


BOOK REVIEW

## *The Evaluation of Polycentric Climate Governance*, by Jonas J. Schoenefeld

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Is climate policy working? This basic question is at the heart of the field of climate policy evaluation. The question is also at the core of *The Evaluation of Polycentric Climate Governance*, a new book by Jonas Schoenefeld. As Schoenefeld reveals, this simple question gives rise to a plethora of other questions: Who actually evaluates climate policy? Who pays for these evaluations? What do they cover (and what is left out)? What criteria and methods are employed in the evaluations? In his book, Schoenefeld engages with these – and other – questions by connecting scholarship on policy evaluation to insights from the literature on polycentric governance.

Building on Elinor and Vincent Ostrom’s pioneering work on local governments and common pool resources, the concepts of polycentricity and polycentric governance have become fashionable in various bodies of literature that seek to shed light on areas of governance, with a multiplicity of actors, levels, and instruments. This includes scholarship on transnational environmental law,<sup>1</sup> and on climate law and governance.<sup>2</sup> However, some of this literature is marked by conceptual fuzziness and inconsistency, with scholars using terms such as ‘polycentricity’ in various descriptive, analytical, and normative ways.<sup>3</sup>

Schoenefeld does not fall into this trap. He demonstrates meaningful engagement with the literature on polycentric governance, and helpfully unpacks the concept itself. Schoenefeld points to the more-than-semantic distinction between ‘polycentricity’, which he refers to as a ‘descriptor to indicate the apparent structure of governance activities’, and ‘polycentrism’ (or ‘polycentric governance’), which in his view

<sup>1</sup> E.g., V. Heyvaert, ‘The Transnationalization of Law: Rethinking Law through Transnational Environmental Regulation’ (2017) 6(2) *Transnational Environmental Law*, pp. 205–36; J. van Zeben, ‘Facing the Legitimacy Challenge: Law as a Disciplining Force for Transnational Environmental Governance’, in V. Heyvaert & L.-A. Duvic-Paoli (eds), *Research Handbook on Transnational Environmental Law* (Edward Elgar, 2020), pp. 145–57.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., D. Cole, ‘From Global to Polycentric Climate Governance’ (2011) 2(3) *Climate Law*, pp. 395–413; A. Jordan et al., ‘Emergence of Polycentric Climate Governance and Its Future Prospects’ (2015) 5 *Nature Climate Change*, pp. 977–82; A. Jordan et al. (eds), *Governing Climate Change: Polycentricity in Action?* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See A. Jordan et al., ‘Governing Climate Change Polycentrically: Setting the Scene’, in Jordan et al., n. 2 above, pp. 3–25.

‘describes “a *system or theory* having or proposing many centres or focal points”’ (p. 5). In other words, where polycentricity simply refers to a pattern of multiple sites of governance, polycentrism refers to a system, which requires some form of interaction between these sites of governance (pp. 7–8).

To further help to operationalize a potentially fuzzy concept, Schoenefeld identifies three ‘foundational ideas’ (p. 20) that underpin polycentric governance: (i) self-organization – actors having the capacity and willingness to govern themselves; (ii) context – the idea that the context in which a site of governance operates matters, and that there is a need to go ‘beyond panaceas’;<sup>4</sup> and (iii) interactions – that different sites of governance, even though being independent units, interact.

Schoenefeld’s aim is to uncover the (potentially important) role of evaluation in a system characterized by polycentric governance. In a polycentric system, information is assumed to flow from one site of governance to another, allowing for learning across multiple governance units.<sup>5</sup> Evaluation offers one potential mechanism through which learning can take place. Like the concept of polycentric governance, Schoenefeld helpfully unpacks the notion of ‘policy evaluation’, showing that it should not be thought of simplistically as an activity that comes at the end of a policy cycle, but rather as something that ‘may weave much more profoundly into the fabric of governance’ (p. 184).

