# Clarifying Multi-Level Governance

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**Abstract**
Despite its widespread use in European studies and beyond, the concept of multi-level governance (MLG) still suffers from a considerable degree of uncertainty as to its precise meaning, which in turn hinders the cumulative development of this research programme. In an attempt to stimulate a systematic methodological discussion of the idea of MLG, this article presents a critical reconstruction of the concept structured around three "axes of ambiguity"—the applicability of MLG beyond the European Union; the role of non-state actors; the focus on policy-making structures vs. processes—followed by a conceptual assessment and clarification strategy based on John Gerring's criterial framework. Building particularly on Gerring's criterion of causal utility, the article argues that the MLG concept is best clarified along the (not necessarily exclusive) lines of two theoretical directions emerging from the literature: MLG as a theory of state transformation, and MLG as a theory of public policy. For each of the two models, the criterial framework also indicates a number of corresponding conceptual shortcomings which MLG scholars should try to reduce as much as possible in future refinements of this idea.

# Clarifying Multi-Level Governance

## 1. Introduction

Since its first introduction by Gary Marks in the early 1990s, the concept of multi-level governance (MLG) has gained ever-increasing popularity.[1] Today MLG is not only the subject of a sizeable literature and an important heading in European Union (EU) studies textbooks, but also an established idea in European political and administrative circles, where it is often used as a benchmark for good practices in policy-making and implementation. In addition, MLG is increasingly employed outside of the boundaries of Europe (and European integration) as an analytical tool for, among others, federal polities and international organizations.

From the outset, however, the diffusion of MLG has been accompanied by considerable ambiguity as to the precise meaning of this concept. In part, this is no coincidence: definitional murkiness is, arguably, responsible for much of the popularity of MLG by making the latter "capable of being invoked in almost any situation," as Peters and Pierre (2004, 88) note. At the same time, however, lack of conceptual clarity is a problem for the MLG paradigm, for it deprives it of a clear language for the cumulative development of descriptive, normative, and above all causal arguments. Seen in this light, definitional uncertainty is probably among the

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[1] As a rough measure, consider the following results of Web of Science searches for items containing "multilevel governance" or "multi-level governance" in the title: 10 in 1995-99; 45 in 2000-04; 106 in 2005-09; 204 in 2010-14.

main culprits for the theoretical underdevelopment of MLG noted time and again by scholars.[2]

That MLG is in need of clarification is evident from the amount of effort that authors working with this concept routinely put into preliminary definitional discussions (for a small sample see Piattoni 2010; Bache 2012; Alcantara & Nelles 2014). Quite often, however, these attempts are self-defeating, since at best they do little more than restating the conceptual status quo, and at worst they add yet more definitions to the available bunch. To break what risks becoming a vicious circle, a more radical approach to MLG's conceptual problems is necessary; one based on a more explicit and systematic methodological reflection. This article aims to contribute to such reflection.

The article proceeds as follows: after summarizing the genesis of MLG in the next section, it presents, in section 3, an overview of the concept as it has developed since, structuring the account around three "axes of ambiguity" in its definition: the applicability beyond the EU, the role of nongovernmental actors, and the focus on structures vs. processes. From the MLG semantic space so obtained, two clarification strategies can follow, as sketched in section 4: a "language-focused" and a "scientific-ideal" one. After discarding the former as inappropriate for the case at hand, the article presents, in sections 5 and 6, a disambiguation approach based on John

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[2] Rosamond (2007, 129), for instance, sees MLG as "more an organizing metaphor than a theory," while for Jordan (2001, 194, italics in original) MLG is "an appealing *picture* of what the EU looks like, but is weak at explaining which levels are the most important and why, and what actually motivated the experiment in governance in the first place." Similarly, Blom-Hansen (2005, 635) calls MLG a "descriptively accurate model ... [which, however,] fails to specify why this should be the case ... [and] does not explain which actors, at which levels, will be causally important, and when."

Gerring's criterial framework, which culminates in the formulation of two ideal courses of action for the future development of MLG, corresponding to two theoretical models: MLG as a theory of state transformation, and MLG as a theory of (EU) public policy. Section 7 recaps and concludes.

## 2. The genesis of multi-level governance

The history of MLG has been told several times (e.g. Stephenson 2013), so only a summary is in order here. The term was coined by Gary Marks in the early 1990s (Marks 1992; 1993) to describe and account for a number of institutional and political transformations in the process of European integration.[3] First, the structural changes brought about by the 1986 Single European Act and the 1991 Maastricht treaty, which expanded the competences of common institutions and enhanced the EC/EU's supranational character in already integrated areas (for instance by expanding majority voting in the Council of Ministers). More important, however, were a number of changes in the specific area of regional policy introduced between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Among these were the increase of the structural funds budget, the creation of a new "cohesion fund," and the overhaul of the regional policy decision-making system, which increased both the Commission's planning powers and the regions' competences in the programming and implementation of structural policy (see also Hooghe 1996a).

