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Micropolitical practices of multispatial metagovernance in rural Denmark

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Abstract
Research on governance, network governance and metagovernance has shown how the practice of governing involves a diversity of actors in and beyond the state. Much attention has been paid to the role of powerful state and non-state actors while less consideration has been directed at less visible and marginalised actors who are recognised as participants but whose agency is rarely subjected to in-depth research. In this article, we address this lack by studying the micropolitical practices of place-based self-governing networks in the Danish countryside and their role in governing rural places. Our theoretical point of departure is Bob Jessop's notion of multispatial metagovernance which we seek to enhance by considering marginalised actors around the edges of the state apparatus. Our findings suggest that these marginalised and overlooked actors are not just subjected to governance but actively partake in shaping the governance landscape by enveloping rural places for self-governance in four distinct ways: (1) subverting municipal micro-technologies of power; (2) filling the void created by scalar fixes; (3) keeping local organising efforts fluid and opaque to outsiders and (4) orchestrating strategically selective cooperation with extra-local actors. Without downplaying asymmetries of power and their influence on governance outcomes, we conclude that metagovernance and collibration are not just prerogatives of the powerful. Generating adequate understandings of such practices is therefore only possible if we consider the full breadth of involved actors without taking for granted that outcomes are always decided in advance by the powerful. The study that the article reports on shows one of the ways in which this task may be approached empirically.

Keywords
metagovernance, rural, micropolitical, place, power

Introduction

In this paper, we investigate the role played by rural, place-based self-governing networks in shaping and performing governance and metagovernance through micropolitical practices. More

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precisely, this involves an exploration of what takes place around the edges of the formal governance realm and beyond the fuzzy boundaries of the state apparatus. In a reality where governance arrangements involve a heterogenous multiplicity of actors, the role of public authorities – that is, the state apparatus – is reconfigured. This leads to calls for the development of collaborative and adaptive state strategies that focus on connecting, motivating and committing actors while bridging differences between them (e.g. Klijn & Koppenjan, 2020; Meuleman, 2020; Carlisle and Gruby, 2019). In this sense, governance has become the primary arena for addressing one of the key issues of political organisation: 'how to combine unity and diversity and craft a cooperative system out of a conflictual one' (March and Olsen, 2011: 485). The danger of such a pursuit is that the focus on fostering cooperative relations and consensus may result in a blindness towards conflict and power, where we fail to adequately appreciate that asymmetric power relations and antagonisms are inescapable aspects of political reality (Allen, 2003; Mouffe, 2013). This does not preclude the possibility of collaborative governance arrangements, but it does mean that creating and maintaining them require a commitment to treating power as 'our mundane, pervasive, uneven milieu' (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 8). It is an issue that can never be fully resolved but which demands continuing attention and action, not least where the representation of marginalised groups is concerned (Hunt, 2019; Dobbin and Lubell, 2019). The groups with which this paper is concerned empirically are marginalised only in the sense of their disadvantaged positionality vis-à-vis the state apparatus and its decision-making processes. They are, in other words, located on the margins of the state terrain, but not on the margins of society[1].

Currently, issues concerning collaborative governance are accentuated around the edges of the formal governance system. Previous research shows how difficulties arise in public-voluntary relations, when authorities act in ways that are too controlling (Bailey and Pill, 2015) and when they 'push too hard' (Uster et al., 2019). We use the Danish case of village planning for outdoor recreation and landscape access to explore some of the micropolitical practices that contribute to determine how governance arrangements play out in practice, reproducing some power asymmetries while disrupting others. Our starting point is that local actors in rural areas have access to knowledge and networks where public authorities do not (Agger et al., 2010) and that therefore the practices of local actors beyond the state can be decisive for governance outcomes (Ubels et al., 2019). It follows that studying governance at the local level requires an approach oriented towards these micropolitical practices, and hence to questions of how governance is embedded in the everyday, rather than focussing only on formal governance arrangements and policies per se. The importance of local knowledge is exacerbated in our empirical grounding because the object of governance – rural landscapes as spaces for outdoor recreation – is intimately known only by those whose everyday lives are lived in the places in question.

Using multispatial metagovernance (Jessop, 2016a) as an abstract-simple entry point allows us to contribute to on-going work on collaborative and network governance as well as metagovernance by combining elements of Jessop's strategic-relational approach with an empirical orientation towards micropolitical practices and the everyday. Findings are used to generate a new understanding of the role of place-based, self-governing networks in rural governance. This refers to Stoker's (1998: 23) proposition that 'governance is about autonomous self-governing networks of actors' with a few qualifications. First, autonomy is not fully achievable and hence 'self-governing' refers to aspiration and effort rather than to achieved or achievable reality. Second, whereas the networks that Stoker and others have tended to focus on are invariably powerful, place-based rural networks are situated in disadvantaged and marginalised positions in the governance landscape. They lack a 'domain of command power' that Stoker (1998: 23) associates with regime-forming self-governing networks. And yet, it is clear to us that their disadvantage does not render them powerless. What we set out to explore, in this sense, is how and to what extent such marginalised self-governing networks nevertheless manage to exercise power: what resources do they mobilise, what capacities do they build, and how do they navigate the governance landscape?

