

# Reconsidering policy, complexity, governance and the state

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This is a comprehensive and detailed book and it makes a distinctive contribution to the field. Classical core ideas are reconsidered to revitalize and inspire scholarship in this area based on the authors own realist and pragmatic understanding of policy making and analysis. A revitalization of policy studies is the stated aim of the book but, as the authors reflect, this is a tall order as in doing so they attempt to address the inherent paradoxical nature of policy studies, that is, in attempts to understand it (both as distinctive activity and a mode of activity) it seems to disappear into its own constituent parts (p. 10). To address this challenge, the authors develop a thorough and detailed argument; that the role of the state and “state capacity” must be positioned center stage within the field of public policy. The subsequent detail is delivered through 10 connected chapters stratified to produce a tightly argued framework defined by the authors as “systemic institutionalism” an approach that links policy with governance and the state (p. 10).

The chapters provide a critical dissection of classic policy studies scholarship, discussing core ideas, analytical frameworks, and empirical studies. Chapter 2 considers “policy systems” and elaborates “systems thinking” which the authors argue, is an attractive perspective and can be helpful particularly in relation to perennial “wicked problems.” Institutions are considered in chapter 3 and the key argument that institutions are significant for understanding policy because as public problems have advanced in complexity so has institutionalism (p. 35) appears to not be as sophisticated and well-crafted compared to subsequent chapters.

The book’s central argument really unfolds in chapter 4, where the authors consider the role of the state in policy scholarship discussing the two orthodox positions in public policy analysis of state—state centered and society centered perspectives. The authors challenge this binary analysis arguing that there is instead, a blurring of the state/society boundaries, it is this “blurring” that is a central feature in what is “public” in public policy. Finally, the authors develop the concept of “meta governance” posited as a useful new concept for highlighting the continual role of the state in coordinating with other networks.

Borders are considered in chapter 5 and this section points to policy studies growing developmental gaps particularly in relation to International Organizations and their influence on policy making as autonomous and influential in their own right (p. 85). Chapters 6–8 consider advisory systems, information, and implementation. Chapter 6 providing a much-needed critical examination of what the authors note and that has been to date, mainly a descriptive study of policy advisory systems and an area underexplored, ripe for new innovative research. Particularly in chapter 7, the author’s clarity of argument is welcomed where they firstly highlight the perennial problem that more data does not necessarily mean more information (p. 120) and that the issue of state information control and the flow of

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ideas within the “black box” of government remains poorly understood. The authors encourage more empirical work that attempts to fathom the opaque areas of information processes within government systems. These chapters, if considered against the backdrop of Covid-19 government policy responses provide particularly illuminating and important reading. Finally, in chapter 10, an excellent manifesto is provided for future innovative research containing identification and recommendations for key areas of future research in the field.

This is an exceptionally detailed account of public policy studies to date, perhaps laborious at times in its elaboration of theory and a little scant on empirical application—it is for this reason that it would not present as an introductory text for undergraduate students. Nonetheless, this is an important and distinctive text containing all the essential ingredients for serious policy studies scholars and founded upon a well grafted and novel analytical approach.

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