

BOOK REVIEWS



Christopher Ansell, *Rethinking Theories of Governance*, Rethinking Political Science and International Studies Series, Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2023, 248 pp., ISBN 978 1 78990 918 0 (cased); ISBN 978 1 78990 919 7 (eBook)

Rethinking Theories of Governance, by Christopher Ansell, proposes to consider *how* theories become useful, with the identification of three valuable criteria for usefulness: the warrants, the dialogical quality and the diagnostic quality. This is not a modest endeavour but an original instrument of clarification for the appreciation of theory, in general, and of the theories of governance, in particular. This way, the study of the theories of governance becomes an academic scrutiny that challenges and re-expresses the previously long-held imperatives of comprehensiveness, falsifiability, internal consistence, parsimonious presentation and empiric validity, thus having a well-deserved place and role within the Rethinking Political Science and International Studies Series. The criteria proposed by Christopher Ansell are apparently simpler, but more parsimonious, more comprehensive and more useful. At the same time, the requirements of diagnostic and dialogical quality of a theory include well the superior theoretical potential for the organization and generalization of data. None the less the dialogical quality of the theory, by itself, and also combined with the other two criteria, forms and maintains the logical consistency of the theory. Finally, the dialogical quality of a theory increases the chances to generate new research.

Given the great number of meritorious governance theories, the book addresses governance theories according to the manner in which they respond to challenges, social problems, political conditions, administrative conditions and prove to be effective and accountable. At the same time, the finalities and defining characteristics of the theories of governance can be employed as criteria for evaluating these theories in relation the goals states above, but also contributing to democratic legitimacy, managing political conflict, improving global cooperation and coordination, reducing poverty and inequality, managing the commons and

transitioning to sustainability. These essential dimensions are investigated in the chapters of the book with these desiderates of governance. Together they set the perfect background for a meditation oriented to rethinking theories of governance, which is also the legitimate purpose of this book.

The benefices of theory as dialogue and diagnosis are multiple and interesting and they range from the “management” of intentionality, that is, the directed attention to most relevant, urgent or challenging problems, to causal mechanisms, future inquiry avenues and reflective problematization as preoccupation for what could be wrong or incomplete in the strategies and solutions proposed. However, the author discerns many other aspects and defining dimensions to be acknowledged as advantages of viewing theory as dialogue and diagnosis. Challenging public problems should be identified and “tamed”. Theory enables planners to do so.

In this respect, Christopher Ansell starts from the concept of “wicked (social) problem” proposed by Rittel and Webber in 1973 and still relevant in recent studies (such as Crowley and Head, 2017 and Gruendel, 2022). Discussing the conceptual journey of wicked problems, he emphasizes attempts at reefing or expanding the concept (e.g., as in Levin et al, 2012, where a class of “super wicked” problems is proposed and continues with the discussion of ill-structured, intractable and “messy” problems (for very complex public issues, that need a special type of “mess management” to propose “local contingency scenarios based on pattern recognition and anticipation of problematic developments of social problems).

The Skinnerian concept of a “social trap” is useful in describing and identifying suboptimal (short-term) behaviours that can very well become long-term and the new normality and which are even better emphasized against the background of the tragedy of the commons and also in relation to the concepts of “poverty trap” and “capability trap”.

Complexity and problem-solving take the fore of the analysis of governance, leading to theoretical mappings of the varied types and dimensions of complexity (describable via goals’ conflicts, dynamic multiple factors or variables influencing goal attainment, the fluctuation of the impact of variables over time and their connection with the goals, the uncertainty of the proposed solutions and of the evaluation of the proposed solution or set of solutions), but also to the diagnostic perspectives that allow for the assessment of governance complexity and for its consequences. The theoretical approach always resorts first to the knowledge deepening of the problem under the banner “better knowledge, better consultation and better use of third-party partners” (apud Head, “Wicked problems in public policy”, 2008, 114). This is a performance management primal good step in addressing public policy governance problems. Then comes the stage of better structuring the description of the problems followed by the enhancement of the governance capabilities: reflexivity, resilience, responsiveness and

revitalization (necessary in the process of unlocking “unproductive situations”. Via strategies of “small wins”, via networking and collaboration, gradually, the adaptive governance takes shape as response to complex governance issues. Better policy design gains importance with the experience in solving complex governance problems and it is sustained by public innovation benefiting from incremental strategies of governance improvement, on the basis of networking, leadership, experimentation and learning.

