Multilevel governance, polycentricity, power, and European Union environmental policy
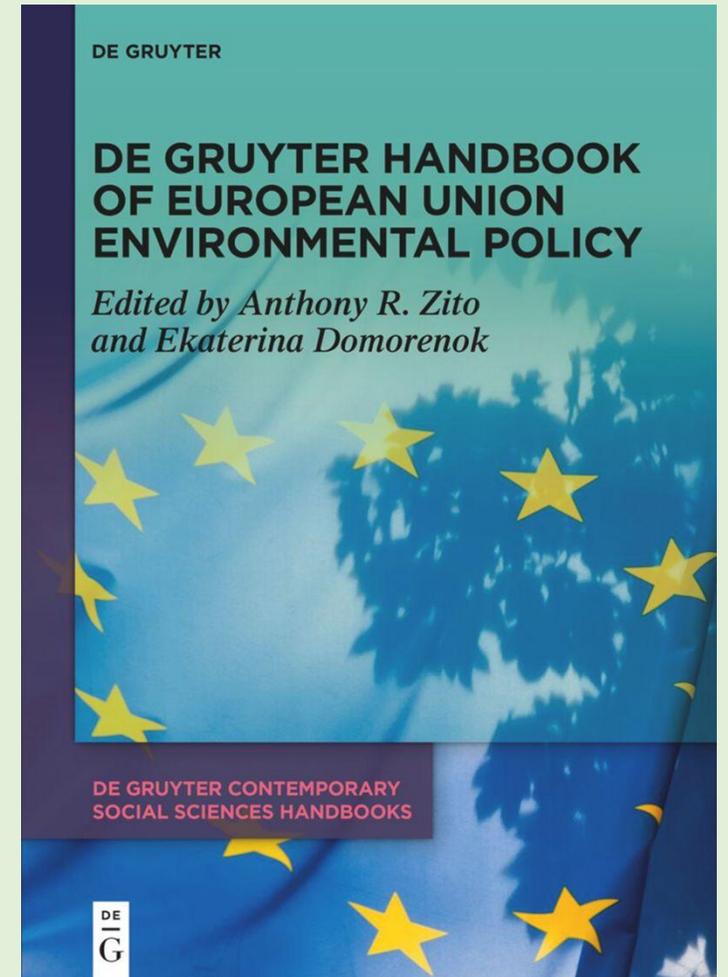
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Commons for the (Not) Gentle World: Institutions, Cooperation and the Shifting Political Landscape

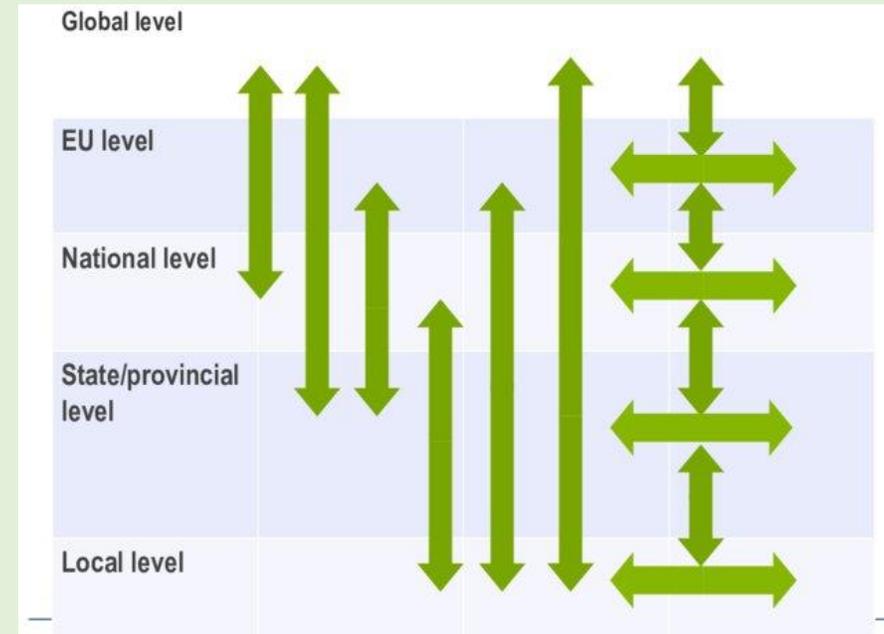Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 17-18 March 2026

Introduction

- Multilevel, polycentric and monocentric governance
- Power and (inter)dependence
- Power over, power to and power with
- Typologies of policy instruments
- Putting it all together in the context of EU environmental policy
- Discussion

