GOVERNANCE NETWORKS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

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The sheer volume of literature published in the field of governance mirrors the growing interest in conducting research on this ambiguous term (Rose-Ackerman 2017). In practice, the increasing complexity of everyday challenges has made governments become more dependent on social and economic actors to achieve their goals. In this book, Klijn and Koppenjan make a heated plea for the study of governance networks and complexities (Part I), the management of complexities (Part II) and democracy and accountability in networks (Part III).

The book's initial hypothesis is that public administration, private and non-profit organizations are increasingly faced with complex, wicked problems – that is, “problems with a certain extent of social and technological complexity” (p. 43) – when developing policies or delivering services in the public sector. The authors contend that these activities unfold in networks of interdependent actors steered by deviating and sometimes conflicting perceptions and strategies. In their debate that these networks are under enemy control by cognitive, strategic and institutional complexities, the authors convincingly suggest that a better approach to deal with these complexities is through progressive forms of coordination, i.e., network governance. Yet, doubts remain as to whether would be easy to get the interested parties to work together as a whole. The authors do not state that it would be easy, but instead discuss how to manage the complexities in various ways.

This text book is “written for students in public administration, public management, public planning, and policy sciences and analysis” (p. xii). The book is both theoretically and empirically rich. It provides definitions on core concepts, which will elucidate its readers on how to handle wicked problems in governance networks. Although these definitions are furnished with examples from Europe and the U.S., the book could have also further advanced knowledge if it had provided examples from countries where governance structures are weak or dominated by corruption.

Even though one could find the presentation of definitions rather simplistic, for instance, those on “governance as good governance” (p. 5), I concur with the authors when they state that “although many authors acknowledge the importance of governance, it is not easy to

determine what exactly is meant by it” (p. 4). Students, researchers and practitioners will greatly benefit from the definitions presented. Having said that, I may have missed more territorially-based definitions of the term governance, such as territorial governance (Schmitt and Van Well 2016) and also environmental governance (Zuidema 2017). I am convinced that the literature on governance networks, territorial governance and environmental governance could cross-fertilize. Examples of place-based and environmentally-sound wicked problems such as wind farms (p. 43) or nuclear waste storage (p. 77) are provided that could be discussed in light of recent developments on environmental governance and decentralization.

The book is undeniably a “scene setter” to provide better clarifications on the entanglements of governance networks. The authors make it clear from the very beginning that they understand governance as “the process that takes place within governance networks” (p. 10). Furthermore, by governance networks, the authors mean the “more or less stable patterns of social relations between mutually dependent actors, which cluster around a policy problem, a policy programme, and/or a set of resources and which emerge, are sustained, and are changed through a series of interactions” (p. 11).

Despite the fact that the authors extensively debate complexity in ways that would be worth exploring in this review, I would rather focus on “the role of information gathering and (scientific) knowledge” in feeding substantive complexity (p. 58). This might be confusing at first. The authors, however, provide interesting arguments which highlight that “information gathering, the use of experts, and conducting research will then prove to be counter-productive” (p. 64) in managing complexities. This is because the variety of interpretations and the impasse between parties will be strengthened rather than reduced. The authors argue that what is needed is stronger communication between interested groups and the “joint production of meaning” (p. 64) regarding the complex problems at stake. Governance network processes are rather complex, not only because they involve several groups making strategic choices that better match their interests, but also because interactions are context-sensitive, meaning that they are directly linked to their geopolitical surroundings.

The authors continue the discussion on managing substantive complexities by briefly pointing out “citizens’ science” (p. 142) as a possible alternative to support wicked problem-solving. I read the authors’ perspective on this matter with a great deal of curiosity, as it could be an approach to “stamp credibility” in tacit knowledge, often disregarded as being relevant to public planning and policy-making. However, they acknowledge that “it is difficult to see how citizens can make sense out of the confusion when researchers fail to convince policy-makers” (p. 143). Due to the weakness of this alternative, the role of researchers in

contributing to a de-politicization of the conflicts between parties is then discussed (p. 146). At this level, the key argument is that scientific research must be tightened to reflect reality. This is not only an issue of dealing with complex or wicked problems, but a general societal matter, in my viewpoint. Academic research must tally with needs at ground level. It must be effective in addressing day-to-day challenges that have an impact on the lives of citizens. In this regard, the authors could have also explored the role played by social media in, for example, making scientific and tacit knowledge more widely available to support policy-making. In today's hyper-connected society, citizens are co-producers of possible solutions for triggering challenges.

While I consider the book to have paved an informative way to a good number of theoretical explorations, some indications for future research could be pointed out. An investigation of the relationships between governance networks, electronic civic participation and the empowering of citizens' science could be fruitful. An exploration of the applicability of some of the arguments debated in this book at the cross-border level would also contribute to academic literature, policy-making and the general management of the public good.

REFERENCES

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