The many are smarter than the few: 
a plea for Möbius-web governance

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Abstract
The new global context and the increasing social diversity of modern societies have created both the need for devolution to ensure the requisite flexibility and innovativeness to compete effectively worldwide, and the need for more participative governance regimes to better respond to the needs of the different social groups and mobilize their intelligence. The dispersive revolution and the new pluralism have triggered not only the emergence of new structures and tools, but also of a whole new way of thinking. In this Möbius world (where inside and outside are one and the same) foreign policy is likely to be shaped by a wide array of actors and in a more experimental open source mode – involving prototyping and serious play.

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“The cure for the ailments of democracy
is more democracy”

John Dewey

Introduction

This paper was first presented at a conference with a captivating, perplexing, and exceedingly circumspect title – *Polycentric governance?: sub-national governments and foreign policy in an age of globalization*. First, such a title plainly stated a fact of life: the presence and importance of sub-national actors of all sorts (regional, sectoral, sectional, etc.) in foreign policy-making, as in most domestic policy files around the world. Second, it unexpectedly put a question mark after the expression “polycentric governance”, as if it were merely a conjecture rather than a fact. Third, it would appear to draw attention mainly to sub-national “state” actors to the exclusion of all others for reasons that were not made entirely clear, thereby occluding what is not “public governance”, *stricto sensu* (Ladeur 2004).

In the light of this cautious problematique, this paper is somewhat radical. It takes as a point of departure the concluding remarks of James Rosenau (2003) at the end of *Distant Proximities*: the world is confronted with the challenge of *Möbius-web governance* – i.e., a multi-polar/multidirectional, mixed formal/informal mode of governance that mobilizes the contribution of all actors (from the public, private and social sectors) as producers of governance. This eye-catching label was inspired by the Möbius strip where inside and outside are one and the same. Rosenau looks into this abyss, cozily nests this daunting mode of governance within a typology that also accommodates a variety of more traditional genres of governance (top down, bottom up, market, network, side-by-side), and then walks away, leaving this *terra incognita* for another voyald.

This paper makes the case for the effectiveness of a very bold version of such an approach – open-source Möbius-web governance.

The argument is built in four stages.

The first section quickly underlines some major developments of great consequence in world affairs: the relative decline in the role of the state, and the state’s dis-aggregation into sub-national fragments; the parallel emergence of multi-sectoral/multi-level governing mechanisms in a world where nobody is in charge; and the illiberal flavor of the state-centric culture of adjudication that attempts, in the face of the new complex situations, to grant ever more arbitration power to state super-technocrats.

The second section suggests that, while this rear-guard action by the states is unfolding, new units have coalesced (at the infra-national and cross-national levels), that are the new loci of productivity growth and innovation. These new nests of actors have not only a most important stake in internal and foreign policy in a Möbius world, but also much of the knowledge and power needed to play a role in this governing process. These units and actors are often non-governmental or non-state units and actors. Indeed, they are often the result of cross-sectoral arrangements and *metissage*, and are demanding more and more access to the policy process at the domestic and international levels. This is not the place to document the damage done by national governments’ the top-down one-size-fits-all counter-approaches to these emerging forces (and their propensity to coerce and
adjudicate in order to maintain their hegemony). Suffice it to say that the new dynamic units are actively seeking ways to take part in the construction and maintenance of a multiplicity of regime-like arrangements that challenge the presumption of nation-states and region-states to be the only legitimate and authorized voice in policy-making.

The third section argues that open-source Möbius-web governance offers an opportunity to build a very resilient foreign policy, piece-meal and bottom up, through effective prototyping and serious play – words that will have to be added to the vocabulary of international relations – and that the fear of chaos evoked by traditional state-centric Jacobins, in fighting any effort to construct such a governance regime, is much exaggerated.

The fourth section examines the feasibility of such a transformation of the Canadian foreign policy process on the basis of both the experiences of the WTO and cognate international organizations, and the current intra-Canada discussions about opening up the process.

While the international forums give plenty of evidence of an evolving open-source international policy-making process en émergence, it is not unfair to say that the intra-Canada scene is less promising. It is no different in this area from what exists in other Canadian policy forums: an arrogant old guard big-Government phalanx within the federal government that still maintains that there is no need for any opening up of the process, that Canada must speak with one voice internationally, and that Ottawa is uniquely and solely equipped to determine what this unique message should be. While this technocratic voice is challenged, it is still very powerful.

The conclusion argues that the conventional wisdom defended by this old guard, big-G phalanx is wrong-headed and dysfunctional, unlikely to lead to an effective foreign policy process, and most likely to inflict significant damage to the fabric of Canadian society.

**The dispersive revolution**

If one had to characterize the drifts in the world order experienced over the last few decades, one could do worse than to refer to these transformations as the echoes of a dispersive revolution.

The Forum for the Future of the OECD has documented the long-term transformation of our “geo-socio-technical systems” over the last few decades and has probed their contours for decades to come. Four reports have been published: on technology, economic growth, diversity and creativity, and governance (OECD 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001). The major challenge identified in these reports had to do with geo-governance: the technological, economic, and social dynamisms require new ways to ensure effective coordination in a world where power, resources and information are ever more widely and asymmetrically distributed.

