Theme-based Book Review: Government Capacity and Capability

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BOOK REVIEW

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Introduction

Government capacity and capability are not only a matter of public rhetoric. Government capacity may be seen when government can "do what it wants to do" (Gargan, 1981, p. 656). Capacity has been tied to policy, resource and program management, but capacity is not exclusively a matter of management. Government capability is evidenced by institutions that "respond effectively to change … make decisions efficiently, effectively (i.e., rationally) and responsively, [and] … manage conflict" (Bowman & Kearney, 1988, p. 343). Arrangements within institutional structures help organizations to move beyond simple static capacity to kinetic movement in realization of government's goals; in this respect, accountability, coordinating ability, staffing and resources may point to capability (Bowman & Kearney, 1988). Still, government institutions frequently have difficulty translating capacity into realized performance (Manning & Holt, 2014). Capacity and capability have context-specific characteristics. Efforts to impose systems and capacities out of context, as mimetic isomorphism, can fail (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004; Pritchett et al., 2013). Public sector enterprises are constrained by a variety of factors, from within and outside the organization; some factors are overt, but others may be difficult to identify, borne of individual and group limitations that inform the human condition.

This themed book review looks at four recent books that on some level address government capacity and capability – what can be expected and gotten from the public administration enterprise. The books include *The Three Ages of Government: From the Person, to the Group, to the World*, by Jos C.N. Raadschelders; *A Modern Guide to Public Policy*, edited by Giliberto Capano and Michael Howlett; *Transportation and the State: Governing the Public Domain*, by Hans Keman and Japp J. Woldendorp; and *The Death of Idealism: Development and Anti-Politics in the Peace Corps*, by Meghan Elizabeth Kallman.

Raadschelders, J. C. N. (2020), *The Three Ages of Government: From the Person, to the Group, to the World*. University of Michigan Press. 326 pp., ISBN 978-0-472-13223-2 (Hbk, 80 USD); ISBN 978-0-472-03854-1 (Pbk, 34.95 USD); ISBN 978-0-472-12736-8 (E-book, 34.95 USD).

Jos Raadschelders's ambitious project for *The Three Ages of Government* is to address what have been increasingly rapid changes in various aspects of society, from social and cultural to technological, and how these shifts impact perception of government in its multiple guises and expansive role, through a public administration perspective. In the book's seeking after "what government is", government is explored as a social phenomenon through three historical phases: from origins of the human race in primates and as hunter-gatherers, tribal activity, and to the present with the impacts of globalization and its sedentary nature, with government itself shifting from early history, to government as a tool of the elite, to institutions increasingly being called upon to respond to the broader public and all its demands, often directly. Throughout, readers are treated to Raadschelders's impressive insight, in a book that at times reads more like a conversation and encouragement to further discussion than the final word on the topics presented, thus involving the reader in an active way.

The book began with an introduction highlighting important aspects of the conceptual path to be followed. Chapter two provided the context for material about understanding government and its place through history. Chapters three through five offered an exposition of the title's eponymous three stages, from individual to tribe to a sedentary globalized framework. Chapter six discussed authority and decision-making, making a resonant point about what the public takes for granted in government services. Chapter seven concluded the book with an overview of the influences illustrated in the book, a portrayal of the essentially fragile nature of democracy, and the 'true guardians' of government in the public service.

The book's greatest strengths lie in the author's command of the literature and mindfulness of public administration's place amongst fields of inquiry, and in the expansive scope of the text, reaching beyond public administration to make relevant one of the more pressing issues of the day. The result is a clearheaded reading of government's role, capacity, and citizens' trust in public institutions.

I disagree somewhat that this book will be of sweeping interest to all citizens, because it is far too erudite to hold simple interest for long; certain details of interest to a public administration audience may confuse rather than encourage readers from other fields, public officials, or citizens as a general target audience. The prose is readable and engaging as an academic book, pulling from references as diverse as Searle, Kafka, and Satie, in addition to Simon and Waldo (all personal favorites), but the approach is far from the stuff of popular literature, though it does bring to mind occasionally popular works like those of Jared Diamond and Richard Dawkins (who are referenced), as well as memorable

frameworks for large conceptual matters, with people making sense of place in historical context (such as Ewick & Silbey, 1998).

