BOOK REVIEW

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORM EDITED BY KUNO SCHEDLER AND ISABELLA PROELLER

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In recent years, public administration in many countries has sought to move towards increasing homogeneity in administrative structures, systems, and practices, from a belief that this will strengthen institutions and improve performance. This goal has yet to be achieved. Case studies do not support the idea of convergence of public-sector reform programs. Indeed, there appears to have been substantial divergence in reform trajectories (see Bovaird, pp. 323–350). Thus, there arises the main question addressed by this book: Are reforms continuously characterised by divergence as the result of different national traditions and development paths? This book analyses the impact of culture on the possibilities and limits of concept transfer between different organizations and jurisdictions.

This analysis is conducted from three different perspectives. The first includes elements that can be grouped in the category of “defining culture,” developed further below. The second perspective considers the variables and methods used to measure the magnitude of how culture specifically influences public management reforms (which the editors call “artifacts of culture”). The third perspective looks at examples of cultural elements in public management in various countries (Switzerland, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Germany, and e-government in Asia).

With a focus on international comparability, these three perspectives offer readers classic bibliographical references on the subject (e.g., Hofstede, Hood), as well as an extensive and detailed review of the current literature on each of the areas discussed. The book’s strongest point is its ability to explain how
national cultures, organizational cultures, occupational cultures, and sectoral cultures translate and interpret global trends. Countries are stimulated to adopt similar reform instruments, but they display particular dynamics in doing so. This results in considerably varying paths of public management reforms among Western states, despite shared labels. Quite different modernization agendas might actually be embraced under the umbrella of the New Public Management doctrine or of “good governance,” which is bad news for proponents of a comprehensive new shared model known as the European Administrative Space, despite the efforts of international institutions.

The authors of this book argue that culture, like strategy and structure, has become an object of management. Bureaucracies have a cultural component, but the interlinkage between culture and public management has not always been systematically and explicitly included in analyses of public management reforms. The following are the main reasons for this:

1. Although there is common agreement on the importance of culture, attempts to conceptualize culture have proved to be non-uniform.
2. As compared to the role of the political/administrative system, the impact of cultural values and practices seems to be less clear and pronounced (see Beuselinck, Verhoest and Bouckaert, pp. 77–115). Culture-related elements only tell part of the story.
3. The cultural factor has become less visible to political scientists, who prefer to highlight other variables, such as power and institutions.
4. Reform is mainly done to improve management efficiency, rather than to change core government values. Many studies therefore treat culture as a residual factor.

In its discussion of these topics, the book reveals why several reform programs were launched and abandoned: organizational and professional cultures were neglected by the technical approach of the reforms. The disregard of existing organizational cultures made the widespread failure of well-meant reforms highly likely. The conclusion is clear. If public management seeks to have an impact in the future, it must more thoroughly take into account the culture within organizations. In the words of Maeder, in his contribution to this book: “It would be more helpful to put more emphasis on serving the citizen in an efficient way than to denigrate public administration” (p. 73).

If our goal is to achieve international comparability with regard to the effect of reforms, a number of methodological problems begin to arise: how to link a dynamic analysis of coordination strategies and instruments with static data on political/administrative systems; how to take into account cultural differences in how time is framed, since reform models usually contain explicit time-related components or dimensions (see Pollitt, pp. 231–245), etc. Furthermore, basic socio-demographic and socio-economic variables fail to explain levels of confidence in civil service (see Van de Walle, pp. 171–201). Public management analysis is now facing a challenge. As culture changes, so must methodologies and concepts, in order to increase capacities for explanation.
Like any compilation, there are imbalances to be found among the articles included in this volume. Nevertheless, the book is certain to become an essential reference on the subject, as it includes much of the current knowledge on cultural aspects of public management reform. This book is a compilation of the best articles given in a scholarly conference on the subject. As such, it is aimed at academic experts to help them consider cultural issues when analysing public management. Furthermore, it will also be of great interest for those aiming to introduce reforms inside the public sector, by encouraging practitioners to bear in mind that cultural aspects will be as important for their success as strategy or structure.