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Book Review

Zuidema, C. 2017. *Decentralization in Environmental Governance - A post-contingency approach*. Oxon and New York: Routledge. ix+ 322 pp. \$127.46. Hardcover. ISBN-10: 978-1-4724-2253-8 // ISBN-13: 978-1-315-59335-7.

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Environmental governance has, for at least the past 50 years, received considerable attention from planning literature. No clear definition, however, exists of ‘environmental governance’; the literature has not been successful in bridging the gap between multiple approaches to governance, despite the growing complexity of environmental issues.

Decentralization in Environmental Governance takes all who are interested in the challenges of navigating the theory and *praxis* of a plural governance landscape on a journey, a thought-provoking one which, according to Christian Zuidema:

“was inspired by the observation that the local level is increasingly seen as a good place to develop and deliver environmental policies” (p. 12).

The book is both theoretically robust (Chapters 2, 3 and 4) and empirically-sound (Chapter 5 and 6). Theoretically, the author embraces an “investigation and attempt at navigating the plural governance landscape” (p. viii) in order to formulate an admonition for planners and decision-makers, urging them to carefully consider a post-contingency approach (p. 13). The aim of the author’s theoretical inquiry is:

“to find common ground comprising theoretical arguments that can help us navigate the plural governance landscape we face while focusing on the possible increase in the role of the local level of governance (i.e. decentralization)” (p. 12).

Empirically, the author highlights the efforts made by the European Union (EU) and the Netherlands to encourage local approaches to the environment. Chapter 5 addresses the approach taken by the EU to increase the role of the local level in environmental policy. Chapter 6, by taking “one of the leading nations in environmental governance” (p. 17) as a case study – the Netherlands – explores situations of decentralization. The aim of the author’s empirical inquiry is:

“to indicate the likely consequences of increasing the role of the local level in environmental policy for developing and delivering proactive and integrated approaches to the local environment” (p. 12).

The book underlines that nations have been expanding their societal capacity to govern, for example, in matters of environmental concern, by reallocating power and responsibilities from the central state ‘upward’ to supranational entities (e.g., EU), ‘sideways’ to non-government, market and civil organizations and ‘downwards’ to lower tiers of government such as regions, provinces and municipalities (p. 21). The author underlines that local governments have been playing a key role in developing environmental policies through decentralization, deregulation and privatization. The author considers these types of changes in environmental policy as a “shift in governance” (p. 2). This shift is introduced by the author as governance renewal operations. The author claims, however, that “governance renewal should be treated with care and prudence” (p. 29). This claim is supported by the

argument that such strategies may guide governments to prioritize “development-oriented interests such as economic growth or financial gain at the cost of environmental qualities” (p. 27).

In this regard, the book delivers a constructive critique of governance renewal in environmental governance. The author arguably advocates that regulatory-based command-and-control types of spatial planning “still have an important role to play in our 21st-century governance landscape” (p. ix). In addition, the author also debates that the coordinative model of governance, “seen to be incompatible with the challenges of our complex and plural societies” (p. 268), still has some important benefits “in coping with less complex and common policy problems and for guaranteeing that minimum levels of protection against environmental stress are met” (p. 268).

The book provides guidelines for supporting planning students, planners and decision-makers in choosing between various governance approaches. The author suggests that a post-contingency approach enables the planning community to find common ground for navigating the plural philosophical governance landscape. I remain doubtful, however, about whether local leadership will in fact use Zuidema’s arguments in the moment of choosing among a myriad of governance approaches. A question arose in my mind – are local leaders deeply rooted in philosophical thinking or do they act according to urban trends, e.g., smart cities, or by adopting urban planning buzz words such as “co-creation” or “co-production”? The author appears to be aware of these drawbacks and provides in Chapter 7 avenues for future research. I concur with him that to keep fueling the quest for a livable future within the spatial environment, more empirical research is needed.