As much as it pains me, I do not always agree with the book's generally positive outlook, when the current context is informed by so much in-fighting and stated desire to return to "bad old days" that lacked inclusion and focused on policies and programs that help those that frankly have had enough help already. Some with power tend to relish their unawareness of process and government's technical forms, cheered on by a baying crowd that also fails to understand the what and why of government authority and process. The book is a bit Eurocentric in sections; for example, Ibn Khaldūn is included, but the accomplishments and contributions of Islamic thought to public administration are not limited to him, and insight from other parts of the world is similarly less a focus. Raadschelders admits his ordering approach to the text, and inclusion of certain theories and materials, as a snowball approach, but the product evidences no pretensions otherwise. This is not a large limitation given the scope of the text, where a comprehensive approach may have led to a multi-book project.

Raadschelders is among public administration's most important authors and has long served as a standard-bearer for the field. *The Three Ages of Government* pulls together the many threads of his research and teaching over several decades in service to the academic community. This is not only an introduction to his work and its impact, but also, hopefully, to public administration for a wider audience that may be less familiar with our field as a self-aware subject of study. The book reminds me of cherished topics and conversations raised in the conceptual foundation course I encountered as a doctoral student, and so I think it would be an excellent assigned text for that purpose for new scholars. It is among the sort of infrequently encountered volumes that take the reader on an intellectual journey – even where one may disagree along the way, it is the learned discussion that is ultimately the point.

Capano, G., & Howlett, M. (2020), editors. *A Modern Guide to Public Policy* Edward Elgar. 288 pp. ISBN 9781789904970 (Hbk, 160 USD); ISBN 9781789904987 (E-book, 40 USD).

A Modern Guide to Public Policy provides a commendable overview of the field's literature and implications for practice. I was impressed with the breadth of coverage and the quality of content from the assembled author team. The fairly generic title conceals the wealth of information contained within, which quickly brings the reader current on knowledge in the field; it is an uncommon book in the sense that it may be appealing to both academics and practitioners, given its approachable, competent style.

An introductory chapter highlighted major concerns within the field of public policy and the book's approach, which examines assumptions about public policy, policy contexts, and evolution of policy understanding. The edited volume is divided into five major sections: first, public policy nature and study; second, policy process and contextual factors; third, policy-making mechanisms. Part four addresses the tools employed by governments along with resource considerations. Part five looks at policy outputs, outcomes, and evolution.

The Howlett and Cashore (2020) chapter on public policy definition provided a useful start to the text, situating what comes later in a basic but effective foundational presentation, beginning with the field's major conceptual roots and the policy cycle model. Anthony Perl's (2020) chapter on policy dynamics and major stops along the policy cycle, including an excellent treatment of agenda setting, is on point with its assertion of policy as an iterative process, where evaluation serves a useful refining purpose. The chapter on policy actors and power relations by Beland and Haelg (2020) explains relevant theoretical bases clearly and usefully. Moshe Maor's (2020) chapter on policy over- and under-reaction is immediately engrossing, raising serious questions about signaling, blame avoidance, and overconfidence in politics and impact on the policy process, especially in times of crisis; this chapter could not be timelier and more relevant. Busetti and Capano's chapter (Busetti & Capano, 2020) on first- and second-order mechanisms in policy, affecting individuals or in aggregate, respectively, takes on material that might be dull in less capable hands; the tables included in the chapter are instructive and useful.

Howlett's (2020) chapter on behavior and compliance problems in policy raised some pertinent points, particularly about how policy actors with "rudimentary and cursory knowledge of how those expected to be affected by the policy are likely to react to it" (Howlett, 2020, p. 152); I also found this chapter useful in context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with regard to behavior in absence of altruism, and orders to wear masks to being taken as an opportunity to talk about diminishment of personal freedom, instead of a public health obligation and a show of concern for others. The chapter on policy capacity and capability by Wu et al. (2020) tied the ability of policy systems to larger issues of legitimacy. The concluding chapter on policy dismantling and accumulation by Knill et al. (2020) provided a good overview of this subtopic, while also serving as a fitting conclusion to the book, with calls for attention to unsustainable policy accumulation and research into implementation and its deficits.