In such a world, the center cannot hold, and there has been a significant implosion of all the traditional behemoths – centrally planned economies, so-called totalitarian or mass society regimes, or centralized information or innovation systems. All modern effective systems have tended to become more decentralized and distributed: organizationally or spatially, or both (Paquet 2005). Moreover, the multiplex relationships holding these diverse centralized systems together, and helping them to re-enforce one another, have also fizzled out. The linkages between state, nation, elites and territory that provided much of the social glue, have been shaken loose. While states and nations (and the related notions of citizenship, identity, etc.) have traditionally been anchored in territory, of late, they have become much more footloose, “de-territorialized”. As a result, the hierarchical and authoritarian geo-governance nation-state structures (that have been in good currency for the last century or more) have proved to be rather ineffective in
meeting the coordinating needs of socio-technical systems that are continually stirred by new technological advances, external forces generated by the globalization process, greater social differentiation, and higher interdependency.

A dispersive revolution has led organizations to adapt to the new circumstances by various processes of dis-integration of existing arrangements, and quasi-re-integration in more diffuse patterns.

The search for a heightened capacity for speed, adaptiveness, flexibility and innovation, based on new forms of integration and coordination, has triggered the emergence not only of new structures and tools, but also of a whole new way of thinking. Private, public and social concerns have ceased to be drivers of people to become “drivers of learning” (Wriston 1992:119 – learning organizations, based on new forms of alliances and partnerships that are rooted in more horizontal relationships and moral contracts (Paquet 1992).

This dispersive revolution has led to the crystallization of new network business organizations, of more subsidiarity-focused governments, and of increasingly virtual, elective and malleable communities. Major governance challenges ensued: how to acquire speed, flexibility, and innovativeness, while maintaining the necessary coordination, coherence and integrity.

These forces have been at work for quite some time, but their impact has been considerably heightened by the digital revolution.

Internetworked technologies have transformed all levels of governance. As technology made participation not only possible, but easier and less costly, businesses, governments and communities have been confronted with a greater demand for participation. Citizens have become more active partners in the governance process. This has redefined the “public space” and even the notion of “publics”. New publics have emerged and, through their prodding, new distributed governance regimes, based on a wider variety of more fluid and always evolving groups of stakeholders, have developed deeper roots (Angus 2001; Tapscott and Agnew 1999).

This expansion of the democratic sphere has elicited partial and temporary response arrangements (involving meso-level summits, task forces, clubs and partnerships, regime groupings, networks of cities, etc.) based on soft power (incentives and persuasion) and soft laws (flexibility, evolving moral contracts, memoranda of understanding, etc.). These contraptions may only partially and imperfectly meet the imperatives of effectiveness, transparency, legitimacy, etc., but they have often been the best that could be practically accomplished.

Most nation-states have responded to these pressures by agreeing to some modest degree of deconcentration of power and resources to sub-national state levels. However, devolution was often designed in such a way as to ensure that real power would not be diffused too much, and would remain within reach for the centre.

The rationale provided for such timid deconcentration and hesitation to proceed with effective decentralization was that centralization might need to be re-established quickly in times of global crisis. But, it is difficult to rationalize such a reluctance to decentralize on this sole basis. There was also much reluctance to share power, and a tendency by governments to declare (without a scintilla of evidence, but with much bravura) that any significant decentralization would impair their capacity to perform their duties in both normal and abnormal times. Some sub-national “states” have grabbed these limited opportunities to acquire new leverage (real or symbolic) with glee; others have resisted these symbolic and fragile gifts from the centre that
could so easily be clawed back. The slight broadening of the oligarchic base of the state (and the temporary sharing of state power that has ensued) has therefore often been nothing but cosmetic reshuffling since the true power bases remained the same, and only surface re-alignment was offered. But because, in some cases, dis-aggregated states have ensued, opportunities for effective devolution and power-sharing have more recently been seized more aggressively by a number of sub-national states: so much so, that one may speak of a new order *en émergence* (Slaughter 2004).

Up to now, this evolution has largely remained (in most countries) a surface inter-governmental laundering of power phenomenon. This is because these initiatives have failed importantly at many levels (1) to recognize and gauging sufficiently the complexity of the policy challenges lurking ahead that call for new types of concerted action, (2) to acknowledge the fact that resources, knowledge and power are irretrievably distributed well beyond the ambit of the state, (3) to accept the harsh reality that no one is omniscient or omnipotent, (4) to factor in the fact that transnational, local, and non-state actors are inevitably bound to become more important, and (5) to understand that collaboration is the new categorical imperative.

It is particularly intriguing that the emerging structures that have popped up in response to this dispersive revolution have taken quite different paths on the economic and political fronts.

In the 20th century, an increased regulation of capitalism and an increased deregulation of democracy appear to have been the dominant trends (Zakaria 2003). This strategy has not been entirely successful: economic regulation has crippled economic growth and innovation, and, on the political front, there has been a growing fear of the “emergent publics”, and of their “demands”, by the oligarchy in place. This has led many to argue that, in the 21st century, deregulating capitalism and regulating democracy even more might be the better way.

Indeed, economic deregulation has now come to be in good currency. And the rising culture of adjudication that has emerged over the last while has given much more power to superbureaucrats (the Supreme Court, central banks, and commissars of all stripes) and has amounted to efforts at regulating democracy (Paquet 2006a).

Many eminent scholars, who had always been diffident about devolution, have celebrated this growth of “undemocratic” institutions – arguing that the clutches of professional technocrats in charge of these super-institutions are more efficient than the clutches of amateur elected members in legislatures – and have proposed the multiplication of such adjudicatory institutions in various areas, like health or the environment (Blinder 1997; Dror 2001; Zakaria 2003: 248ff).

