, 2006; Kooiman, 2008; Koppell, 2010; Radin, 2000).

These observations have important implications for how we understand policy formulation, who makes it, why and how. It also suggests the need to reframe our theoretical lenses and focus on the processes associated with the transmission of policy knowledge, how and through what conduits policy knowledge is diffused, how policy knowledge is learned and internalized within specific national and institutional contexts, and why.

In this chapter I address the increasing influence of exogeneity on policy formulation. I do so by constructing a series of heuristic typologies as a means of organizing the now voluminous literature that has arisen to theorize and explain these trends, the new contexts of policy formulation, the transfer of policy knowledge across geographic space, the transnational nature of policy learning, and the structural forces propelling this change. These literatures are expansive, indeed discursive, but singular in their attempt to grapple with the implications of post-Weberian governance systems for political organization and policy making. Indeed, a core commonality across the literature is the broad notion of diffusion, precipitating what various authors have termed the transplantation of 'regulatory capitalism', 'neoliberal governmentality' or 'governance without government' – processes which are generating a larger, overreaching tendency towards policy convergence (Cao, 2012; Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012; Levi-Faur, 2005; Levi-Faur et al., 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2015; Pollitt, 2001; Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992). That is, processes of policy diffusion and transfer lead ultimately to an increasing sameness of policy approaches, or what Knill terms a 'general expectation of cross-national policy convergence' (Knill, 2005, p. 764). Increasing degrees of exogeneity in policy formulation, in other words, embed similar frameworks, policy practices and policy approaches across spatial and institutional contexts, creating potentially greater levels of similarity and convergence over time.

These debates feature centrally in much of the literature surrounding post-Weberian governance systems. However, while observations about increasing levels of exogeneity have generally been accepted as an increasingly important aspect of policy knowledge and policy formulation, the relationship between exogeneity and convergence remains problematic, generating a sub-set of literatures and debates about the extent to which convergence in terms of institutional forms, policy design and governance outcomes can be observed (see Goldfinch & Wallis, 2010; Pollitt, 2001):

> while it is now widely acknowledged that the boundaries between jurisdictions and policymaking sites are becoming more porous, that policy learning and transfer have become continuous (if not endemic) processes, and that the rate of transnational policy diffusion is accelerating, there are unresolved debates around whether these processes are driving 'convergence' in policy regimes; whether they imply a fundamental challenge to, or reconstruction of, conventional sources of (national) political authority; and whether they are most appropriately understood in terms of 'network' or 'restructuring' ontologies. (Peck & Theodore, 2015, p. 4)

Despite this observation, much of the debate about the relocation of sites of policy formulation and sources of policy knowledge remain synonymous with theory building and empirical investigation of the extent to which this is leading to cross-national policy convergence. These literatures I thus treat collectively as a dominant set of approaches that explore three fundamental and interrelated puzzles: (1) the implications of increasing exogeneity on policy formulation in terms of policy learning, diffusion and policy transfer; (2) the implications of exogeneity on new and emerging modes of governance; and (3) the relationship between exogeneity and convergence.

I organize the literature into three typologies which I characterize as (1) the spread of neoliberal governmentality; (2) the globalization of policy formulation; and (3) policy formulation through policy transfer and ideational diffusion. While each of these perspectives is treated discretely for purposes of analysis, in reality the boundaries between such perspectives are blurred and represent a vexed intellectual-theoretical continuum.

THE SPREAD OF NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENTALITY

A now common and expansive series of perspectives attempting to delineate those forces causing convergence and relocation in the sites of policy formulation derives from what we might broadly term a critical political economy literature. This literature identifies changing capitalist modes of production and accumulation – specifically, the transformation from Fordist to post-Fordist (or flexible) regimes of accumulation – as instrumental drivers forcing states to respond in broadly similar policy terms to increased competition for capital (Amin, 1994; Cahill, 2014; Harvey, 1990; Hay, 2004; Jessop, 2002). In the post-war era, for example, the Keynesian state enjoyed relative insularity from highly mobile capital by controlling market access through mercantilist trade and investment practices (protectionist measures that included tariffs, quotas, closed investment and financial regimes, or capital account measures limiting convertibility and profit repatriation). The insular nature of such state-based systems of national capitalism allowed for the instrumental management of core contradictory forces or competing interests, in effect allowing the state to strike bargains with labour and capital (Gilpin & Gilpin, 2001; Shields et al., 2011). While the particular policy configurations varied between states, in essence they all focused on similar policy goals: orchestrating labour compliance and productivity increases in order to support returns on capital; commitments from capital to sustain investment levels in order to support employment, innovation and economic growth; state reciprocity for commitments from labour in terms of policy instruments supporting social protection arrangements (unemployment insurance, pensions, housing, health and education entitlements); modest wealth and income redistribution through progressive taxation; and policy regimes to reward capital in terms of tax concessions on investment (Brenner, 2003; Cahill, 2014; Harvey, 2005; Majone, 1997).