Multispatial metagovernance at the edge of the state

Our theoretical framework is derived primarily from the work of Bob Jessop (2009, 2010, 2016a; 2016b) on multispatial metagovernance which rests on a Gramscian–Foucauldian redefinition of state power as 'government + governance in the shadow of hierarchy' (Jessop, 2016b: 164). It was a corrective to approaches that he saw as having (a) decentred the state in accounts of governance, thus underestimating the key role that state actors continue to play in the practice of governing and (b) become too preoccupied with analysing one particular spatiality – for example, scale or network – when governance arrangements and practices are more properly understood as being multispatial. Replacing 'multilevel' with 'multispatial' allows for attentiveness to the messy realities of governance without reducing this reality to a neat set of nested scales with clearly defined internal relations.

From government to governance and metagovernance

Whereas government is limited to the state, governance denotes a reality of governing where many other actors take part alongside those immediately associated with the state. According to Jessop (2016b: 166) governance 'refers to mechanisms and strategies of coordination in the face of complex reciprocal interdependence among operationally autonomous actors, organizations, and functional systems'. He notes furthermore that 'because actors cannot grasp all aspects of this complex world, they must reduce complexity cognitively, through selective sense and meaning making, and simplify governance tasks by isolating some subsets of relations for attention' (p. 166). Governance thus increases the complexity of governing, but its practice involves complexity reduction to make something governable. This is where metagovernance steps into the picture as 'the organisation of the conditions for coordination' (Jessop, 2009: 92) with 'collibration' (see also Dunsire, 1996) as the most general mode of metagovernance, involving 'the capacity to alter the relative balance among different modes of coordination' (p. 96). This leads to the creation of 'spatiotemporal envelopes' within which actors feel they can satisfactorily govern 'a subset of relevant features'. The development of governance capacities is targeted toward the specific envelope rather than mastery of the governance landscape as a whole. Actors are asymmetrically positioned, and power differentials are therefore inherent and unavoidable. But it does not follow automatically that such power differentials correspond neatly to formal hierarchies and that core state actors are necessarily always in a privileged position vis-à-vis actors located around the edges of, and beyond, the state. The key point is that the inability of actors to grasp the situation as a whole extends to everyone, not just actors at the bottom/periphery. Rather, we are dealing with 'an increasingly complex social formation, which is intransparent to any single point of observation' (Jessop, 2016b: 179).

Place-based micropolitical practices of (meta)governance

None of this entails a retreat of the state but rather a reconfiguration of its role; state actors are not less involved in governing practices, they are differently involved. Two points of involvement are particularly important for our purposes: (1) 'in organizing the conditions for networked self-organization' and (2) 'in the collibration of different forms of first-order governance and metagovernance' (Jessop, 2016b: 183). A contradictory tension is at work here that we explore empirically; on the one hand, the state seems to retain control by modifying 'the relative weight of different modes of governance in order to promote state projects as part of its continuing efforts to preserve state power' (p. 184). On the other hand, the state seems to become decentred as its role in governance practices ceases to be that of the prime mover to become instead 'one actor-cum-

stakeholder among others, all endowed with distinctive resources to contribute to governance arrangements and projects that are initiated beyond the state' (p. 184). The practice of village planning for outdoor recreation in rural Denmark provides an intriguing case for exploring this tension, because it is not immediately clear on which side of the fence these practices fall. Formally speaking, they are located beyond the state apparatus, but at the same time it is abundantly clear that they are by no means beyond reach of it.

Now, this is not surprising given that the exercise of state power 'depend on diverse micro-political practices dispersed throughout society' (Jessop, 2016b: 50). Such practices are only partially within reach or influence of core state actors, who have a variety of means at their disposal, ranging from direct coercion to more subtle practices, where 'potential sources of resistance or obstruction' are turned into 'self-responsibilized agents of their own subordination' (p.179) – or what the Foucauldian literature refers to as governmentality (e.g. Dean, 2010). This attempt at control, however, is not guaranteed to succeed since the targeted peripheral actors employ their own means and capacities. This is precisely why government practice cannot be properly understood without taking both governance and metagovernance practices into account. Actors beyond and around the edges of the state are not passive receivers for acts of state power but partake actively in the practice of governing. We turn attention to how such participation is practiced by a specific group of non-state actors. As self-governing local networks their mode of governance around the edges of the Danish state is premised on 'solidarity based on unconditional commitment to others (e.g. loyalty within small communities or local units (…))' (Jessop, 2016a: 15). Returning thus to the notion of spatiotemporal envelopes, this connects to questions of territoriality. To render a spatiotemporal envelope governable is to territorialise it – to claim the space it bounds – and in this sense metagovernance also becomes an act of territorialisation.

Methods and material

The empirical study primarily draws on focus group interviews conducted in five rural communities across the Danish countryside, complemented by documentary material in the form of local development plans from the respective communities. The material was collected as part of a larger research programme on nature and outdoor recreation in the Danish countryside. Although the current paper relies predominantly on qualitative evidence, the larger research programme employs mixed methods where quantitative and qualitative data are combined within a pragmatic and non-exclusive approach (Greene, 2007).