The empirical focus of the book is on the European Union (EU), Germany, and the United Kingdom (UK): three ‘evaluation leaders’ (p. 52). Following a brief overview of the history and practice of (climate) policy evaluation in these three jurisdictions (Chapter 3), more than half of the book is devoted to an empirical analysis of 618 climate policy evaluations published in these jurisdictions between 1997 and 2014 (Chapters 4–6). It is clear that Schoenefeld has put in a major effort by coding the evaluations along several characteristics, most of which can be traced back to what he considers the three ‘foundational ideas’ of polycentrism: self-organization, context, and interaction.

To assess whether climate policy evaluations are emerging through *self-organization*, Schoenefeld, for instance, examines whether such evaluations are funded by the state or by other actors (thereby distinguishing between ‘state-driven’ and ‘society-driven’ evaluation) and whether evaluations are the result of a specific legal requirement to monitor and evaluate policies. To assess how the relevant *context* is considered, he looks at how various factors (for example, time horizon of evaluation, attention to policy goals, unintended policy outcomes, external events, and the political environment) are reflected in evaluations. To better understand the *interactions* between different sites of governance, Schoenefeld, among others, studies the extent to which evaluations can be used in other governance contexts and the extent to which evaluations refer to each other.

<sup>4</sup> E. Ostrom, M.A. Janssen & J.M. Anderies, ‘Going beyond Panaceas’ (2007) 104(39) *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, pp. 15176–78.

<sup>5</sup> Rather than an untested assumption, one could argue that it is an essential prerequisite for the functioning of polycentric governance; see, e.g., J. van Zeben, ‘Polycentricity as a Theory of Governance’, in J. van Zeben & A. Bobić (eds), *Polycentricity in the European Union* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 9–27, at 26.

The downside of this impressive empirical analysis is the density of the resulting information, linked to nearly 100 figures spread across three chapters. As such, it becomes difficult to discern the core messages emerging from the analysis. Although Schoenefeld helpfully summarizes some of the key findings at the end of subsections, one cannot help but wonder whether the information in these chapters could have been presented in a more compact and reader-friendly fashion. The density of information presented in the empirical chapters, the use of jargon (notably from the polycentric governance literature), and an excessive use of quotes in previous chapters make the book hard to digest by non-specialists.

The empirical analysis yields some interesting insights, which are discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. For instance, Schoenefeld clearly demonstrates that notwithstanding the emphasis on non-state and local actors in the polycentric (climate) governance literature, the state still has a major role to play, notably by funding evaluations. Relatedly, he finds that non-state actors cannot always fill the gaps in state-driven evaluations (which tend to be less reflexive and pay less attention to the prevailing context) because of the costs of policy evaluation. Nevertheless, he concludes that both 'state-funded and society-funded evaluations make unique and relevant contributions to climate policy evaluation in the EU's polycentric governance approach' (p. 197).

These findings in themselves offer useful food for thought for scholars and practitioners in the areas of polycentric governance and policy evaluation. At the same time, Schoenefeld has missed an opportunity to truly live up to the title of his book by focusing narrowly on *public* climate policy evaluation (i.e., governmental interventions). Although this focus is understandable, and largely in line with the extant literature on policy evaluation, it would have been valuable to shed light on the emerging practice (or lack thereof) of evaluating non-state and subnational climate governance initiatives. If climate governance *in toto* is to transform into a polycentric system, it will be important to understand what we can learn from governance beyond the state, and the extent to which insights from public policy evaluation can be applied to non-state and subnational governance initiatives. Likewise, some further consideration of the implications of the book's findings for jurisdictions outside the EU would have been welcome, even if any further empirical studies would be the subject of future research.

To conclude, *The Evaluation of Polycentric Climate Governance* is an original book that offers a timely and helpful contribution to the literature on polycentric (climate) governance and policy evaluation and, as such, should be of interest to scholars and practitioners working in these areas. For transnational environmental lawyers, the book offers a useful conceptualization of the core features of polycentric governance, including both its theoretical potential and its practical limitations.