Others (and we are of that group) have denounced such creeping illiberal delegation of various tasks to independent bodies as a seductive but damnable way to try to overcome the ailments of democracy by delegating more and more functions to the technocracy (Paquet 2006a). To this latter group, as for John Dewey, more democracy is the solution to democracy’s ailments.

**Governing in a pluralist society**

The dispersive revolution, compounded by the increased social diversity of the texture of modern communities, has consolidated the pluralist nature of society.

Globalization has accentuated the intermingling of populations, and most societies have become more polyethic, multilingual, etc. It has also generated a new transnational competition that has impacted on groups of actors quite differently, both within and across borders. City-regions have
emerged that have become impressive growth poles with a world market; meso-systems of innovation have come to dominate the global industrial landscape; new communities of practice have taken shape while others have dwindled. Such groups (national or transnational) have forged a variegated fabric, and public, private and social communities of meaning (operating often in circumscribed issue domains and/or “territories”) have emerged as meaningful stakeholders (Paquet 2005).

Shallow diversity could be tackled by political arrangements that one might lightly characterize as “boutique pluralism” – to adapt an expression used by Stanley Fish (1999: ch.4). Boutique pluralism recognizes the legitimacy of diversity, and pays attention to it as long as it does not lead to any significant adjustment to the prevailing order.

In a general way, the political process chooses to ignore these differences and strips individuals of any characteristics except their citizenship, in an effort to find a legitimate way to aggregate preferences. It creates the citizen as être de raison: erasing all differences in order to impose the citoyen sans qualités (CSQ) as the arbiter of all decisions (Paquet 2005).

Deep diversity is not so easily erased. In such a world, the CSQ cannot claim to be the sole legitimate source of power. Differentiation is not circumstantial, but essential. This calls for an explicit recognition that the governance of the socio-technical system must take these differences seriously. Such a diffraction of society, generated by deep diversity, has two major impacts.

First, even with the best of intentions, it is quite difficult to ensure that all the varied points of view are fully acknowledged and appropriately weighted in collective decision-making. Aggregating such intractable value differences in macro-baskets, and allowing for some horse-trading, is clever but not helpful. It may lead to certain expedient and opportunistic balancing acts at the higher level, but such aggregation of social choices does not necessarily lead to the best or to consistent and fair choices, or even to choices that take diversity seriously.

Second, it generates different sorts of conflict between or among factions. And these conflicts are not all necessarily of the same nature, and resolvable in the same ways. For instance, one must distinguish between routine distributional issues that can be resolved by discussion and negotiation, and categorical conflicts that cannot be resolved by debates and negotiations, because things such as identities “cannot be changed by rational arguments” (Fleiner 2001).

Truly plural societies are societies that explicitly recognize that individuals and groups can legitimately have different value systems. To pursue their different objectives, they require positive freedom: capacity and opportunity to actively and effectively pursue these values, and work pro-actively at the elimination of the constraints or unfreedoms that prevent them from doing so. Moreover, truly plural societies deny that there is any constantly overriding value (Kekes 1993:19).

This entails the inevitability of conflicts, and the need to develop reasonable conflict-resolution mechanisms, based on some core working credo (however minimal and strictly procedural) that the disputants may share. While the plurality of conceptions of a good life increases the range of valued possibilities, not all possibilities are reasonable. So there is also a need for limits, and for the justification for such limits as excluding unreasonable possibilities, or unreasonable ways of pursuing them, or ways that might simply maximize destructive conflicts.

There is a quasi-doctrinaire dominant belief in the prevalent ethos that the state is the centre of the public sphere, and the privileged locus (if not the only one) where the conflicts among groups are to be resolved. It is our view that, in a modern, pluralist, knowledge-based socio-economy,
there is no privileged or transcendent locus of conflict resolution, and, therefore, that the valence of politics and state is considerably overstated.

In a more realistic appreciation of the socio-economy, the horizontal (community) relationships are as important as the vertical ones between the citizen and the state. The reduction in the relative importance of the stato-political, any disenchantment of the political, or any drift toward a reduction of the intermediation role of the political (Touraine 1999), or its reconfiguration in new sites – all this means a shift from big G government to small g governance (Paquet 1999a).

Small-g governance may be defined as effective coordination when resources, information and power are widely distributed. This does not mean that big-G government is imploding. There is no doubt that the world is changing with the pressures of globalization, deepening diversity, and citizens’ wanting to be in the loop, but the public sector continues to play a crucial role in sustaining a healthy society through the provision of much infrastructure and social overhead capital that would not be produced otherwise. Such necessities make it easy for state technocrats to bombastically make the case for a strong state: command-and-control is claimed to be required to correct demonstrated market failures. But this is a non sequitur: Public sector intervention may be necessary, but it need not be either from the centre, or without a significant participation/collaboration of private and social actors.

The many concurrent drifts (1) from national to sub-national actors (private, public or social), (2) from government to governance, and (3) from central government to regional/local government, are therefore often confounded in the debates. And it has proven much easier for state bureaucrats to persuade the citizenry that the agonistic choice is either centralization or chaos, than for their critics to persuade the citizens that what is required is a very different institutional order in Western-style democracies – an order anchored in a philosophy of subsidiarity that reduces the scope of centralized state action in normal times (Paquet 1999a; Hubbard and Paquet 2007).

In this new world, as in a Moebius strip, there is no inside or outside. At all times, agents operating domestically are forced to face various forms of competition from the outside, and to engage in a variety of evolving arrangements with agents abroad (that have complementary assets) in order to survive. Since the issue domains are varied, and the constellations of actors involved in these various transnational arrangements are not identical, the nation-state cannot always provide a standard security zone for all these agents for whom the world is their oyster.