Focus group participants were all members of 'local councils'. In the Danish governance landscape, this term refers to a diversity of civic associations engaged in local planning, politics and development. Their *modus operandi* and naming vary considerably: for example, 'resident association' (*beboerforening*), 'citizen association' (*borgerforening*), 'village guild' (*landsbylaug*) and 'local council' (*lokalråd*). The latter has become the prevailing umbrella term for associations recognised by the municipality as representative voices of local communities within the municipal territory. Formally, then, they are located beyond the multilevel government system and state apparatus. In practice, the boundaries separating them from municipal authorities are blurred, fuzzy and mobile.

Based on answers in a survey covering municipalities formally designated as rural or peripheral,[2] the communities were selected to cover a broad range of countryside communities with differing sociospatial positionalities. Only places that already had a local development plan specifically addressing outdoor recreation and access to local nature were considered. The latter criterium was given by the larger research project and was thus not applied with the current paper in mind. The presence of a plan was important because we wanted to study the role that such plans played in local governance practice. The five communities have been anonymised using the following

designations: (a) west coast; (b) peri-urban; (c) inland village; (d) peninsular and (e) fjord. Two communities are in Northwestern Jutland and three are on Zealand.

Findings

Findings are organised around four themes addressing different aspects of multispatial (meta) governance about which empirically grounded knowledge is lacking. First, we consider the particular role of local development plans (LDPs) and associated practices. This allows us to gain new insights into 'how micro-technologies come to be assembled and articulated' in everyday life to "provide the substratum of institutional orders" (Jessop, 2010: 343). Second, we trace the moving edge of the state apparatus as it is encountered by respondents in practice, illuminating how this fuzzy edge inflects on practice and how that practice is itself involved in moving state boundaries (cf. Jessop, 2016b: 68). Third, we draw out the place-based and everyday character of micropolitical practices as they unfold in rural settings (cf. Jessop, 2016b: 50; Johansen and Chandler, 2015; see also *Place-based micropolitical practices of (meta)governance*). Finally, we ask whether the local practices under study are acts of metagovernance in their own right, thus questioning the implicit assumption that metagovernance primarily takes place in the state and/or among powerful actors.

A few introductory remarks on the governance context of rural Denmark are necessary before proceeding. First, since the early 1990s the state-civic interface has been gradually instrumentalised with state actors increasingly seeing 'voluntary social work as part of the social service provision in a hard-pressed welfare state' (Grubb and Henriksen, 2019: 62). Second, state and philanthropic support for village associations has come under a regime of competition where rural places vie for limited funds (Nørgaard and Thuesen, 2021). Third, the structural reform in 2007 where municipal mergers completely redrew the political-administrative map has had far-reaching repercussions, not least at the municipal-civic interface in rural areas (as we shall show in *Operating at the moving edge of the state apparatus*). Our findings have to be viewed in light of these broader trajectories which are elaborated in the following sections.

Local development plans as access tickets

The LDPs played a particular role in blurring the edges of the state apparatus due to the ambiguous ways in which this microtechnology of power was employed and performed. LDPs are documents without legal status that local communities use to clarify and communicate their development and planning visions and needs, presenting their own plan of action towards realising those visions. As non-statutory plans, LDPs are not regulated by legislation; they can take any form and there are no standard procedures that need to be followed (Thuesen, 2017). LDPs thus play a role in community-internal practices while also performing a function at the interface between local communities and the municipality in which they are located. Whereas the self-governing local networks who produce the LDPs clearly represent bottom-up village initiatives, the LDPs are situated in-between this informal, voluntary, local sphere and the statutory planning system as a governance tool to mediate municipal-community interaction (Arnouts et al., 2012).

Internally in the rural communities, the role of LDPs was seen to be ambiguous. The decision to produce a written plan was invariably tactical, premised on varying municipal governance arrangements where rural places with a plan would gain automatic or easy access to funding support. Council members were thus quick to admit that writing the plans was primarily an access ticket to municipal funds:

> West Coast1: (…) it's crucial, because **it's the written plan that triggers the release of the money** and then the work can begin to realise it.

> Inland Village1: And then we felt a bit under pressure, because we needed money for that trail project and **to get money, we needed to make an LDP**.

Engaging in local planning practice, then, does not imply that local councils had bought into the idea that it would be beneficial beyond gaining access to funds. Findings suggest quite the reverse as respondents explained how LDP tended to fade into the background with little to no updates being made as goals and projects described in the plans were realised or otherwise outdated. Also, council members who had joined later were not always familiar with the contents or even the existence of the LDP that supposedly guides their practice:

> Peri-urban1: So**, I've never ever seen it before just now**, but I think to myself that, oh my, a lot of those things are just on-going, and I was just about to think… Peri-urban3: That's an important message: it hasn't been dropped on the floor, it's actually**, it has lived underneath without us knowing that it was on paper**. Peri-urban3: **It's in the back of our heads**. Peri-urban4: We haven't taken it out and looked in it. Peri-urban3: But we can nod in recognition at every single point.

This sense of the plan as an invisible or background presence was expressed in several focus groups. Respondents explained that whereas the LDP gave a somewhat accurate sense of what they were working to achieve or had achieved already, it did not play an active role in guiding their practice. As a governance tool, then, it is oriented towards the community-municipality interface rather than towards internal community governance practices.

