26. Steering

Renate Mayntz

THE TERM AND ITS USE

The term "steering" has not played a focal role in the English-speaking social science literature; it simply refers to efforts at deliberate control of a given social or political phenomenon by a given actor, something that occurs in reality as one of a great number of processes. Its German version "*steuern*" in contrast has become a hallmark term in the political science literature, mainly in the period between the 1960s and the 1980s. To describe, as in this chapter, the emergence of a *Steuerungs* or steering paradigm and its subsequent changes affords a glance at the relation between changes in reality and in the perspective of social science.

The meaning of the German concept of steering or *steuern* is the same as that of the English "govern," whose Latin root *gubernare* means to steer or pilot a ship or carriage. In tracing the development of the paradigm of steering it is important to distinguish between the term (steering, or *steuern*) on the one hand, and the substantive concept or paradigm on the other hand. The development of a theory of political steering began in the 1960s, when governments aspired explicitly to steer their nation's social and economic development towards specific goals. Something that warrants being called a theory of political steering (*Theorie politischer Steuerung*) developed especially in (West) Germany, where the legacy of state theory proved fertile ground in the historical situation of social and political reconstruction. German state theory had famously been concerned with the state–society relationship, considering the state not as a force of domination and subjugation but as one for disciplining selfish private interests in the service of the public good; a very continental European conception, rooted in the history of Prussian Germany and absolutist France. After World War II, a democratic polity able to serve the public good effectively had to be built in West Germany, and planning was a way to do so. In the late 1960s a veritable planning euphoria developed, and a largely prescriptive theory of planning evolved (Kaiser 1965–72; Kahn 1969). In this context, the term *Steuerung* was introduced to the German social science discourse as a translation of the English "control," a concept that played an important role both in cybernetics and in Talcott Parsons's systems theory that became popular in Germany in the 1960s (Parsons 1976). In the 1970s, the term *Steuerung* started to appear in the title of social science publications, growing continuously over the following years before being overtaken by publications featuring the term "governance" in their title.

Originally the term *Steuerung* was understood in the narrow sense of political steering, and continued to be thus understood when used in the context of public policy-making, not least with reference to technology policy (e.g. Kruedener and Schubert 1981; Grimmer et al. 1992). At the same time, however, the concept of "control media," crucial to Parsons's systems theory and translated into German as *Steuerungsmedien*, led to a wider understanding of the term in the context of sociological macro-theory. Here *Steuerung* became equated with efforts at social coordination. Different forms of social coordination were distinguished, notably hierarchy (or state), market, network (or association) and community. Within political science,

however, the term *Steuerung* continued to be limited to political steering, defined as the deliberate political attempt to steer, guide or direct (parts of) society, including the economy.

In the Anglo-Saxon countries, the term "steering" did not become the hallmark of an expanding field of research and theorizing as it did in Germany. The subject matter of steering was dealt with in the evolving theory of the policy process. This is evident, for instance, in Paul Sabatier's characterization of this theory: "The process of public policy-making includes the manner in which problems get conceptualized and brought to government for solution; governmental institutions formulate alternatives and select policy solutions; and those solutions get implemented, evaluated, and revised" (Sabatier 1999: 3). In the Anglo-Saxon literature, public policy was understood as a hierarchical mode of social coordination, contrasted to the market and subsequently also to networks, clans and community as alternative forms of social coordination. The paradigm of public policy suffered a similar change as took place in the evolution of steering theory to the more recent theory of governance.

THE PARADIGM OF STEERING

The basic elements of the concept (or paradigm) of steering consist of: (1) a steering subject, typically the government, the state or some public authority; (2) steering instruments, in particular law; (3) a policy goal; and (4) the target group or object of steering (Mayntz 1987). Steering presupposes the political *intention* to direct a specific social process or effect a specific change in the economy or civil society, but the concept does not imply that the goal of intervention is in fact achieved. Steering is an actor concept; it is state-centered and employs a top-down perspective. The paradigm of political steering was first developed in the context of political planning in Germany, and social reform in the United States (US), but the term "steering" was hardly used. As many of the intended reforms did not achieve their stated goals, political scientists started to question the planning model and to investigate public policy empirically in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Step by step, these empirical studies elaborated the basic paradigm (Mayntz 1996).

