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Bryer, Thomas A. (Ed.) (2021). *Handbook of Theories of Public Administration and Management*. Edward Elgar Publishing. ISBN: 9781789908244. 360 pp.

Zusammenfassung

Der Titel des neuen englischsprachigen Theorie-Handbuchs ist vielversprechend – könnte es doch dazu beitragen, die bedauerliche Literaturlücke zu schließen, die sich mit Blick auf kompetente, aktuelle und umfassende Zusammenstellungen theoretischer Ansätze, die sich konkret auf das Verständnis öffentlicher Organisationen beziehen, auftut. Betrachtet man allerdings das inhaltliche Spektrum und die fachliche Ausführung näher, entpuppt sich der Sammelband als eine bittere Enttäuschung. Insgesamt führt die Veröffentlichung 26 Beiträge zusammen, die in fünf Abschnitte gegliedert sind, deren Überschriften auf Funktionen öffentlicher Organisationen (wie „Personal“ und „Organisation“) Bezug nehmen, aber auch „internationale Perspektiven“ anbieten. An die Stelle systematischer und fachkundiger Übersichten treten jedoch eher zufällige Schwerpunktsetzungen, die wesentliche Theorierichtungen unbeachtet lassen. Die Einzelbeiträge sind weniger an theoretischen Argumentationen interessiert, als an normativen Trends und empirische Entwicklungen, insbesondere vor dem Hintergrund des öffentlichen Sektors in den USA. Leider verzichtet der Sammelband auf einführende und zusammenfassende Querschnittskapitel sowie auf vergleichbare Kapitelstrukturen, so dass sich der Eindruck einer disparaten Sammlung verfestigt.

This request for a book review had me interested from the very beginning: the newly-advertised Handbook of Theories of Public Administration and Management. The publishing house, Edward Elgar, is among the most trusted names in our field and promises a high-quality product resulting from professional support from the publishers and a thought-through editorial process. Only recently, the second edition of the Handbook on Theories of Governance (edited by Christopher Ansell and Jakob Torfing) was published by the same source, setting an example of an authoritative and systematic account of relevant theoretical approaches, basic concepts, and different forms of governance. Still, comprehensive collections of theories applicable to the study of public administration are still eagerly sought after. Given the fact that theories are the cornerstone of any meaningful scholarship, there is still a paucity of available literature providing expert-style, yet easily accessible overviews of schools of thought, particular in the field of public administration and management. When the inspection copy arrived, it was greeted with much anticipation. I was in for a surprise.

The editor, Thomas A. Bryer (known for his work on participatory approaches and collaborative designs in local policy-making and public service delivery), states that the primary goal of the book is “to reflect the broad issues, concerns and theoretical perspectives across the public administration and management scholarly community”

(p. 1). To this end, he brings together 39 authors and co-authors from 13 countries, who contributed 26 chapters totaling in 326 pages. The contributions differ in style and length, ranging from five-pagers (with four references) to full-fledged articles, including extensive bibliographies. The chapters are organized into five parts of the book, mainly revolving around functional dimensions of public sector organizations. First, the chapters are supposed to address the “role of public administration” vis-à-vis politics, citizens, and in relation to society at large, particularly in terms of ethics, social equity, and social justice, before, second, shifting attention to “theories on the function of public administration”. Consisting of six chapters, this second part mainly deals with instruments and mechanisms, “which can support the realization of the purposes outlined in the first part” (p. 2), among those are performance management, collaborative governance, public sector branding, digital government, administrative law, and municipal management. The following parts are dedicated to core resources of public administration and management: people and organization. In the “people” section, readers find discussions of the utility of public service motivation as a research field, the relevance of religious beliefs in enhancing public service, the meaning of charismatic leadership in public administration as well as chapters on gender and diversity in public employment. The “organization” part is the shortest section of the book, featuring three chapters that relate to questions of strategic management and organizational change. Finally, the closing section comes under the rubric of “international perspective of public administration and management”. The editor justifies this part of the book as a discussion of “various theories and perspectives introduced in preceding parts and how they fit or might apply differently in various other countries”. It quickly turns out, however, that each chapter pursues its own research question (with meaningful references to theories of public administration being conspicuously absent) in mostly single country cases (including Chile, China, India, Lithuania, Pakistan, Russia and the UK) looking at different time horizons.

To put it bluntly, the book is a gross disappointment. Handbooks are meant as sources of reference. Scholars do not value reference books for making unexpected finds, but for their comprehensive and expert treatment of a subject matter, providing a firm foundation and a clear sense of orientation. Handbooks on theories are also supposed to put theories first. The new publication does not remotely meet either expectation. The contributions are mainly empirical in nature, often embedded in the habitat of US public sector organizations, and tend to take normative stances as to how change should be brought about. Adding a number of disparate country chapters (dwelling on digitalization in Russia or the success of China-based authors in international peer-reviewed journals, for example) does neither open up a comparative perspective, nor does it strengthen the theoretical ambition of the volume. In only very few chapters, theoretical approaches are explicitly considered, particularly in relation to social equity (ch. 4), social justice (ch. 5) and human resource management (ch. 13). When giving priority to topical issues and normative perspectives, however, the risk of inherent bias in selecting appropriate theories increases, leaving complete strands of theoretical thinking out of the picture (in the case of this volume, the public choice school, neo-institutional economics, but also any other variants of institutionalism, old or new, as well as systems theory are among the victims). It goes without saying that this edited volume does not aim for a systematic treatment of theories per se, looking, for example, at ways of how theories can be developed, classified, compared, and evaluated.

What is also missing are substantive introductory and closing chapters, which lay-out the plan of the book, explain choices made in content selection or that can be used to connect the dots, address open questions and identify avenues for future research. As in other handbooks, these editorial techniques could have been helpful to the reviewed publication, if only it had had a coherent plan in the first place.

In sum, Thomas A. Bryer has edited an anthology of stand-alone chapters addressing a series of current issues and concerns in public administration. Some of those chapters, more aligned with one another than with the rest of the volume, could have served as core material of a very different publication focusing on the quest for equitable and inclusive public administration informed by postmodern theories and using participatory and collaborative approaches. Unfortunately, the parties involved in the production of this publication chose otherwise and published a misnomer. Those of us in the public administration and management scholarly community, who are interested in a handbook of theories in our field, or a close approximation thereof, will have to look elsewhere.

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