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Digital Era Governance: IT Corporations, the State, and E-Government by Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts, Simon Bastow and Jane Tinkler. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 289pp., £25.00, ISBN 0 19 929619 7

Technological development is transforming the way we are governed. Public policy now hinges upon the state's ability to manage vast amounts of information. The authors examine here how developed states are coping with this challenge. Their inquiry is partly theoretical: they seek to establish a more sophisticated understanding of the technical background of policy-making. But it is also partly prescriptive: they argue that many states are failing due to obstacles largely of their own making. The focus of the book is not so much government, but the relationship between government and IT corporations. Modern states pioneered information management systems, but are now increasingly, it seems, dependent on the private sector, as the complexity of modern technology demands the empowerment of 'expertise'. This book also, therefore, demolishes the optimistic discourse on 'the information society' and emancipatory politics.

After a useful discussion of Weberian theory, the inquiry is set up in chapter 3 by comparing the performance of seven countries (UK, USA, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Canada) in information management. The criteria are qualitative, but credible and comprehensive. The general finding, established in the subsequent five chapters, is that where IT corporations have too much control over design and implementation, public information management systems work poorly. Officials need their own technical capacity, and they need to use it. The authors criticise neither competition (e.g. USA) nor corporatism (e.g. Japan), but rather monopolistic markets and a lack of activism by officials. Incidentally, the best-performing country is the Netherlands. The worst is the UK, where the market for government contracts is dominated by a very small number of firms, and government capacity has been seriously undermined by 'new public management' reforms.

Criticising 'new public management', in theory and practice, is actually one of the underlying aims of this book. The authors bide their time before delivering the killer blow in chapter 9, but it is worth the wait. As a work of both theory and empirical analysis, the book deserves the highest possible plaudits. The volume of primary research that has gone into its production is almost breathtaking, especially when you consider the novelty of the research design. Furthermore, the book also has practical implications. An afterword contains policy suggestions that are radical but entirely sensible. Highly recommended.

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Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts, Simon Bastow & Jane Tinkler, Digital Era Governance: IT Corporations, The State and E-Government (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 302 pp., ISBN 0-19-929619-7 (hbk), £25.00.

This book poses important questions concerning the nature of modern public administration, and suggests some intriguing answers. It argues that the role of information technologies has been largely overlooked by recent generations of researchers and theorists of public service organizations. Retracing steps back to Weber, Talcott Parsons, Herbert Simon and others, they point out that the role of record keeping and other paper-based transactions was part and parcel

of early conceptualizations of bureaucracies. Somewhere along the line this insight was lost, at least by social scientists. Record keeping and the like were hived off. They were boring, and not the sort of things that cultured middle-class people should touch. They could safely be entrusted to the geeks in libraries and in computing departments.

The academic consequences have been bizarre. IT now occupies a central role in many government agencies, in the simple sense that an IT failure would mean organization failure. Yet IT is all but invisible in academic accounts of those agencies: it is treated as the blackest of black boxes. There is little reporting of the actions of IT suppliers, or relations between those suppliers and government. One yearns for a simple set of statements about the nature of the technologies involved, so rarely are they offered: even in journals such as *ICS* descriptions are often limited to one or two paragraphs.

This book consciously sets out to establish the place of IT, through studies of public services including taxation, revenue and immigration. Health, social care and defence are not covered, understandably, as each would need a book of its own. Case studies are reported of the development of information technologies in a number of public agencies in seven countries – the USA, UK (mainly England), Japan, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands and New Zealand – over a five-year period. There is a wealth of empirical detail throughout the book. The authors use it to draw out a number of general insights, such as that there appears to be an inverse relationship between the market power of IT firms in a country and performance in implementing and using IT in public services.

The final chapter is given over to digital era governance, or DEG. The authors argue that New Public Management (NPM) is dead, and will gradually be replaced by DEG. DEG, like NPM, should be viewed as a set of linked observations about the world rather than an elegant construct developed with the Academy. Elements of DEG involve a natural reaction to widely perceived deficiencies of NPM: thus it is concerned with integration of services rather than fragmentation, and with person-centred service delivery rather than with citizen-customers exercising choice in quasi-markets. But, crucially, these trends are shot through with policies that can only be pursued – and hence explained – because the IT makes them possible. Thus DEG is also characterized by changes in the nature of service delivery, with the computer screen becoming a natural ‘front end’ for some public services. And, even more fundamentally, DEG should entail a reworking of the relationship between the citizen and the state, due partly to IT’s inherent tendency to make transactions more transparent.

A DEG-like trajectory will, of course, be subject to a host of familiar challenges. When citizens realize that governments are able to peer right into their private lives, as is already becoming apparent in England, they may not be happy. (There is a paradox here: the same social scientists who are so uninterested in IT are among the first to protest at perceived erosions of their liberties.) There must, in practice, be a tension between the panoptic capabilities of some large databases and the desire to make services more citizen-centred. The whole point is that these problems are the very stuff of social research into organizations – yet research is proceeding as if the technology itself were irrelevant.