As a micro-technology employed in the practice of governance, then, LDPs are used to pursue divergent ends by municipal authorities on one hand and by local councils on the other. We know from previous research that municipalities use LDPs to inform and legitimise formal planning processes, using the LDP as a window through which they attempt to gain access to the common will of local communities within their territory (Thuesen and Rasmussen, 2015). What our current findings indicate is that when local councils construct that window, they do so primarily to make sure that their efforts will trigger the release of municipal funds. What municipalities get in this situation is not necessarily what they were looking for, in the sense that local actors respond in the way they believe will be most likely to give them access to funds, that is, not by striving to create a clear picture of the common local will. It should be noted, however, that our findings concern the community-side of the interface only; we cannot say with certainty which exact community-municipality discrepancies exist in each case.

Operating at the moving edge of the state apparatus

It should be clear that the micropolitical practices under study play out around the edges of the state apparatus. Now, far from being stable, the fuzzy boundaries of the state are always on the move, shifting incrementally as practice evolves. But they are also subjected to disruptions such as structural reforms in multilevel government hierarchies. In 2007, the 271 Danish municipalities were merged into 98, the 13 counties were abolished and replaced by five regions, while a host of powers, tasks and responsibilities were shifted around between the different levels. With an average population of 55,000 the new municipalities became some of the largest municipal units in Europe (Thuesen, 2017).

Unsurprisingly, this *de facto* centralisation of local government brought with it the challenge of retaining a sense of proximity between rural citizens and municipal decision making. This was anticipated by communities and municipalities alike, and in response, many of the local councils operating today were either created or reorganised immediately before, during, or after the reform.

Focus group participants recurringly brought up this topic unprompted, reflecting, for instance, on the proximity issue:

> Inland Village1: (…) **after the municipality was merged**, **the distance has become much longer** to [the municipal seat]. It's not that long the other way, I mean we can easily get to [the municipal seat] but the other direction, that's very difficult.

The larger municipal units meant that many rural areas and small towns were distanciated from the seats of municipal power while the number of democratically elected representatives was cut drastically. The sense of being left behind or governed from a distance, as expressed in the quote above, has thus spread among residents in many rural communities.

More recently, municipalities have been required by revisions in the national Planning Act to start planning more holistically for viable villages[3] (Retsinformation, 2018, § 5d.). So, although LDPs are non-statutory documents produced by informal actors in the voluntary sector, it is difficult to understand adequately how municipal planning and policy-making in the Danish countryside works without taking them into account. This is especially true where rural landscapes as resources for outdoor recreation are concerned. Natural surroundings and landscape values are important assets for rural communities (Johansen and Thuesen, 2011) which is reflected by the fact that they often feature prominently in the LDPs. In this regard, the efforts of local councils continue to be influenced by the structural reform which severely disrupted projects they were engaged in at the time:

> West Coast1: So, what happened was (…) that **when the municipalities were merged**… originally, there was a connection agreement through the counties, but then the counties were abolished, and then some of the municipalities fell out of it, and then **it became a trail with holes in it**.

In some cases, the boundaries between formal government and informal governance were also blurred on an individual level. Some members of local councils had a past in the municipal organisation, either as politician or bureaucrat, and others still had formal municipal roles, such as being a member of the municipal subcouncil for rural development (peninsular1). In these cases, the edge of the state seems to move into the local council itself, with members occasionally adopting the language of state actors to set themselves apart from their fellow citizens: 'And I think in many ways that I can keep things apart, but of course you have to listen to the citizens. We need to be able to stomach criticism' (peninsular1).

All the self-governing local networks saw a role for themselves in filling holes where the municipality was seen to be absent:

> Peninsular1: When they made the new municipal plan in 2008, then they categorised (…) the main town, and then there were some smaller, or larger, towns with 2-3,000 inhabitants and then there were categories 3 and 4, and **we were all the way out in category 5; absolutely nothing was going to happen there**.

Wherever the moving edge of the state was nowhere in sight the self-governing local networks stepped in. At the other end of the spectrum, respondents talk about situations where the edge of the state apparatus was not only in sight but appeared as a double, for example, sometimes with the two edges contradicting each other:

> West Coast1: It's the Nature Agency and the Coastal Authority, that's our two, how to put it, big brakepads in terms of getting the things done by the coast that we've had ideas about. I: But in that context, hasn't the municipality been able to break down that barrier? West Coast(together): They've

> tried, they've really tried. West Coast1: We've been friends with the municipality up until now. West Coast3: All the way through, yes. West Coast1: But we don't think that they, I mean, **they too haven't got enough power to stand up against to large state organisations.**

What respondents refer to here are the special planning regulations installed to protect the coastline from unchecked development. These regulations also affect smaller physical landscape interventions such as the establishment of trails and outdoor facilities, precisely the kind of projects that the self-governing local networks often initiate. In practice, it means that on top of the usual fundraising challenge, permissions are needed not only from the municipal planning authority but also from the Coastal Authority which is a part of the state Nature Agency. Respondents experienced such dense state presence as a barrier that left them powerless and frustrated: 'Those authorities, it's very difficult for them to talk to each other, and they absolutely don't want to talk to us (…)' (west coast5). Across the focus groups, this was the only instance where respondents talked openly about the state apparatus imposing their authority directly.