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[3] It should be noted that in the same period parallel work was being done along similar lines by German scholars such as Beate Kohler-Koch (1995) and especially Fritz Scharpf (1993; 1994), who introduced the idea of *Mehrebenenpolitik* to capture the interactions between different governance levels and actors in the EU. Compared to Marks's work, however, these contributions put much less emphasis on the subnational level, and more importantly on the issue of conceptual innovation.

Taken together, these transformations generated new political and policy configurations in the EU which, Marks argued, could no longer be captured and explained by the hitherto dominant models of European integration, namely intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism. The former had been made obsolete by the supranational character of many of the abovementioned reforms. Neofunctionalism, however, did not fare much better, concentrated as it was on the "constitutional" and "history-making" dimension of European integration—a trait shared with intergovernmentalism—and the corresponding dualism between member states and supranational institutions. If the analyst instead expanded her focus to include the Union's workaday politics and policy-making, Marks continued, she would see a different type of political order, in which power was being transferred centrifugally from the member states upwards to Brussels but also downwards to regions, which were becoming prominent actors in the formulation and implementation of (in this case structural) policies.

The new form that European policy-making was taking was a fluid, non-hierarchical, uneven, and partly disorderly one, characterized by "continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers—supranational, national, regional, and local" (Marks 1993, 392). In this system, the state had lost its exclusive gatekeeping function between the domestic and supranational level. Instead, new networks and relationships were being established between regions and the Commission, whereby the latter would seek the former's assistance in implementing policies, and the former would participate in the latter's decision-making process, whether informally or through newly created official channels such as the Committee of the Regions.

At the same time, Marks argued, it would be a mistake to see MLG as yet another theory of the withering away of the state. While the latter's structures and bureaucracies are increasingly challenged—to the point that the Weberian model "reveals less and less about the realities of political power and decision-making in Western Europe" (Marks 1992, 223)—the state nonetheless remains an important player in the new web of policy negotiation and implementation; one which, however, is "enmeshed in a multitude of cross-level links" (Christiansen 1997, 68) and increasingly needs to compromise and collaborate with other actors and institutional levels (Marks 1992; Hooghe 1996b,).

## 3. Three axes of ambiguity

Once introduced in the European studies language, MLG caught on rapidly among scholars and practitioners, who began to apply the term not only to EU regional policy, but also and increasingly to other policy areas, and even political systems. As this happened, however, ambiguities as to MLG's attributes—some of which were already present in Marks's formulation—multiplied, making the concept fuzzier over time. Looking at the MLG literature as it has developed in the past two decades or so, such ambiguities can be summarized in three broad questions: the applicability of MLG beyond the EU; the role of non-state actors; finally, the focus on policy-making structures vs. processes.

*The first axis: Can MLG travel beyond the EU?*

Given its initial elaboration in the specific context of the EU's regional policy, the first question raised by MLG is what, of that context, belongs to the definition of the

concept, and what does not. Marks, Hooghe and Blank (1996) indicated early on that

MLG should be able to travel beyond cohesion policy, and to areas as different as the

single market, energy, and environmental policy, among others. MLG's applicability

to institutional settings other than the supranational European Union, however, has

remained unclear from the start. For the most part, Marks's early writings seem

sceptical in this respect. For one thing, MLG is presented time and again as part of a

process of transformation of the *western European* state. For another, and more

importantly, by framing MLG as an alternative to intergovernmentalism and

neofunctionalism, Marks locates his model quite explicitly within the specific

tradition of European integration theory.

Much of the MLG literature has since proceeded along these tracks, linking the

concept inextricably to the process and results of European integration. For instance,

George (2004, 108) sees MLG as just a "more sophisticated restatement" of

neofunctionalism—incidentally taking issue with Marks's own presentation of MLG

as an alternative to the latter. More generally, Kohler-Koch and Rittberger (2006, 33)

describe MLG as one of the many concepts emerged in the recent past "to grasp the

alleged *sui generis*-nature of the EU polity."

However, a decade or so after Marks's formulation of MLG, a more "generalist"

strand of scholarship appeared, which relaxed the concept's implicit supranational

requirement and applied it to settings as diverse as federations (Painter 2001),

international cooperation (Welch & Kennedy-Pipe 2004), and even unitary states

(Baldersheim & Ståhlberg 2002; Stegmann McCallion 2007). Interestingly, these

developments were accompanied by a broadening of the MLG idea by Marks himself

(and his co-author Liesbet Hooghe) to include "types" covering an institutional range

going from traditional federal systems to international regimes (Hooghe & Marks 2003).

Extra-EU applications of MLG have continued and expanded in recent years along the entire politico-institutional gamut—see for example Zürn (2010) on IGOs and Sbragia (2010) on regionalism—and most notably in the area of traditional federal studies, due to the growing popularity of the concept among North American scholars (e.g. Sutcliffe 2012; Papillon 2012; Alcantara & Nelles 2014).