Asking for the reasons of observed policy failure, political scientists identified, and specified, the preconditions of potentially effective policy choice. It became clear that policy failure can be the consequence of cognitive mistakes in planning. Cognitive failure could involve data, theory or both. Information about the details of a perceived problem could be insufficient, and policy decisions might be based on a wrong theory of the causal factors and causal connections at work in the policy field. Another cause of failure to reach a given policy goal can be the choice of an inadequate instrument, or the lack of appropriate resources, be they financial or legal (Mayntz 1987). There are, for instance, constitutional barriers to the choice of given political interventions, and budget constraints can stand in the way of introducing financial incentives, or engaging in costly programs of public provision. It was also recognized that the way policy-making is organized affects the substantive content of a policy. State bureaucracy involved in policy development was especially studied with a view to improving the effectiveness of public policy.

In the early theoretical model of steering, focus was on the development of policy; and, where the state appeared as steering subject, the implementation of policy was tacitly included. But policy success does not depend only on good policy design. The best policy design can result in failure if its implementation is deficient, as the path-breaking study by Pressman and

Wildavsky (1973) made evident. The 1970s were the heyday of empirical studies of policy implementation (see Hood 1976, and the contributions in Mayntz 1980). The attention now paid to implementation constitutes a first significant extension of the original steering model. It was recognized that implementation does not simply mean enactment of rules. Deficits in the capacity of public administration, individual and organizational interests of the target actors, and diverging normative convictions of the agents of implementation, easily lead to divergence between policy goals and policy outcome. The initial hierarchical steering model changed further when the belief in the effectiveness of the interventionist state eroded and a crisis of governability was diagnosed (Hennis et al. 1977, 1979). New social movements, unorthodox forms of political protest, and refusal to comply with legal provisions called attention to the fact that policy failure may result from the recalcitrance of the target group and the ability of powerful actors in the policy field to resist compliance or subvert the achievement of a policy's goal. This led to the modification of the top-down perspective of the paradigm of steering, by including bottom-up processes of resistance and selective compliance with policy measures (Mayntz 1996).

The shift of attention from the steering subject to the object of steering, and thus from governing to governability, meant that the structure of the policy fields and the action dispositions of the targets of political steering now became an important object of research. Policy fields can consist of a population of small units such as students, households or the unemployed, or of a set of large organizations such as firms, interest associations and unions. These structural properties were recognized as important factors in policy success; among other things because they permit or preclude interaction and negotiation between policy-makers and target groups in the policy development and implementation phases. The attention now paid to the object rather than the subject of political steering did not simply follow from an autonomous cognitive dynamic, but was a reaction to events in the socio-political context. The so-called crisis of governability, exacerbated by the oil crises and the slowdown of economic growth in the 1970s, posed both a practical and a theoretical problem. As has often been the case in the history of political theory, the public perception of a new problem had stimulated the extension of the steering paradigm. However, the modified model of political steering still referred to the nation state, and to domestic politics.

CRITIQUE AND EXTENSION OF THE STEERING PARADIGM

The failure of ambitious reform policies that had been pursued in the post-World War II era of reconstruction led to the demise of the strong interventionist state and hierarchical control both in theory and in practice. Disappointment with the state as an effective political steering center of society gave rise to the search for alternative modes of guiding socio-economic development. Though the US lacked the tradition of a strong interventionist state, there was concern with policy failure here too, and deficits both in policy design and in implementation had been studied. Theoretically, the shift away from the earlier focus on the steering subject—that is, government and its executive arm—undermined the very basis of the model of political steering: the assumption that the state is the control center of society. In a first step, giving up the still state-centered model of steering led to a concern with policy instruments. In particular, regulation in the narrow sense of legal norms that command or prohibit, the preferred policy instrument of the interventionist state, came to be seen critically. Attention turned to

alternative policy instruments, notably persuasion (e.g. information campaigns) and financial incentives and disincentives (e.g. taxes and tax rebates). In the US, market instruments were used to replace regulation in environmental policy (Kneese and Schultze 1975), and they continue to be used in the European Union.