Governing as micropolitical, place-based, everyday practice

The networks of self-governing actors that we deal with in this paper are of a particular kind: they are place-based. Their coming together is based on a shared sense of belonging to the place where they live and the interests they pursue are directly associated with *their views* of the common good of that place and community. There is, to be sure, no necessary correspondence between the views of council and those of the community at large, and this does occasionally lead to tension and conflict. A distinction needs to be made at this point between the local councils and the self-governing local networks that they are part of. The councils themselves are merely the most obvious and outwardly visible manifestation of such networks and therefore emerge as the identifiable actor that municipalities turn to when they wish to interact with a given rural community. In practice, however, the networks are much more fluid, often operating on a project-by-project or issue-by-issue basis. Moreover, the local council may not even be directly involved in every single project or initiative.

In all five communities, project-specific groups were used as the preferred means of getting things done, with the local council playing a variety of different roles, for example, as initiator, coordinator or as mediator towards municipal or other public authorities.

> Fjord5: (…) **one thing inspires the other** and we find out that there are things… for instance, we got the sense that we needed fibrenet, and then there was a group that stepped in and worked on that. But those are not the same who make christmas decorations, or those who make Clover Trails, that's someone else. So there are **different groups who step in and work precisely with what's important for them**.

Council members were keenly aware that the project-based mode of operation comprises the backbone of development efforts in the self-governing local networks and how this entails a need for repeatedly initiating new projects and going through all the performative motions required to succeed, and to keep succeeding. In this context, they saw a role for themselves in generating and maintaining continuity and resilience in the wider network to ensure that the necessary capacity to act was always in place:

> Inland Village1: (…) and we need to **renew ourselves**; if it keeps being the same and we tell ourselves the same things and do the same things, then the gas fizzles out of the balloon. So, **new people are needed**. We have been struggling to get **young people** involved (…). The problem is that, in my age, you kind of have the time for this.

The highly project-based practice and the on-going struggle to ensure a continuity of local forces also help to explain the modest role of LDPs in the everyday practice of local governance (see *Local development plans as access tickets*). To attain funding, the ephemeral project groups need to submit written applications to various state bodies and philanthropic foundations, and these applications comprise *de facto* planning documents in their own right. Writing the LDP in the first place may have been a trigger in terms of setting an overall course but it is only translated into practice when projects are initiated. The course is kept and adjusted through ongoing dialogue, specific projects and continuing outreach towards community members with a capacity to contribute. Importantly, the place-based and close-knit character of the networks and the small scale of the communities mean that these practices are not confined to formal meetings and organised activities, but may be performed throughout the thick copresence of everyday rural life (social gatherings, community third places, chance encounters, etc.) (Johansen and Chandler, 2015).

Place-based, micropolitical practices in small rural communities are necessarily pragmatic. Community members may disagree politically, but they still have to be able to live together and to work towards common goals. This became evident in the focus group interviews through a deliberate distancing of local council practice from formal politics:

> Fjord4: So, the village guild is **not politically constituted**; it's citizens, voluntary citizens. And the politicians, they are someone you invite, when you have some problems that you would like to discuss with them. So, er, **there hasn't been any political influence** on this work, other than what lies with the individual citizen who is involved.

And yet, as the last sentence reveals, the councils and broader self-governing networks are far from depoliticised. Another member of the same council elaborates:

> Fjord5: It's not that we agree on everything, but we agree that we live in a completely wonderful place. We agree that we like each other, and we agree that we want to develop this place to become the best possible. And then of course there's all sorts of communication and different political positions (…), and yes, **we represent as many different positions as all other places**. But there is a great will to talk to each other.

In other focus groups the same message was approached through reflections on the democratic contents of practices, including the general observation that 'democracy does not mean that all of us have to agree. There are no places where that happens. That's not the point of it' (peninsular3). A subtle, but potentially important, implication of distanciating local council practice from formal politics is that the act of designating an issue as 'a political question' becomes a way of locating it outside of reach, deferring responsibility into the formal government system:

> Fjord4: How can we develop and enhance the natural areas, that's also very much a political question right now, and what can you come to an agreement about with the farmers? So yes, there are a lot of clashing interests that have to be resolved and **a lot of it can only be resolved if we have some politicians who want to do something about it**.

The aspiration to self-govern, then, is only partial. The desire for local decisions on local affairs is delimited to decisions where the self-governing networks are confident in their own governing capacities, and this is not deemed to be the case, when issues are constituted beyond their own spatiotemporal envelope or when the matter is so divisive locally that it threatens to tear the network apart. The question of prioritising land for farming or nature holds elements of both. By sidestepping the issue and leaving it to the formal governance system, the local network safeguards its capacity to self-govern on other issues.

From self-responsibilisation to metagovernance from below

It is easily taken for granted that metagovernance is primarily something that state actors and other powerful coalitions engage in. In theory, however, nothing precludes marginalised actors from practicing metagovernance, even if their efforts may often be thwarted by their disadvantaged positionality in the asymmetric power relations of the wider governance landscape. The self-responsibilisation of rural actors is not destined to result only in subordination but may also open a door for subversion. Whether the opening is taken advantage of and for what is a different question entirely. Across the focus group interviews, the most significant observation to be made in this regard is that when respondents talk about participation vis-à-vis municipal authorities they never talk about how the municipality involves them, but rather about how they themselves involve the municipality and about their own practices of citizen involvement. In this sense, they clearly act as metagovernors rather than as someone subjected to metagovernance. Whether and to what degree their attempts at metagovernance succeed lies beyond the scope of this paper.