*The second axis: What role for non-state actors?*

If uncertainties as to MLG's applicability beyond the EU stem from inconsistencies in the interpretation of the concept, the second axis of ambiguity results mostly from discrepancies between what MLG scholars preach and what they (often) practice, so to speak. When formally defining the concept, MLG scholars almost invariably identify, as a key component of this model, the presence of societal actors (primarily, but not only, non-governmental organizations) in the diffused system of exchange, negotiation, policy-making and implementation. So, for instance, Piattoni (2010, 84) contends that "the involvement of non-governmental actors in policy-making—from trade unions and employers' associations to NGOs and CSOs—is a necessary … condition for MLG," while for Peters and Pierre (2004, 77) MLG "emphasizes the role of satellite organizations, such as NGOs and agencies, which are not formally part of the governmental framework." This stress on non-state actors places MLG clearly within the broader "governance turn" in political science, which aims to capture, among other things, "the changing boundaries between public, private, and voluntary sectors, and to the changing role of the state" (Rhodes 2012, 33).

Beyond definitions, however, quite often the non-state component of MLG is relegated to a secondary role vis-à-vis the territorial one, if not ignored altogether. This is true in the first place of empirical applications of the concept (see for instance Ciaffi 2001; Bruszt 2008; and the empirical studies in Bache & Flinders 2004), but also of many theoretical elaborations of MLG, including those proposed over the years by Marks and his co-authors. For example, in their 2001 volume—perhaps the most systematic attempt to build a theory of MLG—Hooghe and Marks (2001, xi) all but ignore the non-state dimension, presenting from the start MLG simply as "the dispersion of authoritative decision making across multiple territorial levels." Similarly, in the already mentioned APSR article (Hooghe & Marks 2003) one finds hardly any trace of the role of non-governmental actors as an essential element of either type of MLG.

*The third axis: Structures or processes?*

A final axis of ambiguity concerns the degree of formality underpinning MLG, and particularly its territorial part. As discussed above, one of Marks's motives in formulating MLG was the need to move beyond "constitutional" analyses of the EU and capture instead the workaday dimension of European integration. This implied two distinct analytical shifts: one from the level of "history-making" decisions to that of the ordinary legislation and implementation taking place in between treaties. The other from the study of the formal structures of governance (whether at the constitutional or ordinary level of legislation) to the analysis of the entire process of policy-making and implementation, inclusive of all those factors—informal rules, routines, exchanges, bargaining, etc.—that are not exhausted by the letter of the law.

While the first analytical shift was mostly uncontroversial from the start, the second—from structures to processes—has remained quite ambiguous over the years. On the one hand, various parts of MLG scholarship have reaffirmed this emphasis on the "actual" dynamics of politics and policy-making. Multi-level governance, Peters and Pierre (2004, 75) observe, "is all about context, processes, and bargaining." Similarly, Zürn, Walti and Enderlein (2010, 4) claim that while analysing formal institutions

> helps to highlight the distribution (and reallocation) of policy competencies across different levels … it fails to capture the complexity of how jurisdictions and levels connect, interact and, most notably, overlap. It is this interconnectedness of decision arenas that sets multi-level governance apart from the more restrictive definitions of federalism and decentralization.

Consistently with the above view, on the side of empirical research the focus on processes is particularly marked among US and Canadian federal scholars, who employ MLG as an analytical tool exactly for the flexibility it affords compared to the many variants of the concept of federalism (e.g. Sutcliffe 2012; Alcantara & Nelles 2014).

Elsewhere, however, research has often fallen back to a largely formal (though not necessarily "constitutional") interpretation of MLG, in defining as well as applying the concept. Inconsistencies can, again, be found in the first place in the work of Marks and co-authors. In the quote recalled above, for example, Hooghe and Marks's emphasis is on the distribution of *authoritative* decision-making. Accordingly, the analysis that follows focuses for the most part on EU treaty changes.

Similarly, their 2003 classification defines both MLG types entirely in terms of the form and role of territorial and functional *jurisdictions*.

An analogous structural bias is to be found in a number of empirical applications of the MLG concept, ranging from more traditional topics such as EU regional policy (Bailey & De Propis 2002), to newer areas of study such as water management (Lundqvist, 2004) and global governance (Zürn, 2010; Beisheim, Campe & Schäferhoff 2010).

## 4. Two approaches to clarification

The three axes of ambiguity can be summarized visually as the dimensions of a cube delimiting the semantic space in which the MLG concept "floats." Assuming, for simplicity, each axis as dichotomous, this produces eight combinations, as shown in Figure 1 (along with examples of literature close to each combination).