Centrally important is “preceptoral politics”: leaders from all sectors becoming animateurs, people called upon to reframe our views of the public realm, to design the organizations of mutual education, and to “set off the learning process” necessary to elicit, if possible, a latent consensus about what can and cannot be done (Marquand 1988; Schön and Rein 1994).

Such learning is unlikely to occur easily in today’s deeply diverse society, either through national level institutions, or through institutions that lie completely or even primarily within the public sector. It will in all likelihood be based (1) on middle-range (meso) institutions possibly built upon what are emerging as new units of analysis for policy development – city-regions and communities of practice (Hubbard and Paquet 2005), or (2) on networks designed to promote communication and cooperation on a scale of issues that mobilizes existing groups and communities at the local level, or forums that are likely to remobilize the commitment of the citizenry in organizations à leur mesure (Hubbard and Paquet 2007).

This underpins a process of policy-making that is based on intelligence and innovation within issue domains: a dynamic monitoring by those closer to the issues, which feeds an innovative learning process and embraces all stakeholders. But this new form of governance, based on
continuing feedback and constant problem reformulation as experiences accumulate, requires new partnerships between the public, private and social realms, between elected officials, bureaucrats, and players from other sectors, etc. This is a world of moral contracts among members of networks: these negotiated norms are much less rigid and less likely to foster adversarial relations than if the work is done through formal regulations and rules.

“The general idea is that if it is possible to agree on the broad principles that particular sets of regulations strive to achieve, it should be possible to produce a flexible set of arrangements that satisfy the interested parties without hamstringing operations” (Morgan 1988:163).

In this context, the state is to become not only a less important actor, but also and most importantly an enabling learning organization, ensuring a constant dialogue with the citizenry, and improving the communicational competence of its citizens. This requires some organizational development and institution building: one cannot rely exclusively on organic feedback. New instrumentalities are necessary if a capacity to learn at the centre and a capacity for quick feedback and instantaneous action are to materialize at the periphery, when government does not appear to do the right thing.

These new instrumentalities do not need to fit nicely into only one of the private, public or civic sectors. The different logics of market, state and reciprocity may cohabit in the design of the most efficient arrangements. Indeed, they may be usefully co-mingled (Hubbard and Paquet 2002). Such métissage is increasingly becoming an accepted vehicle. (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004).

In this world built on a multiplicity of flexible arrangements, governing by network is the rule, and effective leadership might best be described in Harlan Cleveland’s words as “bringing people together to make something different happen” (Cleveland 2002:xv).

This cannot be done by coercion, but will be arrived at mostly by negotiated agreements. For that sort of leadership of equals to work, rich communications, coordinating activities, and relations-building and trust are required. In this world of collaboration, much depends on how people work together, and how they communicate. Leaders are truly connectors who instruct members of their communities of practice in a light way, often by example. This transforms the usual pattern of motivation: one can no longer be satisfied with monetary carrots and accountability sticks. Trust and professionalism are crucial when collaboration is central (Evans and Wolf 2005).

Public sector leaders must maximize public value by concentrating on building on core government capabilities, and identifying what partners the state might benefit most from collaborating with, and in which ways. The public sector becomes itself a connector and an enabler, and not necessarily a doer (Paquet 2006b). This does not necessarily mean that the public interest will be neglected in any way. The governing by network does, however, wield a different sort of power: power with instead of power over.

Mobius-web governance is a label one may use to connote this new ecology of governance. It is characterized by mixed formal and informal structures, and by processes that are multi-directional (i.e. vertical, horizontal, and transversal). The dynamics of such hybrid and baroque arrangements are intricate, and so overlapping over several levels as to form “a singular weblike process that, like a mobius, neither begins nor culminates at any level or at any point in time” (Rosenau 2003:397). Such governance requires that authority be dispersed and decentralized.

Foreign policy as prototyping and serious play
It would wrong to suggest that this new world has just sprung into existence. *Natura non fecit saltum*. Central governments of nation-states have always paid some attention to sub-national groups and sub-national interests in shaping foreign policies. Indeed, particular elites have traditionally been very influential in the domestic and international policy formation process. This process has been informal at times, but has also taken on some formal attire.

Over the last 20 years, for instance, there has been a long tradition of consultation by the Canadian government with sectoral foreign trade policy interested parties. However, these consultations have been marvelously *lite*. So the SAGIT (Sectoral Advisory Groups on International Trade) experience has given mixed results, and the provincial/regional/city-regional/sectional interfaces with the federal government have also remained to the present rather more limited and confrontational than extensive and collaborative (at least until the last few months).

But the acceleration of globalization, and the deepening of diversity within advanced democracies, have put additional pressure on the system of late, and have revealed that the apparatus in place may leave too much to be desired. First, the SAGIT consultation mechanisms are mostly controlled by the Canadian federal government. Second, the advisory nature of the relationship has entailed that a voice was granted but not necessarily a hearing. Third, the dynamics of deliberation is grossly excluded: groups are not really engaged in discussions as partners.

What lurks behind this situation is the remnant of a Hegelian-flavoured metaphysics: the state (always spelled with a capital S and meaning mostly the federal state) is presumed to be the fundamental societal organism, with moral purposes that transcend those of its individual citizens. Therefore, depending on the coefficient of Hegelianism harboured, tinkering with the state sphere or decision-making is perceived as less or more *lèse-majesté*.