While most of the book is quite strong, some chapters left something to be desired – the chapter on uncertainty and ambiguity in policy is perhaps too basic, for example, and chapter six, on a general framework for policy-making is short and not especially compelling.

The book as a whole provides the reader a fine primer to the literature on public policy and the field's present state, and much to discuss, think about, and apply to public policy concerns of the present. Actually, any initial concern I had for the generic title and accompanying low expectations was discarded as I found the book to be not only competent in its coverage, but a fairly entertaining read as well. The book will be most useful for graduate-level courses in public policy, possibly as a central text for such a course within a public administration program, given the chapters' frequent attention to practitioner perspectives.

Keman, H., & Woldendorp, J. J. (2020), *Transportation and the State: Governing the Public Domain.* **Edward Elgar. 288 pp. ISBN: 978 1 78811 294 9 (Hbk, 135 USD); ISBN: 978 1 78811 295 6 (E-book, 40 USD).**

Keman and Woldendorp's *Transportation and the State* offers an exploration of the growth of the modern industrial state and a changing economic system, with transportation, specifically railways, being a cornerstone of such change. After an introductory chapter, the book is divided into two major sections. Part one centers on the development of railway infrastructure as expressions of societal development – "a diachronic analysis of state intervention and railway development" (Keman & Woldendorp, 2020, p. xi) using examples from Australia, the United States, and nations in Europe. Part two of the book delves into greater detail for four case studies: Australia, Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands.

Keman and Woldendorp address the myth of the minimally involved "night watchman" state in Europe by pointing out the essential and defining role governments had (and have) in infrastructure funding. Such intervention is a marker for emergence of the modern state, with the state, having acquired and centralized resources, using public resources to spur projects to benefit the collective. Such efforts potentially serve as uniting activities, as they have in the case of regionwide and national railway systems (the example of Italy is showcased later in the book as a case study). As much as current public discourse may have a tendency to downplay the positive role of government, such intervention made the difference for many public-benefitting projects, which would not have happened or been severely constrained to market-favoring interests otherwise. A government's ability to provide economic largesse is a capacity and capability pointing toward effective government. Public transportation is emblematic of this thinking – not only does it allow for movement of citizens and goods within a state, it also makes possible an increasing robustness of trade. This in turn feeds capacity, in government, the private sector, and in the fueling of opportunity for citizens.

Chapter two addressed the rooting of transportation development in the Industrial Revolution, which made adjusting to new contexts and opportunities an essential public need. Chapter three considered further the role of the state in providing a fertile ground for economic development through transportation. Chapter four brought the study into current considerations of failing railway infrastructure, where national intervention as a statement of collective will gives way to a pressing need to save structures and systems that are increasingly below par. Chapter five emphasized the importance of addressing ailing infrastructure not exclusively as a public problem, given constraints on state resources, but rather to give due regard to the complexity of the situation with railways as semi-public goods. Government has a role to play in initiating large public-benefiting projects, with private benefit, but when it comes to maintaining these projects, the assumption is too often that the state will handle it, as if resources are unlimited. Part two of the book includes four case studies, which illustrate the points of the first part of the book, showing a range of intervention, emphasizing the nexus of economics, politics, and transportation. A concluding chapter showed the importance of the state in infrastructure matters and the pressing problems facing such systems in the current environment, resting future developments in a positive light on shared governance as a way of increasing collective capacity, retaining the usefulness of railway networks for present purposes.

The case studies in the book are a highlight. I found these chapters intriguing and occasionally surprising – the chapter on the Australian experience, with the differences between areas of the nation seemingly emphasized by differences in the gauge of railway tracks, was outstanding. Speaking generally, a slight drawback is that the case studies, while detailed, are limited to Europe and Australia. Since the book demonstrates the importance of railways to societal growth generally and raises salient questions about what happens with railways as a public good with continuing use in the present context, the opportunity is opened up for future research into case studies elsewhere.

A hallmark of good books is that they tell good stories; *Transportation and the State* weaves theory and history together to engage the reader in a discussion of the centrality of railways in development from many perspectives. It is important to remember that there *can be* significant public benefit in projects where government largesse combines with private interests and means to secure public projects, if attention to public benefit and awareness of the potential for corrupt practices and self-serving private sector behavior is consistent.