Good governance cannot be evaluated as such unless it is effective and accountable (transparency and responsivity being implied by the first two characteristics). The author shows that at the macro level meritocratic systems professionalize public employees and reduce corruption. He capitalizes on the argument of Fox, 2015, and emphasizes that governance information has to be “user-centred”, effective citizen voice is necessary to be represented and reasonably raised with rather low fear of reprisals, backward-facing and forward-oriented accountability are distinguished, but both necessary and, finally, there are distinctive forms of accountability, top-down and bottom-up. Nevertheless, these are all aspects indebted to a Wilsonian/Weberian view of the separation between politics and administration, which is, in itself, an ideal type, pretty disputed since facts still indicate corruption as endemic. The political control over bureaucracy even when it is not exactly indicative of corruption remains a brake for effective and accountable governance. “The quality of user-centred information is critical for both transparency and social accountability.” (p. 46) The theoretical diagnostic insights concerning the conditions that make the effectiveness and the accountability challenging are an important contribution to field made by Christopher Ansell’s book.

New Public Management (NPM) and value-based institutionalism are complementary in diagnosing good governance theories. The former underlines extrinsic motivation and the transactional nature of leadership, while the latter places emphasis on the intrinsic motivation and the transformational nature of leadership. Input-oriented rules are inefficient in motivating and controlling the employees and only result-oriented accountability remedies that problem. The institutionalist model value-oriented proves that agencies are more accountable and effective (and more professionalized) than public organizations which lack both professionalization and transformational leadership and rarely motivate employees on public and professional task. The author underscores that Bass’ full range leadership model can give some insights on how to harvest the strong positive aspects of NPM and the value-oriented institutionalist model, beyond the common view that organizational and managerial autonomy is beneficial for effectiveness in governance.

Going from individual public agencies to the state level governance it is interesting and especially constructive that the author starts from the idea that

“state capacity is essential for public sector performance” (p. 63). Following the relatively recent research of Grindle and Hilderbrand (1995) and Matthews in 2012, but also of Evans et al. (1985) and Mann (1984, with the useful distinction “state’s despotic power” vs. “state’s infrastructural power”), Christopher Ansell comprehends the huge body of research on state building and modern state capacity: institutional capacity in gathering taxes, occasionally intervening in markets or a good centralisation of fiscal capacity and of parliamentary overseeing the budget, paved the way to identifying extractive, coordination and compliance state types of capacity (Berwick and Christia, 2018). The phenomenon of “hollowing out” the state is of particular concern especially with the emergence of new forms of governance and amid the centralization vs. decentralization dispute. The argument for decentralization is based on the improvement of accountability and responsiveness of government (Faguet, 2014), while the empirical research of decentralization brought to the fore mixed results, especially if it is undecided if it increases or decreases corruption. The expectation of a closeness of citizens to the local governments that ought to increase accountability is contradicted by the research results proving that local governments are easily “captured” by local elites. However, general conclusions about the relationship “between decentralization and corruption are difficult to draw”. (p. 67) Multilevel governance, network effectiveness, network management and accountability, public- private partnerships come in play in this broad discussion of governance success. Collaborative governance seems the superior level of modelling good governance, but it still raises the difficulties around ensuring democratic representation, procedural legitimacy and the production of valued outcomes. Another important topic is “meta-governance”, a conception about “how governance can be steered”, or, a “practice by (mainly public authorities that entails the coordination of one or more governance modes by using different instruments, methods, and strategies to overcome governance failures” (p. 82).

Eventually, the cooperation between state and society is compulsory for governance characterized by effectiveness and democratic accountability. Thus, social capital and trust are important in this perspective and they are addressed in this research considering the value systems and the potential role of bureaucracy in building trust in government (Peters, 2010 and Goodsell, 2014). “The relationships between social capital, trust, governance and democracy are complex and we still lack a more general theoretical framework to analyze these relations.” (p. 104)

Other aspects such as civic engagement, social capital, conflict, violent conflict and conflict management are also studied and power-sharing strategies seem more efficient in ameliorating societal conflicts than consociationalism and federalism.

