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Philippe Bezes

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New Public Management. The Transformation of Ideas and Practice
Tom Christensen and Per Lægreid (Eds)
Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002, 353 pp., £21, ISBN 0-7546-3212-1 (pbk)

This book is a significant contribution to the understanding of the effects of new public management (NPM)-related reforms on the central civil service systems. It brings together 12 substantial contributions united by a coherent approach. The volume offers theoretical and empirical chapters on the transformative effects of NPM-based reforms, based on a comparison between Antipodean (New Zealand and Australia) and Scandinavian (Norway and Sweden) countries over the past two decades. As editors, in the two introductory and concluding chapters, Tom Christensen and Per Lægreid collaborate to take seriously a threefold dimension of NPM reforms: understanding the processes; analysing the real effects of reforms beyond the managerial talks; and considering the theoretical influences of NPM on democratic theory.

Chapters discussing reform processes embark on a broad framework, introduced by the editors, that defends a 'transformative perspective on administrative reforms' (chapter 2, p. 24) and takes into account 'a complex mix of environmental characteristics, polity features and historical–institutional context' as the main institutional dynamics of reform. They suggest that NPM reform initiatives should be analysed by considering the influences of international environmental pressures but also the filtering roles of nationally based institutions such as political–administrative history, styles of governance and political system features. These constraining variables explain both the specific national managerial reforming ideas and the way national administrative systems are transformed by NPM reforms.

Described in the introduction as a creolisation process, this pattern of analysis is sufficiently broad to be generally found in all empirical chapters, even if all of them do not address fully its central elements. As a general approach, it allows to dismantle the convergence hypothesis of a global NPM trend spreading all over the world and producing the same effects. Although it may appear to be insufficiently tight to provide for systematic cross-case comparison, it convincingly emphasises the specificity of the four countries adopting NPM reforms and offers instruments to overtake the limits of idiosyncratic national trajectory.

Other chapters on reform processes (John Halligan, Anders Forsell, Kerstin Sahlin-Andersson) provide complementary perspectives. While agreeing with the idea that NPM reforms do produce divergent effects on national administrations because of specific institutional arrangements, Kerstin Sahlin-Andersson provides, for instance, some elements of processes of convergence. She identifies the importance of internationally formed NPM reforms through a process of imitation between countries but also transnational processes where international organizations (such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and Puma) play a major role by elaborating and diffusing templates and prototypes. While Halligan provides various frameworks to categorize types of reform and processes, Anders Forsell discusses Brunsson and Olsen's reform theory from *The Reforming Organisation* (1993) and specifically the point that 'the components of administrative reform—talk, structure, processes, outcome—are loosely coupled'. Resting on the story of Swedish NPM reforms and their complex and ambiguous

effects, Forsell suggests that the idea of market reform dominates the process and works as a selection mechanism which rejects all measures which are incompatible with it.

The contributions on the effects of NPM reforms provide the more convincing pieces of the book and a wealth of analysis and results. On issues where theories are repeatedly in search of precise empirical data, the immense merit of the contributions is to offer much evidence of complex, unexpected and paradoxical changes in several dimensions of the administrative systems: political control, top civil servant systems, policy capacities, state employees' unions and ideological legitimization systems. I will limit myself to the key messages.

In their empirical contribution, Christensen and Lægreid shed light on a first paradoxical result: while the reform process in New Zealand and Australia, based on diverse forms of devolution and contracting, was strongly under political control, the effects of the reform have been in practice to produce a dividing line between management and politics and to weaken political control in favour of administrative autonomy. Paradoxically, Norway, which chose a more moderate reform path, did not radically alter relations between the administration and politics and has kept political control at the centre. Top civil servant systems themselves have also been changed by the development of contractual arrangements even if the content and effects of reforms diverge between Norway and New Zealand as analysed in Lægreid's own contribution. In both countries, however, formal contracts for top bureaucrats are not viewed as the main contributor to higher operational efficiency and all present a number of disadvantages: difficulties in specifying the objectives, high transaction costs to negotiate and enforce contracts, persistent accountability problems or just a 'basic' incapacity to offer higher salaries.

Defending a sharp 'sceptical view' of NPM, Robert Gregory offers a welcome non-heroic view of the New Zealand experience. He points out that state sector reforms 'have created a troublesome disjunction between the democratic dimensions of good governance and the corporate imperatives of effective management' (p. 255). Specifically, he argues that the numerous managerial initiatives, defending the reinforcement of managers' autonomy, bring about more 'politicisation', i.e. 'the blurring of political and managerial responsibility' (p. 243) and a culture of distrust in the integrity of government officials.

Paul G. Roness's chapter on state employees' unions is of great interest because it offers a detailed, original and unfortunately too rare focus on the extent to which organised state groups have responded to, had an impact on or have been affected by NPM reforms. By considering the historical legacy of civil servants' unions, union–party relationships and their institutional characteristics, he analyses their capacity to participate in, to orientate, to block or to be excluded from reforms. This chapter provides new institutional factors and information to explain divergences between countries. While the unions in New Zealand were excluded from the reforms of the 1980s and were very weak in the 1990s, unions in Norway (and to a lesser extent in Sweden or in Australia) assumed a more prominent role, had a larger impact and influenced reforms, in particular when it came to wage determination, personnel policy and devolution.

Another interesting perspective is suggested by Martin Painter's chapter about the effects of NPM reforms on policy capacity. Based on a case study of the Australian social housing policy in the 1990s, he suggests that NPM reforms reinforced ancient policy-coordinating tools by providing the political and bureaucratic elites in the 1990s with a set of instruments and structures capable of 'enhancing strategic control over policy development and innovation'.

The third aim of the book is both very stimulating and probably a bit deceptive. The editors emphasise the importance of discussing the effects of NPM-related reforms on democratic systems. Because NPM—in practice and as doctrine—is

associated with a change in administration–politics relationships, its 'application' transforms the role of the bureaucracy and the democratic channels of responsibility and accountability. In their diversity, NPM ideas provide several alternative and contradictory views of democracy (supermarket state, forum perspective) which affect the classic paradigm of the sovereign state and the 'parliamentary chain' of responsibility. The two last chapters of the book (by Synnove Jenssen and by the editors) address such normative concerns. Here, however, the theoretical discussion comes to a sudden halt, mainly because the content of NPM related ideas is insufficiently discussed with a political theory perspective and because the results provided by the empirical chapters are not systematically used and articulated to discuss the changes in the democratic process. To some extent, this is another book and project.

The research design proposed by Christensen and Lægreid focuses on the need for both comparative and institutional approaches. As a first empirical and coherent step in this direction, *New Public Management* is a very useful and illuminating enterprise. Although it may not fulfil equally the three ambitious aims it targets, the book succeeds in providing a number of perspectives and frameworks that re-establish the cardinal character of the issues involved in administrative reforms and put them in their right place: reflections in between the 'art of the state' and democratic governance.

Philippe Bezes
CERSA-CNRS, Paris