For the soft Hegelians, there is more to the state than service provision, but this does not prevent them, at times, from legitimately seeking more efficiency and effectiveness in alternative non-state delivery systems. For the hard Hegelians, any tinkering with any aspect of the state sphere that may reduce its scope or ambit or power can only be regarded with suspicion. So for them the task of finding ways for all interested parties to partake in foreign policy-making will not only appear to be quite difficult, but be regarded as nothing less than sacrilegious and utopian.

This paper’s concern – to borrow a phrase from one of Geoffrey Vickers’ books (Vickers 1983: xxvii) – “is not with solving problems but with understanding situations”. Problem solving is never more than 15% of effective stewardship: the rest requires a deeper understanding of realities that are often less than fully describable, and less than well-structured, but it is an unconditional prerequisite before problem-solution can kick in.

The task ahead for foreign policy developers will require a significant amount of experimentation, and an acceptance that experiments will differ from sector/region to sector/region, and will often fail.

The guidepost in such experimentation, therefore, cannot be instant success, but minimum regret. Governance failures cannot be corrected by simply adding on mechanical contraptions, any more than electricity has emerged from efforts at improving candles. In the end, some reframing, and some cultural change will be required.
The key to an evolution like this is (a) a drift toward open-source federalism (i.e., a form of federalism that enables each citizen and group of citizens, as much as possible, to have access to the “code”, and to tinker freely with the way the system works, within certain well-accepted constraints); (b) a priority to “serious play” (i.e., the development of a premium on innovation and experimentation with the view that, if a thousand flowers bloom one might be able to better retool, restructure and reframe innovatively and productively), and (c) the full recognition of the wisdom of crowds.

(a) open source and issue domains

One of the central features of modernity is the existence of a plurality of conversations through which practical people hope to be able to reconcile, and to articulate in some loose but comprehensive manner, some common “mode of conversation”.

Federalism, if it is thought of as a regime, can be regarded as a social technology that has the capacity to build such a means of articulation. The original variegated fabric of Canada explains why traditional federalism was seized upon as a workable social technology. In the recent past, however, there has been an extraordinary growth of diversity of all sorts in our modern societies, and the plurality of conversations has made most societies truly polyphonic.

In the face of such deep diversity, traditional federalism does not appear to be as powerful an instrument as many had hoped. It has mainly developed along territorial lines: it has fundamentally become associated with a form of geographical essentialism that is “politically naïve, constitutionally undesirable and theoretically irrelevant”: (Carter 1998:55).

Even when federalism has attempted to inject a “national” flavour into such geographical essentialism, or when it has tried to transform itself into a “multination federalism”, the results have not been great, because diversity has by now acquired such polymorphous dimensions that these simple categorizations – territory or nation – have failed to grapple with deep diversity in any significant way (Paquet 2005: ch. 13).

To the extent that the terrain des operations has become so diverse, and the array of actively interested stakeholders so varied, the best way to accommodate such terrains and such stakeholders is by dealing with them relatively separately, by empowering them, by giving them access as much as possible to the “code”, so that they can themselves tinker with the arrangements.

Creating a collection of open source approaches would appear to be the answer.

By partitioning the terrain into issue domains and “communities of meaning”, it is possible to identify a vast number of sub-games that require specific treatment. This partitioning does not exclude some attention being given to territory and nation – to knitting them together into a relatively coherent whole – but it does not provide these global dimensions with some overarching dominant role.

Each issue-domain (health, education, environment, etc.) is multifaceted, and must be dealt with on an ad hoc basis, with its own governance. This in turn calls for all the stakeholders to have access to the code, and to be allowed to tinker with the existing arrangements within certain limits.
The expression “ecology of governance” has been proposed by Walt Anderson to identify this new fluid form of governance: “many different systems and different kinds of systems interacting with one another, like the multiple organisms in an ecosystem” (Anderson 2001:252). Such arrangements are not necessarily “neat, peaceful, stable or efficient … but in a continual process of learning and changing and responding to feedback”.

Such an ecology of governance must remain at all times an open system that has the capacity to learn and to evolve: the model is not a cathedral but a bazaar (Raymond 1999). This open system shapes the required mix of principles and norms, of rules and decision-making procedures likely to promote the preferred mix of efficiency, resilience and learning.

The template likely to be of use in this regime-based federalism may not be available yet, but it is not unworkable. Experiments in the private sector have established that uncentralized networks are workable arrangements, even in complex trans-national arrangements. The most interesting example is the “chaord” – underpinning the operating structure of VISA (Hock 1995).

Hock has shown that in attempting to govern something as complex as VISA’s financial empire, for instance, the design problem was so momentous that they had to create a new form of uncentralized organization. This was seen as the only way to ensure durability and resilience in such a complex organization, exposed to a vast array of turbulent contextual circumstances, but also having to face the immense coordination challenge involved in orchestrating the work of over 20,000 financial institutions, in more than 200 countries, trying to serve hundreds of millions of users.

This new form of organization would provide both the main purpose and the mix of norms and mechanisms likely to underpin its realization through bottom-up effervescence, within the context of some loose framework of guiding principles agreed to by all.

Hock has given some examples of the principles, norms and rules that cannot be simply dichotomized, and has defined the sort of organization used to cope with these challenges in the construction and design of VISA:

- it must be equitably owned by all participants; no member should have an intrinsic advantage; all advantages should result from ability and initiative
- power and function must be distributive to the maximum; no function and no power should be vested with any part that might be reasonably exercised by any lesser part
- governance must be distributive; no individual or group of individuals should be able to dominate deliberations or control decisions
- to the maximum degree possible, everything should be voluntary
- it must be infinitely malleable, yet extremely durable; it should be capable of constant, self-generated modification without sacrificing its essential nature
- it must embrace diversity and change; it must attract people comfortable with such an environment, and provide an environment in which they can thrive (Hock 1995, 1999: 137-139).