If the authors are right and the New Public Management is dead, or at least poorly, three questions follow. The first is about the nature of bureaucracy. The authors have very helpfully reminded us that major writers understood

the importance of standards in information processing, and suggest that DEG would involve a revival and reworking of our understanding of these transactions. If anything, I sense that DEG – if it comes to pass – is likely to pose a greater challenge to bureaucracies than the authors imply, because it will encourage the kinds of multilateral ('pre-bureaucratic') guild-type relationships that are found in the car, semi-conductor and other industries (Sabel 2004).

The second question concerns the status of network and systems concepts in the study of governance. As Rhodes (1997) has observed, network and systems theories have always been an acquired taste across the social sciences. There is a valuable literature on 'steering' based mainly in the Netherlands, there are writers in adjacent fields such as Karl Weick, and there are occasional forays into the world of social network analysis. But this work is still of specialist rather than mainstream interest, cited but not replicated. It is difficult to defend this state of affairs when one looks over the fence at organization studies, particularly in North America, where network-type studies of private firms are firmly in that mainstream. It looks as if students of public services have simply failed to keep up, and are perhaps a little too comfortable with familiar concepts.

The result is that this book, which points directly to a gaping hole in theory and research, is indirectly pointing towards an even bigger one. We have a very poor understanding of organizations, conceived as either systems or networks. That is, if DEG is all about integration, person-centred services and the like, what do those terms actually mean? When governments tell us they are going to reinvent, re-engineer or re-anything else, where is the serious critique of the content of these claims? An engineer or computer scientist – those oily-fingered geeks most of us have been trained to ignore – would find much to amuse and to annoy in the hopelessly vague ways in which terms such as system and network are used. Yet the awkward fact is that a proper understanding of organizations, conceived as networks and systems, is a prerequisite for a better understanding of DEG. Time to dust down Simon, Weick and a few others gathering dust on shelves, perhaps. Third and last, has anyone told governments? Sitting in England, it is easy to point to examples of NPM-type policies across all public services. While the Labour Government in London continues to pay lip-service to something it calls joined-up government, it scurries back to low trust, contract-driven policies at the slightest prompting. Perhaps the future will be a classic New Labour-type fudge: NPM and DEG will co-exist for some time to come. If there is anything in this, the least we can say is that social scientists cannot continue to live by NPM alone. This book forces us to pay attention to phenomena that can't be fitted within an NPM universe, which are important and won't go away.

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References

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Newspaper Review of Digital Era Governance

Everyone's a winner in the government IT blame game

Michael Cross

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The Guardian

One of the more successful myths disseminated about government IT is that we live in a blame culture. Public officials, supposedly, are condemned for failure but not rewarded for success, and consequently live in fear. "We have found a perception ... that well-publicised failures are driving a culture of risk aversion," reports the National Audit Office in its study of government IT successes (Delivering successful IT-enabled business change, nao.gov.uk).

The report is worth reading, and I'll get on to it in a moment. First, however, let's knock on the head the idea that the government maintains a gulag to which it consigns disgraced mandarins and IT managers. It doesn't. Architects of government IT failures are more likely to end up in the gardens of Buckingham Palace than in the job centre.

If failure hasn't done civil servants any harm - bar a couple of hours perspiring in front of a House of Commons committee - suppliers seem actually to flourish. Judging by recent bidding shortlists, a fiasco seems to have not the slightest effect on an IT company's eligibility for government work. In an important new book, *Digital Era Governance*, researchers led by Patrick Dunleavy of London School of Economics paint a hilarious sketch of the board of Fujitsu flying to London in consternation at a decision by its UK subsidiary to pull out of a government contract. In Japan, that would have finished the company as a government supplier; in the UK, cancellation would be "no more than par for the course" and any reputational damage would be temporary. (This is not journalistic hyperbole - the team's research over several years ranks Britain as the worst of seven countries at running government IT projects.)

Now, back to successes. The NAO lists 24 examples of "successful IT-enabled business change". Eight are from central government, seven from other parts of the public sector, five from overseas and four from the private sector.

However, if the government was hoping for a catalogue of triumph, it will be disappointed. Even in the context of researching a "good news" report, the NAO found it difficult to come up with case studies. Only one of the eight central government successes, the Department for Work and Pensions' benefits modernisation effort, is the billion-pound class of project that is a UK government speciality. Most of the rest are tiny. As expected, the NAO found no miracle recipe for success. The common factors identified are all well known: a project must have support from the top, must manage its suppliers intelligently and must identify and realise the benefits of change. And the auditors found that the government has a long way to go before it meets even its own criteria for sound IT management. One fifth of "mission-critical" projects still seem to blunder along with no ministerial leadership; only a handful have gone through all five stages of the review process. And the contents of those reviews, the NAO reminds us, are still secret.

My feeling is that, despite the supposed climate of fear, a lot of good stuff is happening on the front line. Hats off to the London borough of Hackney, for example, for encouraging four out of five parents applying for school places to go online. But in central government especially, contracts are still being awarded by, and to, the leading actors in previous fiascos. Funny kind of blame culture.