To be clear, the self-governing local networks do clearly work from within a self-responsibilised mindset, where local development is accepted as a task for active residents rather than a responsibility of the state. When respondents spoke of this, they tended to talk about it as a plight of the periphery:

> West Coast2: And no one comes here to give us anything. West Coast4: No, they really don't! No, **we know that out here, we are not given anything; we have to do it ourselves, all of it**. West Coast3: And I think that's a massive thing, me who comes from a large city, right, it's funny you know, it's a different way of being together. West Coast2: But it's also frustrating occasionally. West Coast1: Yes, you really need to have a long time horizon and a very large patience.

This way of thinking also prompted respondents to talk about how rural places are being pitted against each other for the attraction of funds and resources for local projects, but also for general municipal goodwill. The latter comes in handy in the context of decisions about public services such as school closures and bus coverage:

> Fjord1: Besides, it also has the side effect that it provides the political pressure necessary if a local area is to avoid losing its school, even if it only has 90 children; then **it isn't closed, whereas in other places it would be**.

This indicates internalisation but not naturalisation of inter-place competition. On the contrary, other rural places were generally spoken of in tones of solidarity and some respondents were eager to situate their own practice in a bigger picture:

> Peninsular3: (…) it's about cohesive power. It's about whether we should have a centre and a periphery or whether we should have a united whole. And those who sit in the highest places have to look at places like this one.

Local councils diverged from each other in terms of how they saw their relation to the municipality. Some emphasised the importance of aligning their efforts with municipal policy objectives, whereas others made it very clear that they had their own agenda and that it did not align with the municipality:

> I: To what degree do nature and outdoor recreation play a part in your development plan? Fjord4: So, the politicians' or ours? Fjord3: So, we are NOT politicians. I: What are you saying? Fjord3: You need to talk to the municipality if you want the municipality… I mean, **we have our own ideas and plans, and things we work to get done**.

This difference also marks the distinction between self-governing local networks who simply participated in governance and those who engaged proactively in metagovernance. The latter did not simply accept the rules of the game or the policy priorities that had been set elsewhere in governance system. Instead they attempted to carve out their own spatiotemporal envelopes to make their own place governable from below. In the peninsular village, respondents thus described the governance system as a house to be broken into:

> Peninsular1: And then **we've never taken a no for a no**. We 've said that we figure it out (…) this thing that if there's a closed door, then there's probably another door that's open. Peninsular2: And then we try some other way. Peninsular1: Then we try another way of getting into the house.

A shared technique was to reduce the state apparatus to the individuals through whom it is encountered, thus turning the state-community interface into a set of manageable personal relations. This kind of micro-level metagovernance was practiced through strategically timed involvement of municipal politicians and selective engagement with individual state officials known to be receptive to suggestions and cooperation:

> West Coast2: But it's also sometimes connected to a single individual, because the state forest manager who was here before the one who has come now, the forest manager, he simply didn't want [to do] anything, I mean, there was nothing, it was just 'no, no, no', no matter what you proposed. This one is obviously a bit easier to deal with.
>
> Peri-urban4: But you can say that officially the municipality is not involved. **It's at council politician level that we've made contact**; it's not officially to the municipality, to any of their departments or anything. We haven't gotten there yet.

In more general terms, respondents were eager to articulate the key role of agency from below for making a difference in rural areas and that this kind of agency may be just as legitimate and competent as top-down decision making in the hierarchy of government:

> Fjord5: **Things often come from below and go upwards**, and not the other way around; at least that's our experience here. (…) Fjord2: I mean, we, even if we live in the provinces, we do know what the [national] organisations are called, so when we need external advice, then we make use of it. (…) but **what comes from the heart of individuals, that's not always where you think in national action plans or actors** (…). That comes second, usually.

There is a pre-emptive, subtly sarcastic response in this, directed at an anticipated prejudice that local, rural actors are unknowledgeable and incompetent at handling their own affairs. By contrast, these local actors see themselves as competent coordinators and mobilisers of an array of local and extra-local actors. Crucially, they see themselves as the ones taking charge, while the municipality is not seen as their only link to the outside world but merely as one cooperative partner among others.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that rural places in Denmark become contested terrains in the governance landscape; that is, terrains whose status as territory become ambiguous because they are only partially governable from the top in a simple hierarchical manner. By focussing on micropolitical practices in rural communities, our findings respond to questions around the agency of ostensibly disadvantaged and marginalised actors that previous studies largely leave in the dark (cf. Hunt, 2019;

Dobbin and Lubell, 2019). Three prominent topics are worth discussing at length: (1) how local agency relates to neo-endogenous normativity and how local actors practice metagovernance in neo-endogenous ways; (2) how micropolitical practices may be put in their place by drawing on the Gramscian notion of the integral state and (3) how metagovernance from below may be captured by the notion of enveloping rural places as an act of collibration and territorialisation.