It will not be surprising that, much as in the case of the VISA’s chaord, federalism, as a way of thinking and as a way of governing organizations, has been explicitly mentioned, and its spirit echoed in a variety of guiding maxims that provide the culture of emerging organizations. Charles Handy has identified a few such principles:
authority must be earned from those over whom it is exercised
people have both the right and the duty to sign their work
autonomy means managing empty spaces
twin (status and task) hierarchies are necessary and useful
what is good for me should be good for the corporation (Handy 1992).

No single template is likely to become a rigid recipe in the use of a mixed regime-based organization, but both chaords and federal systems are interesting illustrations of plausible and credible experiments. Both organizational forms are examples of institutional and organizational métissage. In such a multidimensional world, there is always some scope for modification of the parameters (Paquet 2005).

The challenge is to show how such a system might effectively transform Canadian federalism into a foreign policy apparatus capable of better serving Canadians, while maintaining a degree of coherence and integrity that would enable it to function smoothly. This is where the dynamics leading to permanent deliberation and evolving and always-in-transition features of the apparatus are central to the success of this sort of arrangement.

(b) prototyping and serious play

But it is not sufficient to ensure open access. One must also ensure that the appropriate motivations are nurtured so that all are engaged in “serious play” (i.e., the capacity for citizens to become truly producers of governance through tinkering with the stewardship apparatus within certain limits). This, in turn, requires that the requisite amount of collaboration and trust prevails.

It calls for a reconfiguration of federalism, taking “communities of meaning” seriously, and allowing their presence to weigh heavily in the functioning of the federation. Such an approach would not only suggest very different arrangements, but would underline the importance of regarding any such arrangement as fundamentally temporary – since the ground is in motion, and diversity is likely to acquire new faces.

Consequently, federalism would not only rely on a much more flexible toolbox, but would require that any formal or binding arrangement be revisited, played with, and constantly adjusted to diverse circumstances. It would open the door to the design of more complex and innovative arrangements likely to deal less ineffectively with deep diversity. Unfortunately, for the time being, most schemes at the federal level are in denial in the face of deep diversity. Factoring it in, even in a modest way, might revolutionize and modernize federalism.

Playing with prototypes – in other words serious play – has not been encouraged in Canada. Yet since the Supreme Court decision in the Chaoulli case – a decision that stated *grosso modo* that citizens had the right to seek private health care when the public system failed them – different groups throughout Canada have begun exploring different prototypes of arrangements that would be in keeping with the Supreme Court ruling. They have timidly begun to play seriously.

To do it well, a number of required steps have been identified: tinkerers need to (1) identify as quickly as possible some top requirements, (2) put in place a quick-and-dirty provisional medium of co-development with their partners, (3) allow as many interested parties as possible to get involved as partners in designing a better arrangement, (4) encourage iterative prototyping, and (5) thereby encourage all, through playing with prototypes, to get a better understanding of the problems, of their priorities, and of themselves (Schrage 2000: 199ff).
The purpose of serious play is to create a dialogue (creative interaction) between people and prototypes: something that may be more important than creating dialogue between people alone. It is predicated on a culture of active participation.

The sort of democratization of design that ensues (and the sort of playfulness and adventure that is required for serious play with prototypes) may not yet be part of the culture, but they are emerging tendencies.

The zero-sum game theatrics of present-day federalism (with its few actors trying to protect their vested interests and a single position inflicted on all regions and groups whatever its dysfunctionality for some – *pace* Kyoto) are not very promising. The interaction among a large number of interested parties around a prototype, and intent on designing a better one, is much more promising. Only such an extended multilogue has the possibility of transforming the zero-sum game into a positive sum game.

Yet one has to be sensitive to the fragility of these games. It takes little to sterilize the multilogue or to derail the conversation: declaring any assumption or hypothesis taboo or sacrosanct would suffice. One can only guess at the social costs of having declared the Canada Health Act sacrosanct, rather than taking it as a prototype and allowing it to be tweaked and improved.

That this approach can be extended to the realm of foreign policy is regarded as impossible by some apostles of clarity and certainty. Yet, if there is an area where (because of the lack of world government, and the multiplicity of national rules) fuzziness and blurring are in good currency, it is in the world of external affairs. The fact that diplomats may find clarity and certainty convenient should not be allowed to stunt the creative process through which sub-national actors of all sorts might be allowed to experiment with new arrangements.

Some of the experiments in Europe where sub-national regional governments can negotiate treaties across national borders without having to obtain national permission, would constitute a step in the right direction. But they are only a beginning, since they are restricted to sub-national governments. One can imagine a whole array of experimentation, putting flats and sharps on “national understandings” and developing creative arrangements under the sole constraint that they do not violate certain basic covenants.

The timid experiment in Europe has only allowed sub-national governments to experiment in a limited terrain. There is no reason to believe that – subject to certain minimal rules – experimentation on the international scene by all sub-national actors (local, sectional, etc.) should not be possible and encouraged (Paquet 2000).

(c) the wisdom of crowds

There is a palpable suspicion that one may have slipped into utopian thinking when large-scale evolutionary tinkering and play is proposed to replace the sacred Cartesian rational decision-making purported to be in good currency.

