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Volume 3 | Issue 2 | Fall 2007

3302

[Previous](#) | [TOC](#)

Book Review Perspectives

Jan-Peter Voß, Dierk Bauknecht, & René Kemp (Eds.), *Reflexive Governance for Sustainable Development*

Edward Elgar, 2006, 480pp, ISBN: 9781845425821

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The environmental challenges of the 21st century are novel and ever varying. It is easy to hope for technological change to meet them, and technology is providing powerful tools to do so, and will undoubtedly provide many more. But without implementation technology is useless, and this requires effective governance. For some, it may be axiomatic to fall back on top-down, modernist governmental methods, such as mandates, to move toward sustainability, but, as the editors and contributors of *Reflexive Governance for Sustainable Development* argue, this will not meet today's complex challenges. Strategies of reflexivity are crucial and are predicated upon constantly reacting to change, minimizing unintended side effects, and responding to the initiatives of multiple stakeholders. In 16 chapters by experts from across Europe, *Reflexive Governance for Sustainable Development* explores strategies, policies, and programs that may help move us through an era of uncertainty.

This book can be loosely divided into two sections, the first largely discussing theory, the latter dealing with practice, although, of course, the two overlap. The theoretical part can be slow going, abstract, and replete with jargon. This is the devilish riddle of governance theories; they are needed to get anything done, but when removed from empirical application come across as slippery and esoteric. Fortunately, the latter part of the book puts meat on the spectral skeleton of the former, discussing such issues as sanitation, biodiverse agriculture, and biorefineries.

The early chapters discuss the increasing obsolescence of modernist notions that a small group of experts can identify a problem, figure out the best solution, and regulate it out of existence. Such a theory of governance was always suspect, and regarding sustainability is even more so. Rather, the authors argue, "[U]ncertainty and ambivalence are features of the operation of sustainability" (p. 424). Centralized, regulation-oriented governance gains inertia as it moves toward a target, ignoring the many unexpected consequences and altered circumstances in its wake. With numerous interest

groups and stakeholders taking part in the discussion, and given the small scale and localized nature of crucial technology, sustainability will require radically different thinking from the customary. Sustainability blends two astoundingly complex and unpredictable metasystems: human governance and the environment. As such it requires a new governance paradigm.

Yet, the book, while attacking modernist certainty, avoids rehashing a vulgar deconstructionism in which meaning breaks down in an endless process of self-subversion. As Ulrich Beck explains, “[T]he post-modern idea proves inadequate. It explains, indeed, why the old ways of perceiving modernity are no longer valid; but it does not even pose the question as to what concepts we need in order to describe, to analyse and to make ourselves masters of the new realities” (p. 35). This observation, however, risks repeating the modernist fallacy of mastery. In doing so it points to the precarious position of theories of reflexive governance: they must acknowledge how much we do not know while at the same time leading to action.

Voß, Bauknecht, & Kemp cover some of the strategies that are only beginning to be employed. Key among these novel interventions is the ability to reflect upon an action’s consequences, not just initially but continually, and hence to change governance strategies to react to unfolding events and accumulated experience. As the authors explain, reflexive governance is “geared towards continued learning in the course of modulating ongoing developments, rather than towards complete learning and maximisation of control” (p. 7). In other words, reflexivity is always provisional, employing such techniques as iterative learning, feedback loops, and meta-analysis as methods of continuous learning. A related principle is to draw in a large number of stakeholders to ensure as much as possible that a vast number of interests and opinions work—directly or indirectly—toward a set of goals loosely organized under the rubric of sustainability. Granted this may be like herding cats, but there are ways to encourage cats to move together, and even to employ the grace, speed, and independence of individual cats.

Transition management, scenarios, risk management, and niche-based approaches are key strategies discussed in the book. Such interventions aim to provide some guidance and predictability in an increasingly volatile global situation. Reflexive governance must thus be implemented on a number of scales at once, from global to local, with the ongoing lessons shared as much as possible.

It merits noting, however, that reflexive governance is not as novel as the foregoing discussion might imply. Various versions of it have been occurring, albeit in partial and provisional ways, for quite some time. So John Grin points to arguments that “the most successful cases of planning have been those in which government has subtly shaped the market, not only through regulative interventions, but also through creating the societal conditions under which the market might operate” (p. 73). Adrian Smith makes a fruitful comparison between the alternative technology movement of the 1970s and current reflexive approaches, showing the former as grassroots, individualistic, and even rebellious, while the latter is a far more policy-minded movement toward similar goals. Reflexive governance, though it might seem pedestrian and bureaucratic,

spreads and implements seeds sown by earlier, more revolutionary movements. Indeed, a number of chapters show how activities such as wind power and sustainable sewage, begun with a small-scale, individualistic orientation, have since diffused via very different policy-oriented processes.

The book could have done more to examine long-term precedents. It would have been interesting to include further discussion of what ways such historical developments as early capitalism, the American experience with representative government and checks and balances, and Keynesian economic principles, to name a few, could be construed as forms of reflexive governance and in what ways they failed to meet the necessary criteria. The volume does, nevertheless, supply some strong contemporary examples of reflexive governance. Many chapters explore specific forms with wide implications for the whole approach. For instance, a study of adaptive management in Hungary's Tisza River Basin shows the unpredictable consequences to which policy makers must be prepared to adapt. The chapter's authors point out that modernist assumptions about human ability to control nature have been undermined by "a series of surprising, catastrophic collapses of regional fisheries, agriculture and forestry in the twentieth century" (p. 134). Indeed, the Tisza River Basin's system of dikes has failed repeatedly, while increasing floods have "created a race to raise and reinforce the dikes higher than the next major flood, but the history of dike failures shows how re-engineering the defense system could never catch up" (p. 138). While managers have concluded that protective infrastructure by itself is not enough to manage the basin, the opposite solution, a return to an idyllic past in which nature manages itself, is also unworkable. The basin remains an experiment in management with adverse consequences for every mistake, a microcosm of what is occurring at the global level, though with its own intricate idiosyncrasies.

Reflexive governance, then, remains a work in progress. In their conclusion, Voß, Bauknecht, & Kemp discuss a profound problem, namely that the break up of linear decision making may lead to paralysis. Referring to this dilemma as the "efficacy paradox," the authors suggest that the interplay between questioning and making decisions is never-ending, that getting the balance right is critical, but that there are no hard rules for finding this balance. The process is a slippery one, and practitioners searching for definitive guidelines will find this book frustrating. The authors even admit that "this book is a first outline of a new theoretical perspective that may look rather 'impressionistic'. It may even fail to impress" (p. 436). Yet getting reflexive governance right will be critical. It is, in part, a movement into the unknown, filled with trepidation but also with hope, bolstered by an awareness of our own limitations, a humility that we must learn to use as an asset.

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