Over the last several decades, however, this model has been increasingly eroded, in part because of the increasingly porous nature of the nation-state which has witnessed systems of discrete national-capitalisms replaced with international markets, and in part because of ideational attacks upon the social democratic nature of state-labour-capital relations under Keynesian systems of social-political and economic management. The emergence of new international markets, in particular the spread of capitalist market-based relations to Asia, Latin America and Africa, combined with the emergence of an increasingly globalized liberal trade regime, deepening capital mobility and transnational investment, has fundamentally transformed the international political economy, intensifying inter-state competition for capital, industry and jobs (Grieco & Ikenberry, 2003; Ruggie, 1982). States have thus been forced to respond in relatively similar policy terms, including:

- Capital account liberalization to facilitate inward foreign investment and profit repatriation.
- Liberalization of investment regimes including tariff reduction, and the removal or reduction of quotas and other non-tariff barriers to facilitate inward flows of capital.
- The construction of regulatory regimes to support private sector participation and encourage employment expansion.
- The provision of government guarantees to protect international capital and remove concerns associated with government expropriation.
- The establishment of independent regulatory agencies to reduce the possibility of government opportunism and political risk in terms of the treatment of foreign investment.

Such policy responses have become a standard means of creating regulatory environments designed to attract and facilitate foreign investment, enhance private sector participation in the economy, sustain employment growth and generate deeper economic engagement with international markets. Indeed, such policy stances have been supported through rapid growth in the adoption of bilateral trade and investment agreements, and multilaterally through growth in regional trade/investment partnerships and forums (Trans Pacific Partnership, Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and so on), as well as regional economic unions (North American Free Trade Association, ASEAN Economic Community, Latin American Free Trade Association, European Union). These mechanisms represent deepening elements of a broader fiat of neoliberal policy measures that have increasingly defined the menu of policy choices available to governments, including reducing national barriers that impede capital mobility, adopting non-discriminatory investment regimes in the treatment of foreign capital, and removing state protectionism/monopolies through deregulation, privatization and marketization. These are interrelated processes that serve to further integrate nation-states within the international economy (Carroll, 2014; Carroll & Jarvis, 2013; Jarvis, 2012).

At the same time, increasing competition for foreign capital has also forced governments to enhance the competitiveness of their policy regimes in order to carve out a comparative advantage relative to other states. Tax regimes, particularly as they apply to corporations, have been simplified, and taxes on corporate earnings rolled back in an attempt to encourage capital formation and new foreign investment. Similarly, the utilisation of tax policy incentives, including investment write-down provisions, the provision of establishment grants/allowances and the introduction of 'tax free holidays' have become increasingly standard policy instruments designed to lure or retain foreign capital (Cao, 2010; Murshed, 2001; Painter, 1995).

For critics, however, neoliberal policy approaches are not without cost. In favouring the interests of capital, such policy approaches may reduce the fiscal capacity of states and erode their ability to sustain welfare expenditures, directly provide public goods and services, or own industry and assets (Beck, 1999; Harvey, 2005; Jarvis, 2007; Mishra, 1999, p. 9). Waves of privatization – for example, the divestiture of state assets and deregulation of government monopolies in areas such as banking, telecommunications, utilities (water, sanitation, electricity) and infrastructure (airports, roads, railways, ports and so on) – have opened up various sectors to private (often foreign) investment and competition and in the process introduced new user-pay market dynamics. For critics, such developments reflect a reconfiguration in the relationship between the state and market, indeed between public versus private interests, which signals a diminished level of policy autonomy in terms of governments being able to devise and formulate policy specific to their own interests and the needs of citizens. Indeed, the increasing ubiquity of these types of policy approaches suggests a reordering in the relative power between national policy makers and global capital, or the emergence of what some theorists have termed a widening democratic deficit (Balla, 2011; Brenner et al., 2010; Peck et al., 2012; Yergin & Stanislaw, 2002). Policy formulation, in other words, while still the preserve of national governments, has witnessed a reduction in discretionary scope because of the structural nature of inter-state economic competition and the spread of global capitalist relations.

