RECENSÃO

Governing Complexity, Analyzing and Applying Polycentricity, de A. Thiel, W. Blomquist and D. Garrick, por Fronika de Wit

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Fronika de Wit

"Almost all governing arrangements are polycentric, and all of us as citizens, scholars or policymakers can benefit from better understanding polycentricity" (p. 20). This is how Thiel, Blomquist and Garrick (2019) start their book *Governing Complexity: Analyzing and Applying Polycentricity*. However, the concept of polycentricity is not new; its first usage dates back to the early fifties, when polymath Michael Polanyi (1951) attributed the success of science to its polycentric organization. A decade later, Ostrom, Tiebout and Warren (1961) introduced the term to political science in their theoretical inquiry on the organization of government in metropolitan areas. At that time, metropolitan areas, with their various political units, were perceived as "organized chaos", in need of centralized governmental control. However, Ostrom and colleagues showed that a complex

form of governance with polycentric patterns could achieve greater efficiency in the provision of public goods and services. After this first publication, Vincent Ostrom, together with his wife Elinor, further built upon the concept of polycentricity in their Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University (known as the Ostrom Workshop), where they applied it to natural resources management and especially common-pool resources.

Almost seventy years after its first appearance, polycentric governance is receiving renewed attention. With an increasingly complex and polycentric world, *Governing Complexity* aims to make sense of this complexity and provides an updated explanation of the concept of polycentric governance. The book, mainly written by (former) participants of the Ostrom Workshop, starts by defining that polycentric governance at a minimum *"… connotes multiple centers of decision-making which are de jure independent or de facto autonomous of one another"* (p. 37). The book's overall perspective is that polycentric governance arrangements are not necessarily good: it strives to *"… go beyond making a case for polycentricity and engage instead in an analysis of polycentricity"* (p. 21). However, it does not only look at polycentricity as a phenomenon in our social world, but also as an analytical lens. It introduces the concept of "thinking polycentrically", which *"implies not accepting simple blueprints, but digging into details of institutional design and human behaviour"* (p. 20). The book's context-dependent

assessments mainly focus on water governance, an area that has historically been important to the development of polycentric governance theory, as it involves multiple decision-centers and resource boundaries that typically do not align with traditional jurisdictional boundaries.

Governing Complexity is divided into three parts. The first part (Chapters 1-4) focuses on grounding the idea of polycentric governance by elaborating on its crucial dimensions and underlying concepts. It starts by describing the way polycentricity has historically been used and conceptualized and explains how we can analyze governance arrangements through a polycentricity lens. The second part of the book (Chapters 5-8) deals with operationalizing polycentric governance and highlights three specific mechanisms through which actors interact: 1) cooperation; 2) competition; and 3) conflict and conflict resolution. Finally, Part 3 (Chapters 9-11) aims to deepen our understanding on how polycentric governance is constituted.

Governing Complexity concludes by stating that polycentric governance is ubiquitous and its arrangements widespread. Moreover, the authors claim that polycentric arrangements can perform well, persist for long periods and adapt, depending on myriad factors. In order to better grasp these factors, they hope their work marks the beginning of a broader research program on polycentric governance. The book ends by stating once more that its main aim has not been to promote polycentric governance, but

rather explain the phenomenon. Or, as the authors state: *"Nothing about polycentric governance ensures a happy ending."* (p. 270). Nevertheless, they hope that their contributions will enable polycentric governance arrangements to be improved.

With *Governing Complexity*, the authors bring back the concept of polycentricity and build on the work of the Ostroms. Their updated explanation of polycentric governance theory can be of use to the various disciplines (political economy, public administration, political science, urban studies, environmental studies, geography, sociology, law, and more) that are trying to make sense of governing structures in today's complex world. Also, the analytical lens presented in the book of "Thinking Polycentrically" is refreshing and useful for various scholars interested in the topic and examining the performance of polycentric governance. The book's theoretical, conceptual and empirical discussion of polycentricity definitely adds to the growing body of literature on complex, polycentric governance structures.

Nevertheless, the book's short conclusions are somewhat disappointing. Lacking clarity and not well-structured, the reader keeps asking himself what the question was the book aimed to answer. Also, except for quickly mentioning that institutional change in polycentric governance remains one of the largest challenges, the authors do not elaborate on this or other challenges. They merely state that *"there is plenty of work to be done."* (p. 268). Another point of critique

is the frequent use of "*Ostrom-jargon*". For example, the case studies presented in Chapters 5 to 7 are compared by using Ostrom's *Institutional Analysis and Development* (IAD) framework. And in Chapter 11, the authors refer to Ostrom's *Institutional Design Principles*, which can be used for crafting polycentricity. However, they do not elaborate much on both, which might make it difficult to grasp for readers not familiar with other work by the Ostroms.

Interestingly, a year before *Governing Complexity* was published, Cambridge University Press published the work *"Governing Climate Change: Polycentricity in Action?",* edited by Jordan et al (2018). In their work, the authors link polycentric theory to climate governance and like in *Governing Complexity*, provide an explanatory perspective on how the polycentric approach is suitable for complex challenges. Or, like Jordan et al (2018) put it: *"… polycentric governance provides a means to assemble the jigsaw pieces into a more complete picture"* (p. 378). The authors of *Governing Complexity* do mention the volume by Jordan and colleagues, but they justify the innovative component of their work by stating that their *"… more stringent identification of the object of research may help going beyond this book in building our understanding and theory of polycentric governance"* (p. 26). And they are right. Although the book's conclusions could have been stronger, in general the authors are able to clearly explain the foundations, performance and configuration of polycentric governance

arrangements. And, by thinking poly-centrically, something that at first sight seems to be a chaotic mess, turns into complex governance arrangements with polycentric patterns.

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Fronika de Wit » fronika.wit@ics.ulisboa.pt » Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa » Av. Prof. Aníbal Bettencourt, 9 — 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal » https://orcid.org/00 00-0002-61 81-3537.