**Figure 1 about here**

Following Adcock (2005), the conceptual pluralism illustrated by the cube can be interpreted in two ways, depending on one's view on the nature of concepts. According to a "language-focused" approach, the meaning of a concept is inseparable from its existing use in language. Applied to our case, this principle entails that each MLG combination is as legitimate as the next, so long as it is not entirely idiosyncratic. Taking an extreme view of this approach would make clarification a non-starter, as none of the eight definitions could be seen as superior to the others. To put it like Pitkin (1967, cited in Adcock 2005), the different MLG versions would just

be taken as equally valid yet partial pictures of the same complete structure, each highlighting some aspects of the latter, and contributing to its overall description.[4]

Conceptual clarification could still take place if we moved one step away from a pure language-focused approach and allowed for the possibility of differentiation, and therefore ordering, among definitions. One way could be to reframe MLG as a radial concept (Collier & Mahon Jr 1993, Collier & Levitsky 1997) composed of a prototype—the most richly connotated version: arguably A—from which the remaining seven radiate as "diminished" variants. The radial approach would thus preserve the eight combinations as legitimate members of the same class, while at the same time clarifying MLG by adjectivizing the different versions of the concept (e.g. "vertical MLG" for definition B, "structural MLG" for C, etc.)

While attractive as a path of least resistance vis-à-vis the status quo, the road of clarification-by-ordering (and more broadly the language-focused approach) is, however, not the most appropriate in the MLG case, for two reasons. First, given the relative youth of MLG as a concept, the intersubjective solidity of any of its variants among linguistic sub-communities—a premise of the language-focused approach—is questionable. Second, and more importantly, over MLG's couple of decades of existence virtually all authors employing the concept have referred, directly or indirectly, to Marks's work and original formulation. In a way then, to continue on Pitkin's metaphor, MLG scholars are not photographing the phenomenon from

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[4] In fact, proponents of a pure language-focused approach would, probably, also reject the theory-building objectives to which clarification is taken here as a pre-requisite, concentrating instead on the analysis of different language patterns and their origins.

different angles, but rather staring—better: claiming to be staring—at the same picture of it.

If so, then MLG's problem is not disorder but confusion, which is solved by deciding which of the eight combinations is "right," and which must instead be discarded as incorrect. This view is consistent with Adcock's second approach, the "scientific-ideal" one, which in turn rests on a classical view of concepts as defined by necessary and sufficient characteristics. The remainder of the article builds on this view to propose an approach for the assessment of the MLG concept.

## 5. A criterial analysis of multi-level governance

How to clarify MLG in a scientific-ideal context? As discussed above, the straightforward road of appealing to the authority of the concept's creator is foreclosed due to Marks's (and co-authors') inconsistencies in using the term. This leaves us with the sole theoretical tools of classical concept formation. A typical reference here is Sartori's (1984) guidelines. This approach, however, has two limits when applied to the case at hand: in the first place, many of its rules—such as to minimize vagueness and use parsimonious definitions—are either too basic to be of any use, or can, at least in principle, be satisfied by each of the eight MLG combinations, hence offering no guidance for clarification. Second, and more importantly, Sartori's rule-based approach tends to see concept formation as a one-dimensional affair, in which a concept is either good or bad. What this view misses is that a concept's goodness can be measured along several dimensions, some of which may be mutually conflictual. Consequently, different conceptualizations of the same phenomenon can be equally good (or bad), but in different ways.

An alternative approach, which takes these aspects into account, is that elaborated by John Gerring in his "criterial framework" for concept formation (Gerring 1999; 2001; 2012). The framework includes a set of dimensions (criteria) to assess concepts, several of which, when combined, form definitional trade-offs. In his latest iteration, Gerring (2012) lists seven such criteria: *resonance*, *domain*, *consistency*, *fecundity*, *differentiation*, *operationalization* and *causal utility*. In the next sections these criteria will be used to assess the MLG alternatives and sketch an initial proposal for the clarification of this concept.

*Less problematic criteria: Resonance, domain and consistency*

*Resonance* is the simplest of the seven criteria. It refers to the extent to which a concept's meaning chimes with established uses of the term, and hence makes sense intuitively. When using a term, Gerring notes, one should avoid introducing unnecessary confusion, which could hinder scientific cumulation.

While MLG can still be considered a neologism, resonance is by no means irrelevant to it: if not in their overall connotation, neologisms should still strive for resonance in their constituent terms. In this respect, all eight MLG combinations are well placed, being composed of words ("multi," "level," and "governance") that are all familiar in political science, if not ordinary language. The only qualification to this assessment relates to the four definitions including non-state actors (A, C, E, G), which might be seen as resonating marginally better than the rest insofar as the term governance—itself a relatively new concept—implies a role for non-governmental actors, as discussed above.