While structural changes in the nature of global market relations are commonly invoked as an explanation for the increasing ubiquity of neoliberal policy convergence – and indeed a main driver of policy formulation – this transformation has also been driven by changing ideational values. Specifically, post-war policies associated with Keynesian state-led economic management, in which governments played a central role in the economy through a combination of direct intervention, ownership and central planning, have been increasingly rejected since the late 1970s (Harvey, 2005; King, 2002). The adoption of ideological agendas that favour markets over government, and the preference for market mechanisms in the delivery of public goods and services, have changed what governments do and how they do it (Painter & Pierre, 2005). This can be observed in what Hood et al. (1999) note as the emergence of 'regulation inside of government', where the adoption of managerial practices relating to service levels and the audit of public expenditures is designed to align government with the practices of private market actors (Hood et al., 1999; Lodge & Wegrich, 2012, pp. 121–2). As Deem and Brehony observe:

> [The] characteristics of 'new managerialism' in [public] organizations include: the erasure of bureaucratic rule-following procedures; emphasising the primacy of management above all other activities; monitoring employee performance (and encouraging self-monitoring too); the attainment of financial and other targets; devising means of publicly auditing quality of service delivery and the development of quasi-markets for services. (Deem & Brehony, 2005, p. 220)

This shift represents a transition from public administration to public management, where performance accountability is used to set in place metrics of valuation that promote the marketization of government activities (O'Toole & Meier, 2011; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). These include the development of performance indicators, benchmarking, comparative rankings, and the use of 'activity-based costing' (ABC) accounting principles designed to assign to each activity a specific cost, identify the resource consumption of each actor/unit within an organization, and calculate the costs (including fixed overhead costs) in order to reflect the 'true' cost of service provision. As with the private sector, government activity is thus broken down into transactional inputs and outputs, which are then costed using ABC accounting principles and measured against performance metrics in order to assess levels of 'efficiency', 'value for money' in service provision or financial 'loss' (that is, waste and inefficiency) in the production of government services. The application of new public management practices thus extends market rationality into government activities, introducing notions of resource optimality through econometric costing of government service delivery, including the opportunity cost to government of providing certain services versus others, or the opportunity cost of government ownership of certain assets (real estate, a human resource office, consular offices and services, for example) compared to the benefits or cost efficiencies of divestiture and service delivery through other means (contracting out, privatization, public-private partnerships and so on) (Deem & Brehony, 2005, p. 220).

Critical political economy approaches thus understand the twin processes of neoliberal policy convergence and the increasing diffusion of post-Weberian governance systems as interlinked phenomena: structural changes in the organization of capitalist market relations and ideational changes towards the role of government and its relationship to the market. The former sees the emergence of a post-Fordist state as instrumental, compelling governments to adopt 'leaner and meaner' neoliberal policies in order to remain internationally attractive to capital. The latter understands the adoption of policy instruments such as marketization, privatization and a reduction in the size and presence of government in the economy as a preferred ideological objective (Leys, 2001). Convergence around neoliberal policy approaches is thus the outgrowth of deepening global forces associated with the spread of capitalist relations of production, the emergence of a common set of policy problems in terms of attracting capital, and broadly similar sets of policy responses which coalesce around core ideational values about the role of government vis-à-vis the market.

THE GLOBALIZATION OF POLICY FORMULATION

A second typology extending the convergence thesis and the forces structuring policy formulation is situated around a large body of literature focused on globalization. Globalization refers to the notion that ideas, values, government organization and governance increasingly merge around similar sets of approaches and policy positions (Drezner, 2001). This literature, in essence, sees national borders, discrete national economies, languages, indeed cultures 'dissolving' and becoming more porous through a process of deepening interdependence. Driven in part by technological advances in communications and transportation technologies, most notably the advent of mass containerized shipping and air travel, interdependence across economic, political and social domains has deepened causing what Roland Robertson terms the 'compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole' (Robertson, 1992, p. 2). For globalization theorists, technological developments increasingly obliterate space and geography, enabling the dispersion of production systems, the construction of global value chains, and in turn the emergence of global markets for items as diverse as horticultural and food products, air conditioners, motor vehicles, luxury goods, and a vast array of services such as legal processing, accounting, payments, settlements and clearance systems, medical and educational services – among many others.

