

Reflections on the Makings of Neo-Weberian Policy

by Gianfranco Poggi

This collective work discusses the neo-Weberian model and its impact on the processes of societal transformation. The ‘Neo-Weberian State’ is thus conceptually defined by the authors as the combination of the Weberian model with New Public Management and Public Governance approaches.

Reviewed: Stanisław Mazur, Piotr Kopycinski (eds.), *Public Policy and the Neo-weberian State*, Abingdon (UK), Routledge, 176 p.

As a keen student of both Max Weber’s sociological legacy and of the nature and development of the modern state, I was immediately intrigued by the title of this book. I am pleased with the opportunity of reviewing it here, although on some counts I found the task rather more challenging than I had anticipated. Indeed the book on the one hand is relatively short, on the other it is closely packed with sophisticated and diverse arguments, conducted with reference to various bodies of specialized knowledge which are sometimes rather beyond my ken.

In my view, this volume is a valuable addition to the scholar literature that, mostly in the light of what is sometimes called “the great recession” that began in 2007-8 (and on various accounts persists today), reflects more-or-less critically on the global *neo-liberal experience* – a vast complex of economic, financial, political, social processes perhaps best evoked by the names of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

The literature in question is by now a large and growing body, comprising very diverse components. *Public Policy and the Neo-Weberian State* belongs emphatically to the *academic* component; it is the collective product of thirteen Polish contributors, all specialists in public management active within the Faculty of Public Economy and Administration of the Cracow

University of Economics. I understand that some years ago the Cracow University of Economics responded promptly and positively to the intellectual stimulus represented by *neo-liberal thinking*. If so, it may deserve to be applauded for undertaking, subsequently, the sustained critical reflection on that thinking, and on its practical impact, represented by this book.

In any case, the bibliographies attached to each article suggest that the book's contents rest on the authors' thorough, largely shared familiarity with a great number of books and essays, mostly in Polish and English, including of course the scholarly products of the authors themselves.

The Crisis of the Neo-Liberal Project

To an extent the book's Introduction, its ten chapters, and its Conclusion, all develop quite compellingly the *same* main argument, which seemingly evokes from all contributors a shared commitment not only to its intellectual validity but also to its significance as a potential response to the challenging demands posed by a pressing set of practical circumstances.

Which circumstances? As I already suggested – those widely seen as constituting a significant *crisis* of the neo-liberal project, on account especially of its distinctive, expressly proclaimed understanding of the appropriate making and makings of public policy by states and international bodies. The project promoted a deliberate, sustained attempt to reduce sharply the number, the variety and the scope of the prevailing state activities, thus the entity of the resources they required and the extent to which they could lay binding constraints on the economic and financial activities of non-state actors, both individual and corporate. Contrariwise, the neo-liberal project authorized and enjoined much express interference with the pre-existent institutional design of the state itself and above all of its administrative units.

Now, that pre-existent design – to a greater or lesser extent and in diverse ways – embodied two of the most significant ideal types of Max Weber's: that of *the modern state*, and that of *bureaucracy*, expressly conceptualized as the state's own administrative apparatus. In this sense (among others) one can claim that neo-liberalism had undertaken a sustained, loudly proclaimed attack on something one might call the "Weberian state", and especially on the way in which the latter typically mandated, funded, programmed and managed its administrative activities.

The attack on "Weberian bureaucracy", this book argues, took two main forms: the promotion of so-called New Public Management and the promotion of so-called Public governance. Of these critical initiatives the book emphasizes the first, NPM, characterized mainly by the two well-known policies *privatization* and *de-regulation*, expressly intended to

reduce the size and the cost of the state's bureaucratic apparatus and to drastically constrain and re-orient its activities. The book is less clear about the content of the second form.

Defining the Neo-Weberian State

A useful diagram on p. 20 attributes to NPM three traits – Focus on recipients of public service / Economization of action / Performance measurement – and three to Public governance – Consultation / Participation / Legitimation. But, careful! In the book's main argument all six these traits remain, at any rate at the conceptual level, appropriate features of a valid approach to contemporary public administration, *as long as* both NPM and Public governance, are complemented and counterbalanced by the persistence of a third component – the “Weberian model”. This has the following four traits – Stable law / Continuity of activity / Precise distinction of tasks / Clearly defined management and control mechanisms. It is the coexistence of these three components, and the coordination of their performances, that characterizes (conceptually, again) the “Neo-Weberian State”.

This view of optimal arrangements, offered within the book's first chapter, is articulated further in the following statement near the end of the book (p.167):

The neo-Weberian approach combines a host of features of the Weberian tradition of thinking about the state (centrality of the state, hierarchical management mechanisms, stability and predictability, civil service ethos) with the elements of market-oriented public management (efficiency, economization, competition) and public governance (participation, consultation).

But note the concluding sentence of this very statement: *For this reason, it (the neo-Weberian approach) remains difficult to describe and qualify consistently.*

Now, a reader might find this statement rather frustrating, were it not the case that between p. 20 and p. 169 of the book lie 9 chapters which first convincingly articulate in general terms the defining features of the *neo-weberian model*, then bring it to bear on major objectives of public policy: the economy as a whole, labour market, industry, health, management of the territory and of urban areas in particular.

I declare myself impressed by the scope and quality of this whole argument. Reading each chapter has constituted for me a rewarding learning experience, and I would urge readers to undertake in turn their own reading. They might profit, for instance, by the extent to which most chapters describe the particular policies of the European Unions as a whole, but also indicate to what extent some member countries dissent from and oppose such policies.

However, I do not feel properly qualified to evaluate the whole book's performance. It traverses too many actual or potential themes of public policy, mobilizes too much expert

information which I cannot confidently *process* on my own. I will instead add, somewhat casually, a few comments.

The book's evaluation of the short-comings of the neo-liberal turn mentions but does not sufficiently emphasize a critical one – the considerable increase in socio-economic inequality within the states' populations. It does not expressly prospect the *fiscal* requirements and consequences of the instauration of “the neo-weberian state”. It does not adequately discuss educational policy – which is somewhat surprising, considering for example the damaging impact of the extent of the managerialization imposed by neo-liberalism on academic institutions in particular. It nearly ignores the massive role played by *corruption* practices in most arenas of public administration.

Also, the book's revisitation of the merits of the Weberian understanding of contemporary political and administrative affairs lacks, in my view, an adequate awareness of two major features of that understanding. One is what one could call “the iron cage problematic”, highly pathos-laden in spite of the intrinsic merits Weber attributes to bureaucracy itself. The other is the difficulty of reconciling Weber's worrisome (to myself) emphasis on the primacy of *leadership* in the whole political sphere, with contemporary aspirations to democratic practices which would instead foster popular participation and consultation in process of initiating and designing public policies.

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