Close to criterion of resonance is the *domain* of a concept, i.e. the linguistic and/ or empirical region within which the concept is supposed to resonate. Two principles are important here: first, a concept's domain needs to be clear; second, *ceteris paribus*, the more domains a concept embraces, the better. Generally speaking, all eight variants of MLG perform well in terms of domain. Language-wise, one of the advantages of MLG, however defined, is that of operating not only within the academic domain, in which it was created, but also in the domain of politics and policy-making—where, as mentioned above, MLG has by now wide currency (e.g. Committee of the Regions 2009)—hence connecting the two linguistic regions.

As for MLG's empirical domain, generally speaking, for all eight combinations this is both large and straightforward: it is clear, for instance, that all MLG variants apply to the empirical area of political systems instead of, say, private organizations. Some differences may, however, be said to exist as regards EU-only definitions (A to D), whose domain performance is slightly worse than the rest due to their obvious institutional and geographic limits.

The third criterion is *consistency*, according to which a concept needs to retain the same meaning across its entire set of empirical referents, so as to avoid conceptual stretching (Sartori 1970). This criterion in turn points to the broader trade-off between a concept's intension and extension: the more (necessary) attributes one adds to the definition of a concept, the smaller its set of referents (its extension). While the eight MLG combinations present different intension/extension configurations, each is, in principle, equally capable of being applied consistently within its group of referents. The general rule, Gerring reminds us, is that one should build as abstract and inclusive a concept as needed. In the case of MLG the rule can be turned the other

way around: the empirical applicability of the concept will follow from which version one chooses to employ.

*MLG's central trade-offs: Fecundity, differentiation and operationalization*

*Fecundity* is the extent to which a concept tells us, by itself, something about the outside reality; how much, in other words, it illuminates us about the world, its structure and the connections between its many elements. A concept's fecundity is in turn a function of its depth (the number of things it tells us about the world) and especially its coherence, i.e. the degree to which all parts of its connotation belong together logically or functionally, so as to identify and delimit "natural kinds."

How does MLG fare in terms of fecundity? Of the eight combinations, the four located in the back half of the cube (A, C, E, G), which include non-state actors participation as a necessary condition for MLG, are particularly problematic. To be convincingly coherent—to "carve nature at the joints," so to speak—these interpretations of MLG cannot limit themselves to combining the two sides of state authority dispersal (territorial, and from the state to civil society) in one conceptual package, but must also explain what links these two aspects together, whether it is common causes, certain dynamics, etc. They need to explore, to put it like Piattoni (2009, 174), "(necessary or causal) correlations between growing devolution and growing civil society involvement in governance arrangements" so as to tell us what makes them part of a natural bundle. Drawing such connections is, at least in principle, by no means impossible. And yet, so far it has hardly been done satisfactorily by proponents of MLG.

A concept's *differentiation* is the degree to which it is clearly distinguishable from neighbouring concepts. Of a good concept we expect to be clearly bounded, so that we know where it begins and where it ends (and hence where other concepts in its semantic field begin and end). Ideally, a concept needs to add something new to our language, which is not already covered by other concepts, and therefore unsettle the semantic field (i.e. change neighbouring concepts) as little as possible, if at all.

When assessed in terms of differentiation, MLG performs, for the most part, in a specular manner to the foregoing criterion. Whether it is applied just to the EU or beyond, if defined solely in territorial terms (definitions B, D, F and H), MLG struggles to differentiate itself from the several terms already in use to indicate collaboration between nested governments in policy-making and implementation. Perhaps the foremost example among such terms is "cooperative federalism," a longstanding concept that includes cases often described as multi-level governance— in the first place grant-in-aid management of the sort taking place in EU structural policy (Hueglin & Fenna 2006). Depending on the context, other terms can have quite an overlap with a territorial-only conception of MLG: devolution, decentralization, international regime, and so on. All this, however is less true of the two definitions that look at processes rather than structures (B and F), as these encompass the whole range of exchanges, negotiation and cooperation among governmental levels that are usually not (fully) captured by rival inter-territorial formulas.

A concept's *operationalization* refers to its ability to be observed and measured empirically. To a significant degree, observation and measurement are independent from concept formation: for one thing, when applying concepts as complex as MLG to the empirical reality, researchers often concentrate on and operationalize only some

parts of them rather than the entire phenomenon. For another, even those parts of the concept that are operationalized usually lend themselves to being measured in more than one way (for instance through different indicators). That said, two of the three dimensions explored above are likely to affect the operationalization of MLG. The first is the issue of supranationalism: if defined as a EU-only phenomenon, MLG is more easily operationalizable than when applied to the entire institutional gamut, if only because the latter versions increase the concept's abstraction and vagueness and therefore make its empirical referents less certain—at what point, for instance, does a state's participation in an international organization engender MLG? (See e.g. Welch & Kennedy-Pipe 2004, Schreurs 2010)

The second dimension is that of structures vs. processes: no matter the type of system on which ones applies MLG, defining the latter in terms of formal structures and norms makes it more readily observable—in fact the norms themselves can serve as indicators. Conversely, interpreting MLG as based on uncodified processes introduces not only practical challenges in the actual detection and measurement of the phenomenon—which are often tackled by limiting the number of empirical cases examined (e.g. Ciaffi 2001; Painter 2001; Sutcliffe 2012)—but also and more importantly a number of more theoretical questions as to where exactly, as Blom-Hansen (2005) puts it, the border between mere multi-level *involvement* and multi-level *governance* lies.