For globalization theorists these developments are important since they increasingly challenge geographic space and systems of national legal-territorial jurisprudence as the primary systems of governance through which economic and social activity are filtered. With ever increasing levels of human mobility, for example, crossing borders to purchase goods and services fundamentally changes market thresholds and thus the ability of governments to manage national economic domains – perhaps even dissolving economic sovereignty. For globalization theorists, the notion of a national market for Gucci, a Ford motor car, an electronic computer chip, hair dryers, a university degree or a heart-valve transplant is a historical anachronism which no longer captures the global context in which economic and social activity now occurs. Globalization is thus a transformative *zeitgeist* that levels national difference and produces increasing interdependencies (Held, 1999). Equally, the sense that national borders shield and contain specific approaches to the provision of public goods (health, education, pensions, unemployment insurance and so on), or specific national ideas or patterns of governmental conduct, is increasingly anachronistic for globalization theorists. The spread of ideas, international comparisons of service delivery, governance quality and governance outcomes increasingly reflect a global mindset that serves to distil common understandings of policy problems and forge similar policy perspectives and approaches, and leads to the transnational movement of ideas and best practices in the management of economic and social phenomena (Drezner, 2005).

While cruder globalization perspectives perhaps overstate the degree to which this may lead to a 'global village' or the dissolution of borders in their entirety, clearly the emergence of issue-based interdependencies (for example, cross-border crime, child exploitation, trade in illicit drugs, global climate change, the protection of endangered species, energy security, refugees, human rights, food security, student mobility, or the management of space junk and so on) is witnessing a preponderance of policy approaches formulated through collaborative coordination and the emergence of interdependent systems of governance (Held et al., 2005; Vidovich, 2004). As Stephen Ball notes, this is not a thesis about globalization and the 'hollowing out of the state' but 'rather a new modality of state power, agency, and social action and indeed a new form of state' built on exogeneity and interdependence as primary drivers of policy formulation (Ball, 2010, p. 14; Drezner, 2001, 2005; see also Hirst & Thompson, 1999). Globalization thus relocates sites of policy knowledge and policy formulation into diffuse interdependent spaces, in part because the complexity and resource requirements of managing global problems is beyond any one government, and in part because policy effectiveness rests in transboundary coordination and cooperation (Banks et al., 2005; Riedner, 2015).

POLICY FORMULATION THROUGH POLICY TRANSFER AND IDEATIONAL DIFFUSION

By far the most dominant set of perspectives capturing the rise of exogeneity on policy formulation has been the literature on policy convergence (Bennett, 1991; Drezner, 2005), policy diffusion (Dobbin et al., 2007; Elkins & Simmons, 2005; Gilardi, 2010) and the rise of international policy networks (Blanco et al., 2011; Cao, 2012; Grossmann, 2013; King, 2010) This literature broadly refers to the idea of policy transfer – 'a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in another time and/or place' (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, p. 344). This literature invokes two common explanations for policy transfer.

The first represents a neo-functionalist theoretical understanding of convergence by addressing the sociology of modern industrial organization and the similarities that arise in systems of socio-economic organization. Modernization, industrialization, urbanization and the transition to post-industrial society, for example, require certain institutional and organizational technologies in order to sustain their viability (see Bell, 1999; Galbraith, 1972; Hoogvelt, 2001; Rostow, 1971). The socio-economic processes of modernization, for instance, create ubiquitous policy and administrative challenges or problems: the requirements for efficiency and optimality (in terms of administrative organization, planning, resource allocation, urban management) and institutional capacities (technocratic managerialism, oversight and accountability in the delivery of public goods and services, and efficient and responsive governance systems able to manage increasingly complex, interlinked socio-economic phenomena) (Bennett, 1991, pp. 215–16). Convergence, in this sense, is driven by functional socio-economic imperatives; that is, industrialization, modernization and urbanization in one place or time is more or less similar to that of other places and times, producing broadly similar policy problems and responses, administrative, governance and organizational outcomes (Starke et al., 2008). Policy convergence thus reflects the functional imperative of specific systems of social organization: modernization and urbanization require high density living, urban planning, network services such as water, sanitation, electricity and public transport, and social technologies such as policing, civil protection (fire brigades, ambulatory services) and so on. Policy formulation thus converges not because of political or ideological design but simply because the needs of a particular socio-economic system throw up similar sets of requirements.