But more than a change in policy instruments was involved when state control itself came to be questioned. It was in the late 1970s and the 1980s that political scientists observed a shift away from hierarchical modes of government to a more cooperative style of policy-making and a higher regard for different forms of social self-organization and self-government. This was noticeable especially in Western European countries that used to have strong interventionist states. Characteristic forms of non-hierarchical government were also found and studied in the US (see e.g. Heclo 1978) but did not strike observers as particularly new, since the US lacks the tradition of a strong interventionist state and has always stressed individual autonomy and self-government. Disappointment with the problem-solving capacity of hierarchical control directed attention to cooperative forms of government and to alternative forms of societal coordination, notably private-interest governments and market principles. It now appeared typical of modern society to be governed by a combination of hierarchical and non-hierarchical modes of societal coordination, which were both subsumed under the concept of governance (Botzem et al. 2009). Both in practice and in theory, the paradigm of governance superseded the paradigm of steering. In the last change of the initial paradigm, political steering became one of the several modes of governance.

The term "governance" is mostly used to indicate a mode of governing different from the old hierarchical model in which state authorities exert sovereign control over the people and groups making up civil society. In governance, non-state corporate actors participate in the formulation and implementation of public policy. This means that the function of the state changed from control to intermediation, and thus to defining the rules of the game played by societal actors it did not control directly. The sudden rise in the number of publications explicitly dealing with governance reflects the change in perspective that took place in the 1980s up until the rupture of the Cold War configuration in 1989. Where governance is understood in the very wide sense, covering all forms of social coordination, its meaning is that of *Steuerung* in the wide sense sometimes used in macro-sociology. In this wide sense of the term, not only mixed public–private networks and private interest governments but also market principles are considered a form of governance.

The concept of political steering is not only too narrow to cover the different forms of exerting control in a society constituted as a polity. It has also been criticized for the problem-solving bias that is evident in definitions of "steering" found in the literature, definitions that consider political steering as well as policy-making as state action trying to solve collective problems in the service of the public interest (Mayntz 2001). The problems in question typically involve domestic policy fields such as social welfare, education, migration, public health or infrastructure. This conceptualization of political steering is highly selective, tacitly assuming that policy-making, or governmental intervention into economy and civil society, is in fact motivated by the intention to solve collective problems and serve the public interest. This clearly misrepresents political reality, ignoring the role played by considerations of achieving and maintaining power: the power of incumbents, of one's party or faction, or of the present government. The roots of this normative bias can be traced back to classical antiquity, where both Plato and Aristotle developed conceptions of the philosopher-king or monarch, intent on serving the well-being of his subjects. From here a line can be drawn to

modern theories of state function, still operative in the backdrop of planning theory. Theories of political steering do not neglect power per se, but consider it only as an instrument in the service of policy for the common good, not as a goal sought for its own sake in the interest of a given government, political party or political class. The crucial issue of *cui bono*, the question whether policy is made in the name of the public interest or some narrower private interests, is not dealt with in the theory of political steering. The cooperative state of governance theory is similarly assumed to serve as a central problem-solving institution. In this way steering (and governance) theory becomes a legitimizing fiction (Mayntz 2005).

Another often-criticized selectivity of the political steering paradigm is its neglect of democratic processes and thus of the input dimension of policy. In the literature on European policy-making, the "democratic deficit" of the European Union has often been noted (Scharpf 1999). What is a recognized deficit in the European policy process—that is, the lack of an effective democratic input structure—has not been discussed as a problem in theories of steering (and later in theories of governance) applied to nation states; implicitly, a democratic input structure has been assumed to exist at the national level. In fact, democracy theory and the theory of political steering (and of governance) have developed in isolation from each other as two unconnected scientific fields. The assumption that a well-functioning political input structure exists in national policy-making warrants focusing attention on questions of output effectiveness, but this is of course a questionable assumption. Negotiation in mixed public–private networks may be a way of interest representation, but it is no substitute for a democratic process of decision-making.