**Table 1 about here**

Table 1 summarizes the analysis so far. For each MLG combination, the table assigns a score according to its performance under the six foregoing criteria: 1 if the concept performs well, -1 if it performs poorly, 0 for mixed or middling performances.

Were we to go by these rough numbers alone, we should conclude that definitions C and G are better than the rest because they have a higher overall net score. While attractive in its simplicity, however, this linear additive approach would be incoherent with the spirit of the criterial framework, namely that conceptual attributes might not necessarily be weighed equally against each other and that, at the end of the day, what criterion/a one values most in forming a concept depends on what the latter is needed for. It is with this in mind that we should introduce the last of Gerring's criteria, i.e. causal utility.

## 6. Two types of MLG theory

*Causal utility* refers to the usefulness of a concept in the context of a causal argument or, more generally, a theory. A particularly restrictive version of a concept (say political party) might, for example, be chosen over others because of its superior fit with the context in which one's theory applies (say Western Europe). Further, a concept virtually devoid of empirical referents might be used if it helps build a theoretical argument (for example by completing a typology). Finally, we might prefer to use more richly connotated concepts as *explananda* and less connotated ones as *explanans*, according to the general rule that we should try to explain as much as possible with as little as possible.

As discussed above, a problem of MLG is its theoretical underdevelopment. At the same time, the theoretical ambitions displayed by MLG from the start—recall that Marks first presented the idea as an alternative to two theories: neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism—make the development of causal arguments particularly pressing for this paradigm. Based on this two-sided relationship between MLG and theory, it is argued here that causal utility should be given priority over the remaining six criteria in the assessment and clarification of the MLG concept.

How to go about assessing the causal utility of (the eight versions of) MLG in a context of theoretical paucity? The circularity of this problem is broken by observing that, while there is no such thing as a fully fledged MLG theory, at least two broad theoretical tendencies can be detected in the literature. These should be taken as ideal-typical "vocations" indicating the direction(s) in which a mature MLG theory should move. Accordingly, it is with reference to these two models that the assessment of MLG's causal utility should proceed, so as to identify preferable versions of the concept but also, consistently with the criterial framework, point out corresponding shortcomings that MLG scholars should try to remedy as much as possible.

*MLG as a theory of state transformation*

The first "vocation" of the multi-level governance paradigm is to build a theory of how the distribution and functioning of political authority in the world have been and are being reshaped. This type of MLG theory would highlight above all the changing role and relevance of the traditional nation-state and the fading away of the Westphalian international system, which is gradually replaced by a more fluid

politico-institutional order in which power and authority are redistributed from the state upwards but also downwards.

A general theory of MLG so delimited would have to cover at least three areas: first, it would have to include a coherent explanation for the origins of MLG itself (Marks 1996a; Marks and Hooghe 2001) and, as a corollary, an account of why the transition from a hierarchical to a multi-level system is more advanced in some parts of the world (in the first place Europe) than elsewhere (e.g. Blatter 2001; Sbragia 2010). Second, it should spell out the basic dynamics governing relations among levels of authority, focusing especially on the sub/supranational dimension, whose mediation is no longer monopolised by the state (Heinelt & Niederhafner 2008; Bauer & Börzel 2010). Finally, this type of MLG theory should tell us something about the likely direction of these political transformations, particularly whether these are expected to constitute new international equilibria or, conversely, if MLG's fluidity should also be taken to entail political instability.

A theory of MLG of this kind would be located among those international relations paradigms that have examined the transformations of the state-centric system over the past few decades. With these, MLG would dialogue from its own distinctive position. MLG theory would, for instance, share with classic interdependence theory (Keohane and Nye 1977) a focus on transnational links and actors, and on the role of international arrangements in their emergence, while at the same time highlighting the territorial dimension of many of these interdependent players. MLG's account of the decline of the nation-state would find an echo in theories of globalisation and the "retreat of the state" (Strange 1996), and yet not go as far as seeing state structures as subservient to global socio-economic forces.

Finally, the focus on the subnational reallocation of state function would chime with the idea of a rescaling of statehood (Brenner 2004), compared to which, however, MLG would place regions and cities more explicitly within multi-scalar configurations of authority.

This sort of MLG theory would be best built on a broad and abstract definition of the concept, which includes the European Union as the vanguard of the political changes just described, but goes beyond the EU so as to capture these phenomena of political transformation in their global dimension. This theory would also pay more attention to the structural dimension of MLG than to its processes, in the first place due to its primary focus on the state and its loss of authority and functions in the international order, but also for the practical need to embrace and analyse a vast range of areas and empirical phenomena. Finally, and for analogous reasons, this type of theory would prioritize the study of public and territorial levels of governance over the analysis of non-state actors.