Multilevel, polycentric and monocentric governance

- *Multilevel* governance – collaboration between state and non-state actors along vertical and horizontal dimensions, to oversee policymaking and implementation (Hooghe and Marks 2003; Piattoni, 2009)

- *Poly*centric governance: policymaking and implementation is dispersed across multiple (autonomous) centres of authority (Ostrom 2010)

- *Mono*centric at the opposite end of the spectrum from *poly*centric governance: one central actor can exercise hierarchy over others (Tollefson et al 2012; Tobin et al 2024)

- Useful as heuristic tools, but limited theorisation about how and why different types of governance might emerge (DV), and whether they can explain anything (IV) (Zito 2015; Morrison et al 2017)

Jänicke, M. 2015: Horizontal and vertical reinforcement in global climate governance. *Energies* 8(6): 5782-5799.

Power in governance relationships

- To use multilevel, polycentric or monocentric governance as explanatory theories, we need to understand how power relations operate between different governing actors

- Resources as a proxy for power (Rhodes 1981). In pursuit of their objectives, how much do different governing actors (need to) rely on each other for resources?

- By examining who holds important resources, and who needs them to pursue their objectives, we may be able to locate power relations between governing actors on a spectrum of *inde*pendence – *interde*pendence – *de*pendence (Eckersley 2017; 2018)

- Who has power in different models of governance, and how do they seek to exercise it?

Types of power

- Power *over*: "*A* has power over *B* to the extent that he [*sic*] can get *B* to do something that *B* would otherwise not do" (Dahl 1957, 202-203). See also Bacharach and Baratz (1963) and Lukes (1974)

- Power *to*: *em*powerment of individual actors, who can 'get things done', without necessarily coercing or dominating others (Parsons, 1963, 232)

- Power *with*: concerted action through which multiple actors pursue and achieve common objectives (Arendt, 1970; Partzsch 2017)

Power, policy instruments and governance

Large literature on typologies of policy instruments and tools (e.g. Lowi 1964; Hood 1983; Vedung 1988; Jordan et al 2012; Capano and Howlett 2020).

Instruments as an indicator of how governments seek to govern (Lascoumbes and LeGales 2007):

1) 'Sticks' – regulatory instruments that involve coercion and enforcement – suggest that policymakers are exercising power *over* other actors, which become *de*pendent on them for action. More monocentric governance?

2) 'Sermons' – voluntary instruments that seek to persuade actors to change their behaviour – suggest that individual actors can operate *inde*pendently, exercise power *to* and develop their own solutions to problems. More polycentric governance?

3) 'Carrots' – financial inducements to incentivise behavioural change – suggest that policymakers are trying to mobilise and support collaborative, *interde*pendent action from actors across the policy landscape. More multilevel governance?

Table 1: Power relationships and policy instruments in monocentric, polycentric and multilevel governance arrangements.

	Monocentric	Polycentric	Multilevel
Dominant power dynamic	Power *over*	Power *to*	Power *with*
Dominant principles	Hierarchy, compliance, control	Empowerment, autonomy	Cooperation, coordination
Resource distribution	Concentrated in central authority	Distributed across the governance landscape	Located in governance networks
Key actors and relationships	Peripheral actors *dependent* on central state authority	Individual state and societal actors operate *independently* of each other	State and societal actors operate *interdependently* in governance networks
Dominant policy instrument types	Regulatory (sticks)	Voluntary (sermons)	(Re)distributive (carrots)
Policy examples	Limits on vehicle exhaust emissions	Eco-labeling	Green Deal
Potential benefits	Opportunity for decisive and effective action	Opportunity for innovation and tailored solutions	Opportunity for mobilization and policy coherence
Potential drawbacks	Societal opposition; inflexibility	Free riding; lack of action; incoherence	Steering can be difficult

Discussion

- Instrument types, governance models and types of all exist to different extents in different contexts

- Examining policy instruments can reveal a lot about the governance model, as well as who is exercising power and how

- Different problems require different solutions – perhaps it is not surprising that policy mixes and predominant governance models vary

- General shift away from monocentricity, power over and sticks towards polycentricity, power to and sermons (Jordan et al., 2018) – in the EU and elsewhere

- Some examples of multilevel governance, power with and carrots remain (Green Deal, ETS, *Kommunlarichtlinie* etc.), particularly for climate policy. Generally, however, we may be shifting towards an increasing reliance on sermons. Will they be enough?

Questions