While this sort of argument is continually trotted out, and may sound as if it has some force at first, one needs to be only vaguely familiar with the *de facto* chaotic nature of the *real* decision processes in foreign policy-making to be disabused of the impression that Cartesian thinking effectively prevails. What is mostly on display is some ritualized rationality that provides little re-assurance to critical observers.
Foreign policy-making evolves in the absence of fail-safe mechanisms and ultimate power brokers. It has mostly been stylized in the language of game theory: two-level games or two-face games (Putnam 1988; Gi-woong 2002) that are largely descriptive schemes that are useful to sort out the issues, but are most often indeterminate when it comes to predicting outcomes. Recognizing this sort of reality makes it much easier to question the pretentiousness of career nation-state bureaucrats when they pretend to solve foreign policy issues analytically.

The alternative is to recognize that foreign policy outcomes are broadly determined by evolution, and by the emergence of “correlated conventions” that make the games evolutionary stable (Skyrms 1996). Actors in game context quickly learn that when they are able to coordinate on a correlated equilibrium, all parties do well. The exact nature of this equilibrium may not be predictable, but the trial-and-error process may be counted on to elicit it in the form of a convention. These correlated conventions emerge through evolution rather than through rational adjudication: so called “naïve, unsophisticated agents” “can coordinate themselves to achieve complex, mutually beneficial ends, even if they are not really sure, at the start, what those ends are or what it will take to accomplish them” (Surowiecki 2004:107).

Analysts are so mesmerized by the command-and-control rational way of arriving at an evolutionary stable convention that they exclude all other approaches. Yet evolution and learning are the ways in which our species has come about: through unpredictable outcomes generated by evolutionary stable strategies underpinning much social learning.

It is our view that open-source prototyping, involving a large number of actors is a more effective way of evolving foreign policy than the present ritualized-rational way of doing it. This is the way regimes have evolved in the past, and with much greater effectiveness than had been anticipated most of the time. It is the way Linux and Wikipedia are also evolving surprisingly well (The Economist April 1, 2006).

James Surowiecki (2004) has explored this diffuse process through which crowds elicit effective evolutionary stable strategies and breed surprising outcomes. He has shown that under conditions of diversity, independence and decentralization, much collective intelligence emerges from crowds, and much effective coordination ensues: “the many are smarter than the few”. But he has also shown that attempts at aggregating information and judgments of crowds through serious play and quasi-market mechanisms (like the FutureMAP program and the so-called PAM (Policy Analysis Market) have been received with immense hostility as “viscerally unappealing” in foreign policy quarters (Surowiecki 2004: 79ff). It is fascinating that even a private sector version of a refurbished PAM (without government involvement) ran into difficulty because of the hostility to using the collective intelligence of crowds, and a dedication to reliance on experts despite much evidence that the former performs better than the latter.

Still the pressure to open the system to broader participation and social learning is making headway in foreign policy development, albeit in an oblique and unplanned way. Two interesting examples are the evolving politique internationale du Québec (2006) and the capharnaüm of Kyoto. Both issues are making all our Cartesian friends nervous (and denunciatory of chaos and the excesses to come) but are unfolding anyway without any one person in charge.

It is amusing that in the case of the politique internationale du Québec the ongoing process would appear to be replicating (some 15 years later) the same sort of kickstarting of an evolutionary process of transformation that marked Canada’s immigration policy, and that Mme Gagnon-Tremblay has been at the helm of both these initiatives. In both cases, moral contracts are crucial components.
Lessons from above and below

The paradigmatic change *en émergence* in the world of foreign policy making is a simple echo of the paradigmatic change we are experiencing in the whole world of the social sciences in general, and economics in particular. After years of romanticizing the beauty of planning and social engineering, social scientists have come to realize something that physical sciences confronted a century ago: the cathedral-like models à la Walras or Durkheim have been replaced by bazaar-like evolutionary models. Nobody is in charge.

A century ago, physical scientists tore up the theoretical constructs that social scientists had just borrowed from them, and boldly entered the world of relativity, quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and complexity theory. Now may be the time for social sciences to follow suit (Beinhocker 2006). And indeed, this sort of work is under way, albeit not yet front and center in universities.

These are precious moments in the evolution of prevailing cosmologies, for perspectives are still fluid and have not yet congealed. This fluidity allows journalists and lay commentators to discuss matters on par with experts and pseudo-specialists. Indeed, international affairs as a field of study may be regarded as such an area – one that still has not allowed itself to be completely colonized by tribes of grand theorists. This is not for lack of trying on their part, but for their theoretical machines’ lack of success in producing anything but trite results.

Wisdom is distilled in this area by trial and error. Allow me to refer to two sets of lessons recently reported from above and from below.

(a) From above, the synthetic work of Sylvia Ostry has underlined the decline in deference to the government and to the elites in the functioning of international institutions traditionally charged with foreign policy making (Ostry 2000). Some of the actions by non-state groups, both at the Seattle and Quebec confrontations, have been orchestrated by NGOs and have taken an operatic quality. But these theatrics should not hide the fact that other actors like the multinational corporations have been very active behind the scenes in negotiations with host governments, and that this has amounted to nothing less than a “privatization of trade policy”. Why bother with tedious intergovernmental negotiations when one can achieve the same goal privately? This has raised questions about the very insignificance of being a “trade minister” when the issues at stake span almost the whole range of domestic policy portfolios, and involves direct action by this new wide range of stakeholders.

