Reflexive Governance

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REFLEXIVE GOVERNANCE

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Reflexive governance denotes a mode of governance where feedback on multiple regulatory frameworks generates social learning processes that influence actors' core beliefs and norms (Dedeurwaerdere 2005; Voß et al. 2006; Brousseau et al. 2012). These processes complement political-administrative hierarchy and economic incentives as mechanisms for governance.

Two main models of reflexive governance have been developed to complement conventional state-based and market-based modes of governance, which rely respectively on the seminal works of Jürgen Habermas and Ulrich Beck. The model of Habermas (1998) was one of the first attempts to justify the **participation** of civil society actors in the governance of post-conventional societies, where democratic legitimacy is no longer built on the basis of common conventions shared by a group with a common history at the level of a nation or the belonging to a social class. Instead, democratic legitimacy is built through social learning processes among state and civil society actors based on open participation in the debates on new collective values and norms. This theory influenced experimentation with several deliberative processes, such as citizen juries, consultations with **nongovernmental organizations** (such as stakeholder consultations in the EU prior to the adoption of new regulations) and **global deliberative democracy** (such as stakeholder consultations and international United Nations conferences). A weakness of this first model is that social learning not always leads to the adoption of new policies at the level of the political-administrative hierarchy.

The second model was proposed by Ulrich Beck in the context of his work on the regulation of **risk society**. According to Beck (1992), the

building of efficient and legitimate rules for dealing with risks that might have important unanticipated side effects should involve so-called sub-politics, where nongovernmental actors (including social movements) are directly involved in social learning processes for solving collective action problems without relying on the administrative state.

Illustrations of sub-politics are direct negotiations between environmental associations and **business and corporations** (see **Private regimes**), to make corporate activities or products more sustainable, and the participation of representatives of **indigenous peoples and local communities** in meetings of international research federations (such as the meeting in Belem on ethnobotanical research in 1988 that led to a first formulation of the principles of "prior informed consent" in the **biodiversity regime**). An important strength of sub-politics is their direct impact on the strategic decisions of collective actors. An important weakness is the possible isolation of sub-politics from more encompassing issues and broader social groups.

The key lesson that can be drawn from this literature is that reflexive governance cannot be reduced to the cognitive aspect only (for example values and social identity play an important role in social learning, in addition to purely cognitive aspects such as providing the best argument and transparency of the debate). Instead, reflexive governance has to be analyzed as a social and political process of reframing our core collective values and norms when facing unprecedented unsustainability problems.

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