The MLG version which would be most consistent with this first theoretical model is, therefore, definition H. Needless to say, framed as a theory of state transformation, MLG would also come with all the shortcomings attached to this definition of the concept, in the first place the difficulty in differentiating MLG from neighbouring concepts and theories (like international governance, international institutions and regimes, etc.), and the operationalization challenges presented by such a broad conceptualization of MLG—which, however, might in part be mitigated by the intentionally abstract nature of a theory of MLG so formulated.


*MLG as a theory of (EU) public policy*

The second type of MLG theory is one that aims to explain the making and implementation of public policy. This is a much less radical and more concrete variant of MLG theory, whose central focus is less on the historical break with the Westphalian order than on the actual working of political and administrative systems. Put differently, the main questions of this theoretical model would be not so much about where MLG is from and where it is headed, as about how MLG systems function day by day.

As in the previous case, this sort of MLG theory should, ideally, be built by combining existing partial theoretical and empirical analyses into a coherent framework covering a number of interrelated subjects. First, the origins and dynamics of political mobilization around policy issues, primarily with reference to those phenomena that are more specific to MLG, such as subnational lobbying (McAleavey & Mitchell 1994; Hooghe 1995) and, more generally, the formation of political alliances "across territorial levels, sectoral boundaries and the divide between public and private" (Christiansen 1997, 66). Second, the formulation, territorial structuring and temporal development of multi-level policies (e.g. Fuchs 1994; Benz 2006). Finally, this variant of MLG theory should include causal propositions on the mode and content of policy implementation, and on their variation across subcentral units (Marks 1996b; Bache & Chapman 2008).

In this scenario, MLG theory would be in the category of, and dialogue with ideas and theories in the subfield of public policy. Some of these could be connected to—if not fully contained by—MLG with little effort. This is, for instance, the case of policy subsystems (Baumgartner & Jones 2009) and policy networks, which highlight the synergies among actors types endowed with different governance resources (e.g.

Rhodes, Bache & George 1996). Others, such as epistemic communities (Haas 1992) and advocacy coalitions (Sabatier 1988) could complement the theoretical setup of MLG by adding a discussion of the (primarily ideational) factors behind policy formation and change. As for MLG's own contribution to the public policy landscape, this would be primarily to hold together, in a single approach, at least three aspects: a holistic analysis of the entire policy cycle, from agenda-setting to implementation; an explicit focus on the important (though not exclusive) role of territorial actors throughout such cycle; finally, the ability to account for policy dynamics in a variety of institutional settings (not only national but also supranational).

Being a concrete approach to public policy, this type of MLG theory would probably work best with a more empirically restrictive version of the MLG concept, which does not embrace all possible multi-level political manifestations but refers to contexts within which policy dynamics take place more regularly and densely: in the first place the EU, but perhaps also other federal-type systems. Also, as a theory of actual policy formulation and implementation, this version of MLG would not look just at institutional structures but go beyond them to include more informal relations and politics. For the same reasons, here MLG would encompass also non-state actors to the extent that they have a role in the making and implementation of public policies.

A (and secondarily E, insofar as it includes federal systems but not international organizations) is the version that would fit this second kind of MLG theory best. As in the previous case, selecting a specific combination of the concept would entail having to deal with its shortcomings too. In this case, problems would concentrate mainly in the area of fecundity: to be truly convincing, a theory of MLG as a process of public

policy-making would have to specify, in its causal framework, what links systematically the vertical and horizontal dimensions of power diffusion, ultimately making MLG a "thing" in its own right rather than just the sum of political phenomena that happen to be in the same place at the same time.

**7. Conclusion**

Conceptual pluralism is a double-edged sword for the social sciences. Differences and disagreements over the definition of certain terms can stimulate fruitful normative debates, foster theoretical development, and are often themselves revealing of interesting underlying social dynamics. At the same time, definitional diversity can engender unnecessary semantic confusion and frustratingly fragment analytical language and efforts. The balance between these two sides varies depending on the concept in question (and particularly on features such as its complexity, tangibility, normative implications and stage of development). In the case of multi-level governance, it has been argued here, conceptual pluralism is more of a nuisance than an advantage.

Starting from this premise, this article has presented a critical reconstruction of the MLG concept around three "axes of ambiguity"—the applicability of MLG beyond the EU; the role of non-state actors; the focus on structures vs. processes— and a strategy for conceptual assessment and clarification based on the criterial framework elaborated by John Gerring. Building particularly on Gerring's causal utility criterion, the article has suggested that MLG be clarified following two (not necessarily exclusive) theoretical directions emerging from the existing literature: the first sees MLG as a theory of state transformation, while the second posits it as a

theory of (primarily EU) public policy. Gerring's remaining criteria, on the other hand, should be used to guide scholars in further elaborations and refinements of the MLG concept.