Related theoretical approaches also arise from organizational theory and Weberian conceptions of bureaucratization and rationalization, in which bureaucracy as an organizational form produces increasing levels of organizational homogeneity in terms of 'structure, culture, and output' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 147). The functional attributes sustaining modernization, in other words, have a 'levelling impact', where the 'logic of economism' (Ashley, 1983), the power of technology and the techno-scientific management of social and economic issues produce convergent tendencies in 'social structures . . . and public policies' (Ashley, 1983; Bennett, 1991, p. 216). As Levi-Faur notes, 'regulatory capitalism is a technological as much as a political order', a functional technology adopted as much because of its managerial efficiency (agentification, for example) as it is a conscious embrace of a system of political organization (2005, pp. 21–2).

A second, less functionalist, stream of theorizing stresses policy transfer as diffusion. The diffusion of ideas, policies and governance practices is not related to any specific socio-economic form of organization and thus the deterministic needs of a particular socio-political system, but rather from the simple spread and adoption of ideas. Unlike convergence approaches, policy diffusion is not an 'outcome but the flagship term for a large class of mechanisms and processes associated with a likely outcome' (Elkins & Simmons, 2005, p. 36). Policy diffusion can thus be thought of as both cause and effect: 'any pattern of successive adoptions of a policy' (as quoted in Elkins & Simmons, 2005, p. 36) but where the process of diffusion changes the probability of certain policies being adopted. As Stang and Soule note, 'the adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for remaining non-adopters' (as quoted in Elkins & Simmons, 2005, pp. 37–8), either through processes of agenda-setting, norm diffusion or relational circumstances where a state's move to adopt a certain policy prompts other states to follow. Whatever the cause or mechanism of diffusion, the point is that diffusion is characterized as a reflexive process and assumes no destination or end point, prescriptive organizational form or policy design – it is, for the most part, happenstance and results from a series of individual decisions to adopt certain policies and practices for reasons specific to each policy actor but in a universe where the decisions of policy actors impact the subsequent choices and decisions of other policy actors. Elkins and Simmons define this as 'uncoordinated interdependence' (2005, p. 38).

This non-functional approach to policy diffusion captures a now dominant theoretical approach in the policy transfer literature. Indeed, mapping the cascading impact of 'uncoordinated interdependence' has given rise to an academic industry with scholars categorizing the multifarious mechanisms of diffusion. By one count, for example, upwards of 'thirty distinct species of diffusion' were identified, ranging from cascading norm diffusion (Carroll & Jarvis, 2013; Jakobi, 2012) to policy learning (Meseguer, 2005; Meseguer & Gilardi, 2009), policy networks and knowledge communities (Cao, 2010, 2012), relational and conditional diffusion processes associated with geography and space (Obinger et al., 2013), and policy thresholds and tipping points (Vormedal, 2012). But as Shipan and Volden observe, while in the last 50 years over 1000 research articles have been published addressing policy diffusion, the 'key findings and lessons remain opaque if not inconclusive' (2012, p. 788). Indeed, even the most elemental hypotheses of policy transfer through learning has produced a literature which Fabrizio Gilardi observes 'has fallen short of providing compelling support for learning hypotheses' (2010, pp. 650–1). Rather, '[t]here is agreement that competition, learning, and social emulation are the main drivers of diffusion, but empirical evidence usually is ambiguous and unable to discriminate convincingly among these different explanations' (Gilardi, 2010, p. 650; Voegtle et al., 2011).

The question thus remains: 'policies diffuse, but why?' (Gilardi, 2010, p. 650). More specifically, if the process of diffusion does not necessarily result in policy convergence but rather in a maze of different policy, governance, organizational and institutional outcomes, to what degree is the process of diffusion even significant? As Hall and Soskice (2013) observe, convergence overstates the case to which variation in forms of socio-political organization continue to be present. Rather than producing convergent outcomes, policy diffusion seems only important insofar as the ideas it generates are used in multiple ways, reconstituted in national or local policy domains and reformulated to suit specific domestic needs. Policy variation in the political economy of organizational types, policy design and governance systems thus still remain, albeit with some observable similarities (Hall & Soskice, 2001; see also Levi-Faur, 2006).

CONVERGENT DIVERSITY?

Various theorists have attempted to grapple with this apparent contradiction of convergence amid diversity. Pollit (2001), for example, has emphasized the conceptual fragility of convergence, stressing that it is analytically unable to capture the complexity of policy processes that occur at multiple levels, through multiple filters and actors, and across national and institutional spaces which produce a spectrum of convergent and divergent outcomes. Policy transfer and the language of convergence, in other words, often conceal ideological-political agendas in which agential actors are seeking to preserve or advance particular interests. The language of reform, increased government efficiency, deregulation or marketization, for example, might exist without an 'equivalent amount of action' in terms of implementation of these practices, or it may be embraced and celebrated in the rhetorical sense as political agendas to press for or resist change. Indeed, what might seem like the adoption of a similar institutional or policy design may in practice conceal fundamentally divergent on-the-ground institutional norms (Pollitt, 2001, p. 934).