The book will clearly be of interest for scholars working with this specific subject matter, but beyond that the book may have some use as an assigned text in courses on political economy or where infrastructure and economic development are prominent topics.

Kallman, M. E. (2020), *The Death of Idealism: Development and Anti-Politics in the Peace Corps.* **Columbia University Press. ISBN 9780231189682 (Hbk, 110 USD), ISBN 9780231189699 (Pbk, 28 USD); ISBN**

9780231548465 (E-book, 27.99 USD).

In *The Death of Idealism: Development and Anti-Politics in the Peace Corps*, Meghan Elizabeth Kallman seeks to understand more about "when, why, and how idealism is lost. Why do so many citizens in Western society find themselves … starved for a sense of meaning and purpose?" (Kallman, 2020, p. 1–2). This exploration takes place through a mixed-method study of Peace Corps volunteers. The premise is that idealism dies or is reshaped, in large part due to "performative" professionalization processes and pressures of bureaucratic environments beholden to political interests; later the premise shifts to "what discourages people from dreaming big" (p. 217), a slight variation on idealistic death. After an introductory chapter, the book moves on to a description of the Peace Corps, USAID, professionalization from an ethical and process standpoint, a field view of volunteers, the aftermath of Peace Corps volunteering experiences from career, civic, and political standpoints, and a concluding chapter; an appendix describes the research methodology for the book.

The handling of larger questions of U. S. involvement in other countries from a development standpoint is appropriate. I found much of curiosity in the book when it came to the stories of Peace Corps volunteers; these stories are interesting on their own and probably would have formed substance enough for a volume with little analysis. If I had an assumption about the Peace Corps, it was that relatively green young people were going out into the world, being confronted by challenging situations and other ways of thinking, and realizing a significant, even transformative, potential for growth as a result. If they are challenged and have their naivety upset, well, that might be the best thing that ever happened to them. It is work, like other government work; it can be challenging, and so be it. This book did not change that assumption. I found it precious that some respondents seemed to think that they were in place in the Peace Corps to represent themselves, rather than the United States – that this was owed to them – and that some were content to focus on small issues (p. 145 and 147, for example). However, this speaks to the self-centeredness of some volunteers as much as it does the potential for growth, even beyond the years in the Peace Corps, and is not a net-negative given the point of the Peace Corps from an individual perspective.

The choice to engage in the Peace Corps, or programs like it, is made for all sorts of reasons, unique to individuals; it is not for me to critique the motivation and experience of those who might see themselves as wanting to help, or to do the right thing, whether or not the program, its administration, and intent are flawed or otherwise. Kallman does point out the "privilege" of Peace Corps participants, its "deeply racialized and gendered" character as an institution (p. 72), a volunteer calling the experience "humbling" (p. 182) being seen as provocative; the tone of this text could be seen as derisive, with reference to ideas of saviorhood (p. 49). There is quite a cast of characters around the Peace Corps, from people within the organization to the people that fund it and place demands upon it; there is plenty of contempt to go around, and no need to wear any bias on one's sleeve.

Of course, public administration readers will know that discussions of idealism and motivation are nothing new and that in the public administration field there is a rich literature that considers the problems of front-line workers, instrumentality, best practices, implementation of policy and programs, performance measurement, public service motivation, writ "intrinsic motivation" (p. 119), and ultimately the accountability and legitimacy of the public sector enterprise. *The Death of Idealism* does a serviceable job as a public administration book, but frequently misses important connections to the literature because it is written from outside the field. I frequently felt the comments being made were alien to what I knew and understood as an academic and previously as a practitioner in public service. From that perspective, Kallman has pieced together what public administrators do and some of the pressing challenges facing government work, but that was not the central purpose of the book. There is not a lot of awareness of the common experience – where the interaction of motivation with reality occurs throughout public service. Discussion about the harm in professionalization and hierarchy caused me to think about previous work on management and deployment of resources to accomplish organizational goals – and especially the carrying out of policy in an apolitical manner. I do not bristle at the thought of administrative forms and processes, nor do I believe that nine-to-five workdays are crushing to motivation (offices have to be open to serve the public), but others may see that differently and think adjustments are in order. Accomplishment means different things to different people. Kallman's views on the quality or value of administrative processes are a matter of perspective, but one might argue that there is nothing wrong with a public sector organization asking its employees to be good workers, even given constraints and contextual problems. Following rules does not necessarily imply a "racialized homogenization" (p. 187) to me, though others may differ; it is worth recognizing that institutions do influence people; the opposite is less common, but also possible.