Neo-endogenous normativity and metagovernance

The kind of self-responsibilisation observed among the rural actors studied in this paper is in many ways aligned with the neo-endogenous approach, where rural development is assumed to be 'based on local resources and local participation' and where 'the manifestation of neo-endogenous development in any territory will be the result of various combinations of the *from the above* and *intermediate level* sources interacting with the local level' (Ray, 2001: 9; see also Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019). The European Union has pursued such an approach for decades, not least through the LAG and LEADER or CLLD programmes,[4] and when Danish municipalities push communities to make LDPs, they too are buying into this way of understanding and approaching rural development. In this situation, local actors are expected to partake by taking active responsibility for the development of their own places. Our findings definitely indicate that they have done so but also suggest that they are not merely passive receivers who face the choice of doing what is expected of them or risk being left behind. While this choice is certainly present – especially in the context of attaining funds – it should not distract from the fact that local actors are also engaged in active efforts to shape the governance processes to which they contribute in order to bend them for their own benefit – in other words, the practice that Jessop, after Dunsire, calls collibration.

If the neo-endogenous understanding of rural development, and the governance arrangements associated with it, are to be taken seriously, then research needs to be receptive to the possibility that not only does governance *involve* a diversity of unevenly positioned actors, it is also *shaped* by all of them. Metagovernance, then, is not reserved for the state and the powerful, even if they are in privileged positions, but refers to practices that any actor may engage in, each in their own and not necessarily readily recognisable ways. In the study, local actors did this by (1) being strategically selective about when to play the game by the rules, (2) reducing the state to a series of manageable personal relations and encounters and (3) retaining a fluid, loose, and informal way of local organising which remains opaque to outsiders. So, while state-led metagovernance certainly influences local practice, for instance, by institutionalising inter-place competition for public funds, this competitive state project (Pedersen, 2011) is also modulated by local agency, or as Jessop (2016b: 54f) puts it: 'The effectiveness of state capacities depends (…) on links to forces that operate beyond the state's formal boundaries and act as 'force multipliers' or, conversely, divert, subvert, or block its interventions'. Our findings assist in progressing from this abstract-simple suggestion towards a concrete-complex understanding of the specific practices beyond the state that generate such forces in rural governance.

The integral state at work

From our viewpoint, the best way of conceptualising this play of forces is the Gramscian notion of the integral state, where 'State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion' (Gramsci, 1971: 263). In this conception, the state does not end at the edge of its apparatus but is dispersed throughout society from which it cannot be separated. What this affords is a theoretical lens focused on the interplay of consent and coercion which remains open to the possibility – indeed it expects – that state power and practices of governing are constituted throughout society and not merely among politicians, bureaucrats, planners and policy-makers. As

such the notion has been used before as a means of critiquing prevalent strands of network governance and metagovernance theory, most notably by Jessop (2016b) and Davies (2014). The latter usefully turns attention to the Weberian term 'administrative domination' and reinterprets it through Gramsci. Having reminded us that administrative domination is 'embedded in the everyday routines of the local state', Davies portrays a 'technocratic managerialism' characterised by 'intensive performance management including targets, league tables and quasi-markets fostering the coercive micro management of public services and *the participatory interface between public officials and citizens*' (Davies, 2014: 3225, emphasis added).

Our findings lend further support to this point by showing how LDPs are deployed by municipalities as a coercive microtechnology to govern the participatory interface. The attempt at control is successful to the extent that the local councils do engage in the planning practice requested of them. But beyond this Davies (2014: 3221) is correct to 'anticipate that the governed subject fails to appear when everyday life fosters asymmetries between an embodied 'feel for the game' and discordant experiences'. The rural actors do as they are told, because it is necessary for accessing public funds, but as soon as the game is won, the plans go in the drawer. What our findings allow us to add is that even when citizens are not openly refusing to play by the rules, they may still be bending them to their own interests; they are not just subjected to metagovernance but also actively partake in constituting it, disadvantaged as their possibilities for doing so may be. The integral state, then, cannot achieve a consent of its own choosing but has to suffice with the one granted by its subjects (or turn to coercion). To be sure, the constitutive part played by local actors is not destined to be counter-hegemonic but may just as well reproduce and prop up prevailing hegemonic tendencies. Our point here is merely to say that due to the organic and internally contradictory character of the integral state, pockets of (possible) self-governance will continue to crop up and that this is exactly what we see in the Danish countryside today.

The metagovernance of enveloping (rural) places

In rural settings the disadvantaged position of citizens in the face of state power may be less disadvantaged than it seems. Because the local state in Denmark has been territorially enlarged, municipalities only have a loose grip on what is going on in the many rural communities within their jurisdiction. Governing these places is next to impossible without enrolling actors who possess the deep and fine-grained local knowledge needed to cultivate the trust upon which consent is to be build. Due to the small size and sparse population of their territories they have the possibility to approach development issues holistically and cope with the entire local community, even if they are not professionalised. Danish rural communities are associated with higher levels of mutual self-help, a sense of connectedness with co-inhabitants, and a sense that everyone knows each other, when compared with larger settlements (Svendsen, 2017). In the context of metagovernance, these traits are resources to be drawn upon, and our focus groups show that this is exactly what happens. Participants had in-depth knowledge about each other and used it to 'smooth the edges' and adapt organically, both to each other and to evolving circumstances, including those of changing arrangements in the formal governance system.