The presence of these new actors in the foreign-policy-making area has led WTO specialists to entertain the possibility of allowing all the non-governmental actors to bring their cases directly to WTO dispute settlement panels or to policy forums, and to allow a *laissez-littiger régime* (Ostry) to emerge. Some UN commissions’ committees already include NGOs, trade union representatives and corporations, and have given reality to “what has been called hybrid governance which involves a combination of ‘hard law’ (implemented by the coercive power of the government or intergovernmental institutions) and ‘soft law’ or codes of conduct which provide principles and norms for guidance and emulation” (Ostry 2000).

(b) From below, one must acknowledge the multiplicity of efforts by sub-national governments and stakeholder groups of all sorts to enter the fray, and to have an impact on foreign policy making in the different countries. This is centrally important in Canada, since the federal government does not have a monopoly on foreign affairs: since the 1937 Privy Council decision about collective agreements, the provinces are not bound to implement any international
treaty signed by the federal government pertaining to matters of provincial jurisdiction (Paquin 2005).

This situation has forced Canada to specify, in its international treaty commitments, that it can only respect those treaties within the scope of its own competences. But it is only ex post, reluctantly and minimally, that provincial stakeholders have been allowed to take part in the foreign policy making process. Many other countries, like Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and Spain have developed processes to allow greater participation of sub-national units in the process of development of foreign policy, but Canada has been hesitant to borrow or adopt and adapt these mechanisms.

One might expect that since, under constitutional duress, the Canadian federal government has been so reluctant to open up the process of foreign policy decision-making to sub-national states, it is clearly most unlikely to agree to open it to other less formally-empowered stakeholders.

Consequently, it is unlikely that Canadian federal apparatchiks will look kindly at the possibility of opening up the foreign policy making process. What is most likely is that the foreign policy-making powers of the federal government are slowly going to be eroded, and that the federal policy machinery will adjust pragmatically by making minimal overtures to ensure that no major embarrassing blockages will ensue. This is most certainly not the most Cartesian way to respond to an optimization problem, but since the issue is not optimizing but satisficing with minimal debates for fear that no permissive consensus might ensue, it will ensure that no major crisis materializes.

As for the presence of the other stakeholders, that is likely to materialize in specific meso-forums, and to have much impact without much fanfare. A good example of this sort of virtual forum is the debate around softwood lumber. A large number of stakeholders from the public, private and social sectors have been heard but in a serial and informal set of meetings at various sites, without any person acting as final decider.

In some cases, new virtual networks like Cascadia may take form and acquire a certain degree of formality, but this need not be the case, for it is not clear that such virtual territorial units will be able to develop a consensus on most issues.

This process of slow permissive minimal inclusion in the various sectoral foreign policy-making forums may not be ideal, and may not produce the most coherent overall foreign policy for Canada, but such an objective would be utopian in any case. The degree of anomie in the Canadian system is already such (as Kyoto has demonstrated) that one has to be satisfied with aiming at a must less ambitious objective.

The great Canadian diversity calls for a very polyvalent and polymorphous foreign policy. Anything less complex could only be oppressive for major segments of the country. Only multi-level loosely-coupled negotiating tables, or forums where different arrays of stakeholders will be present, can be expected to work. Over time, this will generate over time a variety of slightly different arrangements coexisting within a broad corridor of compatible but different designs.

Canada already has a considerable experience in designing such patchwork quilts of arrangements. As long as the external effects of such arrangements on third parties are minimal, there can be peaceful coexistence. It should therefore be possible to construct Canada’s foreign policy par morceau, as has been done up to now in any case, without undue damage, but with certain opportunity costs (Paquet 2000).
Conclusion

Polycentric governance is not an expression that refers simply to some pluralist coalition in the world of states (i.e., a coalition of states and sub-states in shaping policy) in a multipolar world. It is a subversive new way of envisaging foreign policy-making. New units of analysis like the “communities of practice” (accountants) and “city-regions” are already not only present on the national scene, but have tentacles around the world. These units are sub-national actors of extraordinary consequence, but they often have no formal presence on the national scene, and are somewhat occluded at the international level.

Few policy areas are less closely welded to the old nation-state than foreign policy. Its very substance is rooted in the belief that the nation-state is the basic unit of analysis. From this presumption stems a variety of bizarre corollaries: that the nation-state has a soul and represents “national values”, the *integrité du territoire* is sacred, the “national community” (whatever that means) must speak with one voice, etc.

This view of the world is as antiquated as units of measure like the ell.

The reductive fascination with “national character” and uniformity must be resisted. Countries are convenient boxes used to simplify the global mapping of cultures, but one should not fall prey to the logical fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi*: ascribing causal force to a principle of classification used for convenience. Measuring unemployment by regions does not allow one to ascribe the differences in observed rates of unemployment to the “regional factor”. Such a tautological argument invents a fictional “national character” as warranted when, in most cases, it is not (Heath 2003).

Whether one can ever break loose from the mental prison of “national policy” is not in doubt. The problem is when, and through what subversive stratagem!

It would be unwise not to recognize that there is a strong dynamic conservatism is at work. It is anchored in a conventional view of foreign policy as the preserve of a federal department. Since this department has a strong and vibrant tradition – not unlike that of the Zouaves or la Légion étrangère – it is likely to put up a big fight to maintain the traditional order. Yet the old guard is unlikely to win this fight.

There are three reasons for this. First, the univocal top-down-enforced foreign policy is likely to be shown to be seriously dysfunctional, given the polyphonic nature of the country. Second, it is bound to serve a variegated and diverse socio-economy rather badly. And, most importantly, it is bound to inflict significant damage to the fabric of the country.

Our survival instinct should, therefore, guide us toward a Möbius-web governance.
References


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