There is the suggestion that idealism is harmed by what goes on in the Peace Corps experience, but I fail to see these experiences as much beyond what would be encountered in other public sector working environments. In either case, the naïve viewpoints of newcomers are met by the harsh reality of context, personalities, rules, and culture. However, it is not my experience that idealism necessarily dies. It is perhaps shaped by what it encounters in the professional environment – brought to earth by the realities of the context, weathered, but still very much in the mindset of public servants. We are all better off for the selflessness of public officials, especially those rooted in reality. One can hold idealism and cynicism at the same time – doing so conveys a mature view of seeking after what might be possible, but being aware of the constraints of the environment.

The book raises some worthwhile questions about representativeness in the Peace Corps. According to the Peace

Corps (2019), more than 240,000 volunteers have served in 142 countries since the agency's founding. It was reported that minorities make up 34% of all volunteers (Peace Corps, 2019), and 65% of volunteers are women (the female population in the United States is just over 50%). The non-Hispanic white population of the United States was about 59.7% at the start of 2020 (Poston, 2020), so there is some ground to be made up in welcoming volunteers of all races. To the extent that the Peace Corps organization is not representative of the great diversity of America; then, this should be actively addressed, any institutional constraints and refusals to evolve aside.

I gained an appreciation through the book of the intensely individual nature of Peace Corps volunteer service; I wonder about generalizations on how idealism dies among the group of people that have made the commitment to this organization and their assignments, and the extent to which it happens. The descriptions in the book likely do not cover the range of expectation (starry-eyed or otherwise) and experience. Marnie Mueller's essay in response to the book (Mueller, 2020), for example, shows the value in more nuanced, individual portrayal. Methodologically, some may have concerns with the approach taken, and utilization of snowball sampling that may undermine representativeness, but there is worth in the exploratory analysis undertaken here, even with reservations I have voiced in this review.

Synthesis

A common theme among the books in this review is government capacity and capability – constrained by history and social contexts, institutional and political factors, a revisionism favoring private interests and avoiding the primary role of governments in public-benefitting infrastructure enhancements, and finally the capacity of individual volunteers who collectively implement government's international development objectives, but may find themselves lost in the process.

Raadschelders' presentation reveals that what is possible in government is constrained not just by present contextual challenges, but by the path dependence of a long history, if not also biological factors and social tendencies. Government can be as good and as bad as the citizenry it serves, but Raadschelders is right to hope that the people who work in government provide exemplary service, because the public relies on government a great deal, and far more than some self-centered quarters would ever want to admit. It is asserted at various points that service to all citizens is the point of government, but recent administrations have seen a considerable amount of the rent-seeking and selfish behavior that is to be avoided in public agencies. It could be that government is less a "reflection of human nature" of the Hamiltonian conception (p. 19), and more the imposition of individual and plutocratic will upon the collective, with benefits accruing to the few with fabulous wealth, but with the emotional support of a broad segment of the population voting against their own economic and social well-being. In any event, capacity and capability are threatened by inattention to such matters.

The perspectives in the Capano and Howlett text demonstrated how simple assumptions of public policy processes are inadequate to understanding the current policy context, and that what is needed are better models to reflect a changing reality in government's endeavors. Keman and Woldendorp took a historical view, reminding readers of the incredible capability of government to create incredible infrastructure networks, contributing greatly not simply to private interests, but to the public and economic development. Finally, Kallman's book suggested that the essential idealism of public servants, in one of the more challenging public sector positions imaginable, may be undone by bureaucratic process and professionalization. The threat there is real. Governments may be quite capable of designing and implementing programs, but these programs, being of human origin, may be inherently flawed in a variety of meaningful ways, limiting the potential good of public-resourced efforts. Systems and institutions may undermine our best efforts to accomplish on behalf of the public, which could further undermine trust, though public servants are, as a group, professional and highly motivated to serve for the public's benefit. All four books provide significant grist for thoughtful discussion and debate.

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