Even though mobility developments have made place attachments increasingly optional – with general attachment in decline and selective attachment on the rise (Gieling et al., 2019) – volunteer work in associations is significantly higher in Danish rural areas than in urban areas (Sørensen, 2012), a capacity allowing locals to imagine and build their own context (Jones and Woods, 2013). In governing their own rural envelope local actors in these areas are thus not always disadvantaged but uphold capacities that strengthen their ability to cope with municipal power. Meanwhile, municipal administrations are hampered by departmentalisation between professional fields making it difficult for them to grasp, address, and access places holistically and to generate trustful relations.

Issues are approached on a 'turf basis' where 'cross-cutting issues do not receive attention beyond the symbolic' (Wegrich and Stimac 2014). Even though municipalities are experimenting with co-creation and participatory processes (Ubels et al., 2019), and LDP's are used to govern 'through communities' (Woods et al., 2007) our findings show that the enlarged municipalities fall short of adequately enveloping rural places, leaving room for other actors to step in.

Simultaneously, the absence of standardised forms of organisation at the local level has paved the way for a heterogeneous undergrowth of loosely coupled ways of organising where relations are maintained and developed not just with municipalities but also with businesses, philanthropic foundations, NGOs, and the wider public through personal networks, websites, social media, etc. This undergrowth is difficult to keep track of except for those who possess deep local knowledge. The envelopment of rural places as an act of metagovernance and territorialisation – enveloping a governable territory – is only truly achievable for the kind of loose networks of local actors beyond the state that we have been studying. In this sense, our research also exemplifies how a scalar fix in the formal hierarchy of governance, that is, the municipal mergers, partially dissolves previous spatial envelopes, paving the way for their de- and reterritorialisation.

Conclusion

By studying micropolitical practices around the edges of the state apparatus in the Danish countryside we have attempted to gain a better understanding of the agency of marginalised actors in the governance landscape. Taking Jessop's notion of multispatial metagovernance as our theoretical point of departure we have argued that acts of collibration should not be seen as being exclusive to powerful actors, even if their positionalities do privilege their possibilities. Instead, we have shown empirically how marginalised actors employ their own ways of engaging in metagovernance, drawing on a very different set of capacities and resources, and utilising the hidden advantages that marginal positionalities afford. More precisely, it was their place-based nature in combination with the inability of the (local) state to envelop rural places properly that afforded the compossibility of partial local self-governance. This connects directly to Gibson-Graham's (2004: 33) broader point that 'places are scattered and control may or may not successfully enrol and harness them'.

In no way do we mean to suggest that Danish rural places have become autonomous spaces of self-governance. State actors at municipal, regional and national levels continue to exert their influence and to govern many aspects of everyday life in the countryside. What we have shown is that local actors are not always willing subjects and that they can and do succeed in 'bending the system' towards their own ends. We found that they did so in four specific ways: (1) while LDPs were used by municipalities as a microtechnology for governing at a distance and through consent, local councils largely subverted this attempt by treating LDPs as little more than access tickets to municipal funds; (2) the moving edge of the distanciated state generated new spaces of possibility that local actors stepped into, filling the void created by the scalar fix of the municipal mergers; (3) efforts were focused on micropolitical practices of an everyday character that only those living locally could readily have engaged in, thus generating the basis for a solidarity-based governance premised on a shared commitment to a specific place (cf. Jessop, 2016a: 15) and (4) interaction with extra-local actors in and beyond the state apparatus was strategically selective, initiated from below and carefully orchestrated to maximise leverage.

Our qualitative research goes hand in hand with the quantitative work of Dobbin and Lubell (2019) which has also highlighted the role of marginalised actors in collaborative governance. While they focused on representation, our work turns attention to agency and the co-constitutive role that marginalised actors play in shaping governance practices and outcomes. Future research needs to attend much more systematically and intensively to the agency of marginalised and overlooked actors in the governance landscape. The findings presented in this paper only scratches

the surface of what may be learnt from deliberately turning the academic gaze away from the question of how powerful actors manage to be powerful, and towards the less obvious ways in which disadvantaged and marginalised actors nevertheless manage to pursue their own ends and even, occasionally, succeed in doing so.

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Notes

1. Within their local communities, our research participants are among the powerful few who get to represent the interests of their community. They are elected, but only by members of the associations they represent, and these rarely cover the entire populace. While we acknowledge this lurking democratic deficit, it is not to this aspect of the situation that we turn our attention in this paper.
2. The formal designation was developed after the structural reform in 2007 and divided the 98 municipalities into four categories: urban (35), semi-urban (17), rural (30) and peripheral (16) municipalities. Categorisation was based on 14 quantitative indicators on urbanisation, centre-periphery, agricultural prominence, development patterns, demography, education and economy (Kristensen et al., 2007).
3. The new provisions about village planning in full: 'Municipal planning for villages has to 1) support a development of sustainable local communities in villages, 2) promote a differentiated and targeted development of villages and 3) designate overarching goals and means for the development of villages'. (Retsinformation, 2018, §5d)
4. There are currently 2800 LAGs (Local Action Groups) which implement the LEADER (*Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*) programme at the local level. Although the LEADER term is still in widespread use, since 2014, it has been formally replaced by the less pronounceable CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) (European Network for Rural Development, 2020). The local development efforts of the local councils studied for this paper were all entangled with the LAGs covering their areas.

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