FROM STEERING TO GOVERNANCE AND BEYOND

In the context of the new political ideologies of neoliberalism and Thatcherism, market principles were considered a more effective alternative to regulation; a typical example is the already cited study by Kneese and Schultze (1975). The turn to market coordination took the form of deregulation and privatization. To substitute the market for government was expected to liberate forces of innovation, to stimulate economic growth and to increase economic efficiency. At the end of the 1980s, the breakdown of state socialism strengthened the belief in the superiority of the market. These promises have meanwhile been discredited by reality. In contrast to economists, political scientists have tended to doubt that market principles can solve all problems of social and economic development, and have rejected the model of market-based competition. With the discourse shifting from political steering to governance, increasing attention has been paid to cooperative modes of policy development and to societal self-regulation. The so-called third sector of public service organizations, private-interest government, neo-corporatist arrangements and more generally all forms of mixed public–private organization, were looked at with interest and studied empirically.

Looked at from the viewpoint of the earlier top-down conception of political steering, the negotiation of political with societal actors in policy networks or neo-corporatist arrangements, and the delegation of regulatory functions to institutions of local or sector self-government, indicate a loss of steering capacity. The state appears weak and only "semi-sovereign" (Katzenstein 1987). This perspective is consonant with modern systems theory and concepts of postmodernism, both of which view society as having no center. Critical of state-centered political theory models, sociological systems theory from Talcott Parsons to Niklas Luhmann

denies the political subsystem the role of a steering center of society at large. To maintain that the political subsystem is unable to exert directive control appears to reflect the same *Zeitgeist* that led to the shift from "political steering" to "governance." But empirical political scientists were quick to point out that state actors are very special and privileged participants in policy networks and neo-corporatist arrangements, and that the state retains crucial measures of intervention even where decision-making has been devolved to institutions of societal self-government (Mayntz and Scharpf 2005). The state normally retains the right of legal ratification of privately developed norms, and the right to intervene by legislative or executive action where a self-governing system fails to meet political expectations. The "shadow of hierarchy" (Héritier 2008) induces warring factions in self-regulating networks to agree on a compromise. Legal framing and process management can achieve better results than top-down political control (Kooiman 2003). Societal self-government and hierarchical control are not mutually exclusive, but are ordering principles that are often combined. Small-scale steering efforts may be one form of governance, and they may fail to achieve their goal, but steering continues to be part of political reality.

After the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, globalization promised an era of worldwide interdependence (Farrell and Newman 2016). The non-hierarchical forms of coordination typical of governance appeared better adapted to analyze multi-level transnational systems in which processes are loosely coupled rather than hierarchically related. Governance in particular emphasized coordination and compromise solutions of conflictive policy topics. But at least since the end of the 2008 financial crisis, this view of the world of politics has changed. Over the past years, the general view of the world of politics and the economy emphasizes conflict and the threat of disintegration. Tell-tale marks are the titles of recent publications, such as Flassbeck and Steinhardt's (2018) book *Gescheiterte Globalisierung* (failed globalization), and Guilén's (2017) *Architecture of Collapse*. Political and economic processes follow different logics, and are interdependent in a non-cooperative way. After the heyday of globalization, the divergence between international economic and political structures has proved problematic. Politics are tied to competing nation states, while the structure of the economy is becoming truly international, and not only at the level of big transnational corporations. Political conflicts attempt to instrumentalize national economies for political purposes. Indirectly connected to the conflictive relation between politics and economy, increasing civil strife arises in leading countries. Efforts at international collaboration, as in the European Union, have not solved these conflicts; the European Union has established neither an extended hierarchy nor a genuine federal state, but remains a complex multi-level political system fighting against its loss of influence vis-à-vis the great powers of China and the United States. Both domestic and international conflicts, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, define a general climate of insecurity and impending disruptions. Steering, as a forceful guidance of specific processes to a defined end, becomes an illusion in a world of present-day complexity, characterized by massive interdependencies between intentional actions and their systemic effects.