As stated from the outset, the aim of this article is not so much to try and settle the matter of MLG's definition (which can only be done as a collective scholarly effort) as to promote a more systematic methodological debate on the topic than has been done so far. In this sense, the two roads for clarification suggested here should be seen less as a point of arrival than as one of departure—a solid one, however, which tries to strike a good balance between methodological reasoning, and consistency with the existing orientations of what is already an established research programme.

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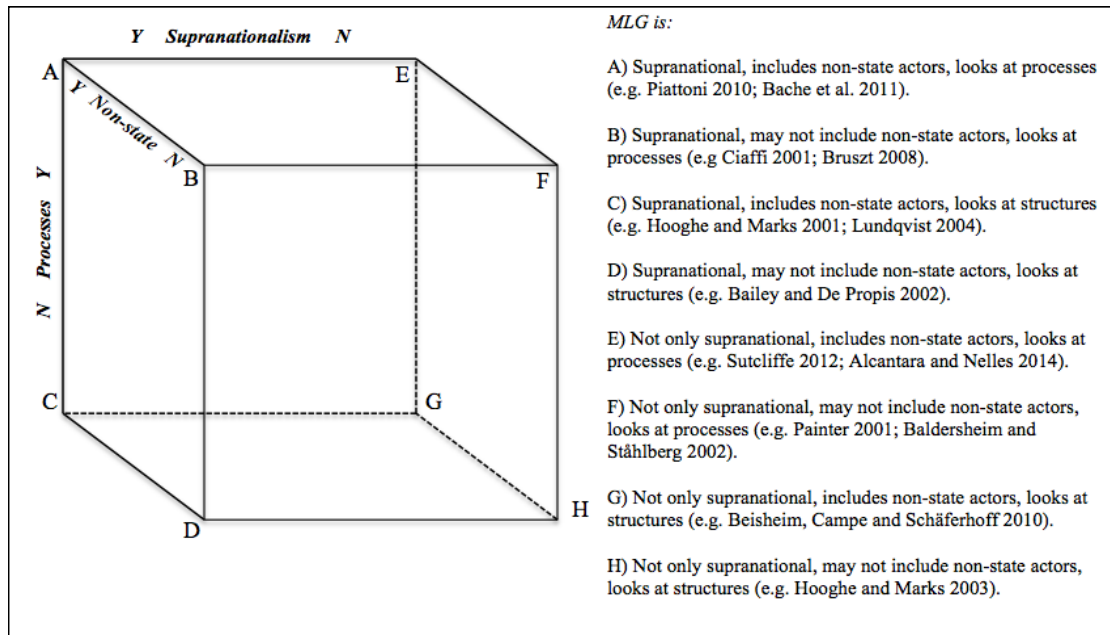Figure 1: The semantic space of multi-level governance



MLG is:

A) Supranational, includes non-state actors, looks at processes (e.g. Piattoni 2010; Bache et al. 2011).

B) Supranational, may not include non-state actors, looks at processes (e.g Ciaffi 2001; Bruszt 2008).

C) Supranational, includes non-state actors, looks at structures (e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2001; Lundqvist 2004).

D) Supranational, may not include non-state actors, looks at structures (e.g. Bailey and De Propis 2002).

E) Not only supranational, includes non-state actors, looks at processes (e.g. Sutcliffe 2012; Alcantara and Nelles 2014).

F) Not only supranational, may not include non-state actors, looks at processes (e.g. Painter 2001; Baldersheim and Ståhlberg 2002).

G) Not only supranational, includes non-state actors, looks at structures (e.g. Beisheim, Campe and Schäferhoff 2010).

H) Not only supranational, may not include non-state actors, looks at structures (e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2003).

Table 1: A criterial analysis of MLG

| Criteria<br><br>MLG is: | Resonance | Domain | Consistency | Fecundity | Differentiation | Operationalization |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A) Supranational, includes non-state actors, looks at processes | 1 | 0 | n/a | -1 | 1 | 0 |
| B) Supranational, may not include non-state actors, looks at processes. | 0 | 0 | n/a | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| C) Supranational, includes non-state actors, looks at structures. | 1 | 0 | n/a | -1 | 1 | 1 |
| D) Supranational, may not include non-state actors, looks at structures. | 0 | 0 | n/a | 1 | -1 | 1 |
| E) Not only supranational, includes non-state actors, looks at processes. | 1 | 1 | n/a | -1 | 1 | -1 |
| F) Not only supranational, may not include non-state actors, looks at processes. | 0 | 1 | n/a | 1 | 0 | -1 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| G) Not only supranational, includes non-state actors, looks at structures. | 1 | 1 | n/a | -1 | 1 | 0 |
| H) Not only supranational, may not include non-state actors, looks at structures. | 0 | 1 | n/a | 1 | -1 | 0 |