The theme of global governance is powered by the hopes of global cooperation and coordination. In a very concise view, we can say that we have the rule enforcement perspective, “the global experimentalist governance” (that gives latitude to decentralized actors to achieve common framework goals) and the “goal-based governance” perspective in global governance (grounded on agreed upon long range generous and ample goals, but not enforcing prescriptive rules).

Good governance is found to be in direct and meaningful correlation with the reduction of poverty and inequality. Specially in the Weberian view of the state, the bureaucracies are meritocratic, capable and autonomous and they contribute to the reduction of poverty, also reducing corruption and creating the favourable contexts for the institution and functionality of a developmental state. At the same time, the welfare programmes, notwithstanding their variation in effectiveness, they correlate well with the reduction of poverty. Community-based strategies are other types of avenues for the reduction of poverty. The NGOs often play a key role in this respect at least as intermediary factors and institutional actors, if not as initiators of poverty reduction strategies.

Related to these processes the reduction of inequality should be as well an outcome of good governance, but there are researches showing that inequality and biased outcomes occur even when „individuals are not biased and policies are officially neutral”. The concept of representative bureaucracy was developed in relation to the preoccupation with the reduction of inequality (both economic and gender, race, ethnicity and maybe also age. Passive, active and symbolic representation types are considered, but the research shows that “the effects of representative bureaucracy are not always straightforward” (p. 152). Fairness is not an automatic result of procedural bureaucracy and procedural justice, and the author emphasizes that awareness to the disadvantaged communities and as well to the characteristics of environmental justice are crucial to acknowledging the inequities, their origins and their meanings.

A special chapter is dedicated to the management of the commons and to sustainability. As a reply to Garrett Hardin’s argument concerning the Tragedy of the Commons, Elinor Ostrom suggested the study and the implementation of the community-based self-governance. A polycentric system of self-governing institutions may set an efficient middle ground between centralization and decentralization in good governance. Co-management is another up to date concept relevant in the study of contemporary good governance which is predicated upon placing the trust in the local community’s participation in governance.

Ostrom insists on the adaptive nature of governance, as extending the theories of adaptive management, and proposes principles for community’s self-governance that are deduced from communities’ views and initiatives, from the proven tendencies that communities have to create networks that support

mobilization and cooperation and Christopher Ansell capitalizes this type of research along with all the above mentioned and other in a well-documented investigation that gathers elements for a reconfiguration of governance at a superior and more adequate contemporary level of performance especially from the perspective of principled democratic demands addressed to governance.

However, environmental governance research is interested in studying as well the international level and not only the level of local communities. At the international level, global environmental governance regimes are indicated to function better when they actively nurture and invest in “a deep knowledge base”.

The aspect of sustainability transition is approached with the view of sustainability coevolutionary processes derived from technology, successful and efficient institutions, (sustainable) technologies, change-adaptive institutions.

The concept of reflexive governance is explained at the political level of criticism and evaluation, post fact, considering critically the outcomes of governance efforts correlated possibly with preoccupations of justification and image but especially useful as a form of accountability, in my view. Nevertheless, the author shows that reflexive governance is meaningful at a general level as an increased attention paid to environmental issues of governance, but it is rather abstract and it has generated only a limited empirical outcome.

In the process of rethinking the theories of governance this work gives a beneficial importance to the state-society synergy perspective. From this standpoint, the shift from government to governance is rather problematic and correlated with the discontents of “neoliberalism” summarized by the obscured role of the public sphere, by the de-territorializing and the state with direct results in the erosion of the welfare state that becomes “a punitive workfare state”, a Foucauldian move that replaces governance by a neoliberal governmentality of a state distancing itself from the subjects governed. An additional negative factor is the eroding representative democracy. Rethinking governance has then to prove that it can contribute to strengthen the state-society synergy. The research builds remarkably on the Weberian model via documentation and a gradual, architectural interpretation of concepts that show a process of more powerful scheme enhancing this synergy. Thus, it is relevant that the argument grows toward the research of “empowered participatory governance” encouraging explanatory theories more than and descriptive theories and the enhancement of the democratic and participatory character of efficient and trustworthy governance against reification, exclusion, poverty and inequality, contributing to both a future stronger democratic society and a future stronger democratic state found not only in relation or synergy, but in a continuous constructive and democratic dialogue that diagnoses problems as it unfolds.

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