REFERENCES

Botzem, Sebastian, Jeanette Hofmann, Sigrid Quack, Gunnar Folke Schuppert and Holger Straßheim (eds) (2009), *Governance als Prozess: Koordinationsformen im Wandel*, Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Farrell, Henry and Abraham Newman (2016), 'The new interdependence approach: Theoretical development and empirical demonstration', *Review of International Political Economy*, **22** (5), 713–736.
Flassbeck, Heiner and Paul Steinhardt (2018), *Gescheiterte Globalisierung. Ungleichheit, Geld und die Renaissance des Staates*, Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.
Grimmer, Klaus, Jürgen Häusler, Stefan Kuhlmann and Georg Simonis (eds) (1992), *Politische Technik-steuerung*, Opladen: Leske + Budrich.
Guilén, Mauro F. (2017), *The Architecture of Collapse*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Heclo, Hugh (1978), 'Issue networks and the executive establishment', in Anthony King (ed.), *The New American Political System*, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, pp. 87–124.
Hennis, Wilhelm, Peter Graf Kielmannsegg and Ulrich Matz (eds) (1977), *Regierbarkeit: Studien zu ihrer Problematisierung*, Vol. I, Stuttgart: Klett.
Hennis, Wilhelm, Peter Graf Kielmannsegg and Ulrich Matz (eds) (1979), *Regierbarkeit: Studien zu ihrer Problematisierung*, Vol. II, Stuttgart: Klett.
Héritier, Adrienne (2008), 'The shadow of hierarchy and new modes of governance', *Journal of Public Policy*, **28** (1), 1–18.
Hood, Christopher C. (1976), *Limits of Administration*, London: Wiley.
Kahn, Alfred J. (1969), *Theory and Practice of Social Planning*, New York: Russell Sage.
Kaiser, Joseph H. (ed.) (1965–72), *Planung*, Vols I–VI, Baden-Baden: Nomos.
Katzenstein, Peter (1987), *Policy and Politics in West Germany: The Growth of a Semisovereign State*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
Kneese, Allen V. and Charles L. Schultze (1975), *Pollution, Prices, and Public Policy*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
Kooiman, Jan (2003), *Governing as Governance*, London: Sage.
Kruedener, Jürgen von and Klaus von Schubert (eds) (1981), *Technikfolgen und sozialer Wandel: Zur politischen Steuerbarkeit der Technik*, Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik.
Mayntz, Renate (ed.) (1980), *Implementation politischer Programme*, Königstein im Taunus: Athenäum.
Mayntz, Renate (1987), 'Politische Steuerung und gesellschaftliche Steuerungsprobleme – Anmerkungen zu einem theoretischen Paradigma', in Thomas Ellwein, Joachim J. Hesse, Renate Mayntz and Fritz W. Scharpf (eds), *Jahrbuch für Staats- und Verwaltungswissenschaft*, Vol. 1, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 89–110.
Mayntz, Renate (1996), 'Politische Steuerung: Aufstieg, Niedergang und Transformation einer Theorie', in Klaus von Beyme and Claus Offe (eds), *Politische Theorien in der Ära der Transformation*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, pp. 148–168.
Mayntz, Renate (2001), 'Zur Selektivität der steuerungstheoretischen Perspektive', in Hans-Peter Burth and Axel Görlitz (eds), *Politische Steuerung in Theorie und Praxis*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 17–27.
Mayntz, Renate (2005), 'Governance Theory als fortentwickelte Steuerungstheorie?', in Gunnar Folke Schuppert (ed.), *Governance-Forschung: Vergewisserung über Stand und Entwicklungslinien*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 11–20.
Mayntz, Renate and Fritz W. Scharpf (2005), 'Politische Steuerung – Heute?', *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, **34** (3), 236–243.
Parsons, Talcott (1976), *Zur Theorie sozialer Systeme*, introduction and ed. Stefan Jensen, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
Pressman, Jeffrey L. and Aaron B. Wildavsky (1973), *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Sabatier, Paul A. (ed.) (1999), *Theories of the Policy Process*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
Scharpf, Fritz (1999), *Governing in Europa: Effektiv und Demokratisch?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.