Extending this notion, Goldfinch and Wallis (2010) stratify the idea of convergence along a continuum. On one end is the convergence of ideas (including paradigms, models, values and interpretations of policy approaches in terms of the relationship between state and market, the role of government and mechanisms of governance). In the middle are convergence around 'policy rhetoric', in which buzzwords, clichés and a specific language becomes the dominant discourse. Further along the continuum is convergence in legislation, organizational/institutional structures and policy design, in which organizational characteristics might be copied or transferred. On the other end is convergence around policy practice and implementation, in which styles of decision making, the methods of framing policy choices, and the ideas and values that inform them might be emulated and executed (Goldfinch & Wallis, 2010, pp. 1101–2). The point, of course, is that each level of potential convergence is subject to sets of differing actors and interests, socio-political environments, resource options, institutional legacies and broader socio-legal contexts that filter decisions, interpretations, and the broader play of ideas and ideological rationalities in terms of how they are interpreted, used and deployed. As Goldfinch and Wallis note, 'structures that seem similar at a distance may vary widely in practice' (2010, p. 1102).

Holzinger and Knill (2005) also address what they perceive as 'theoretical deficits in the study of convergence' by expanding its theoretical and analytical scope in order to understand both its multi-causality as well as the varying forms of convergence that are observed. Specifically, they differentiate between (a) the degree; (b) the direction; and (c) the scope of convergence. The degree of convergence refers to the similarity of policy outputs (the policies adopted by a government) and the policy outcomes (the actual effects of a policy in terms of goal achievement). The direction of convergence indicates the extent to which convergence coincides with an upward or downward shift of the mean from time t1 to t2. The mean can refer both to policy output and policy outcomes. Finally, the scope of convergence focuses on the absolute number of policy domains that are actually affected by a certain convergence mechanism(s); for example, the total number of countries and policy areas which demonstrate some form of convergence.

In Holzinger and Knill's schema, convergence is disaggregated so that the adoption of similar policy instruments designed to realize specific goals may appear broadly similar across multiple domains, while the policy outputs, that is, the actual achievements or attainment of the policy goals, can show substantial variation. As a result, convergence and divergence can inform the substance of particular policy domains and their appearance at one and the same time (Holzinger & Knill, 2005; Strebel & Widmer, 2012).

The theoretical schemas of Goldfinch, Wallis, Pollitt, Holzinger and Knill thus caution against the apparent convergence of policy formulation and governance practices amid a dynamic, complex and often contradictory set of processes. This might be why, for example, we can observe systemic convergence in post-Weberian governance practices – what Painter and Pierre note is the growing emphasis on market solutions to public management, where administrative reforms have often 'removed some of the policy capacity of the state by displacing political and institutional capacity downwards in the political system, outwards to agencies and NGOs, or upwards to transnational institutional systems' – at the same time as we see variation and non-convergence in the specific outcomes of these processes (Painter & Pierre, 2005, p. 1).

POLICY FORMULATION, EXOGENEITY AND CONVERGENCE

The three typologies addressed in this chapter cover a large literature that attempts to explain the global diffusion of post-Weberian governance systems and the relocation of sites of policy formulation, which may be contributing to convergence. While debates about the causality of exogeneity in policy formulation remain contested, ranging from theses of systemic transformation associated with the spread of capitalist relations of exchange, to more voluntaristic perspectives associated with ideational learning, institutional mimicry and the cross fertilization of ideas, few doubt the growing impact of exogeneity on policy formulation and that this will likely deepen in the years ahead (Marsh & Sharman, 2009; Meseguer, 2005). What perhaps is less apparent is the relationship of exogeneity to convergence, and the extent to which convergence is empirically significant. As this chapter has also attempted to highlight, the notion of convergence is analytically fragile and requires much deeper theorization and investigation. The efforts of authors such as Pollitt (2001), Goldfinch and Wallis (2010), Knill (2005) and Holzinger and Knill (2005), however, have begun this task, adding to the analytical agility of the concept and offering practical ways of disentangling convergence in policy design from that in policy outputs, policy impact or achievements. In doing so, some of the problems associated with apparent policy convergence amid observable differences in empirical outcomes are now better understood, contributing to an on-going effort to explore the increasing role of exogeneity on policy formulation and convergence.

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