

BOOK REVIEW

Ferlie, E. and E. Ongaro. 2015.

Strategic Management in Public Services Organizations: Concepts, Schools and Contemporary Issues.

Oxon, UK: Routledge

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Ferlie's and Ongaro's book pursues the core ambition of being "an advanced textbook aimed at the postgraduate level" (iv); therefore, and also following our primary interest in the book, in the following we approach it primarily from the perspective of teaching (Strategic) Public Management (hereinafter SPM) related topics to students in a European context.

There are several respects in which the book goes beyond most of the resources available for such purposes. In the following we briefly highlight three such features. Firstly and – from our current perspective – most importantly, the book features important strengths regarding the way in which it tackles the challenges of teaching SPM in a European, as opposed to US or global, context. The most sizeable cluster of scholarly work possibly used for teaching core SPM topics approach the SPM phenomenon from a largely context- and time-independent (and, most frequently, US) perspective. Many such – usually well-written and didactically well-designed – pieces are available in different sizes and ambitions (one can think of such examples as Moore 1995, Heath and Palenchar 2009). This context-free approach comes as no surprise since the very idea of SPM is strongly rooted in, and has proliferated from, the US context. However, notwithstanding many similarities this context is different from the European one in several respects. We emphasize, in particular, two such differences:

- Firstly, the historically evolved and entrenched differences in politics, in public administration (traditions and practices, see Kickert 2007) and even in the very

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language used for SPM discourse – the latter understood not only in the sense of different national languages but also in the sometimes fundamental differences in connotations and even the very meanings of key terms (Ongaro and van Thiel, forthcoming).

- Secondly, the different contemporary dynamics, issues and focuses of, and short-term political contexts and agendas surrounding, SPM discourses and practices.

If one wishes to include these perspectives, having a particularly European flavor and approach in teaching SPM, the range of choices available is limited to a set of alternatives, each having some limitations and confronting clear trade-offs. The probably largest cluster of course books is comprised of edited volumes mostly offering a broad and intentionally loose overview of a selected set of topics. These topics may either be key functional or problem areas of SPM (e.g. Conteh et al 2014, Longo and Cristofoli 2008, Bovaird and Löffler 2009) or countries and country-specific practices (e.g. Flynn and Strehl 1996, Nemec et al. 2002). Most frequently, these undertakings are not intended to give an overarching and conceptually as well as didactically tight and coherent framework. Another cluster of options includes monographs authored by a single author (or a small group of authors) such as Andrews et al. (2012). These pieces, however, tend to lack a well-founded historical and geographical contextualization.

One of the unique strengths of Ferlie's and Ongaro's work is that they make an, in our view largely successful, attempt at integrating and accommodating these diverse and somewhat controversial ambitions in a single – modestly sized – volume. Chapters 2 and 3 give an in-depth historical overview of how SPM has developed. Subsequently, these as well as some of the later chapters satisfy the core ambition of a course book by giving a treatise of particular substantive SPM approaches. Some of these components are integrated in the historical chapters, such as the “design” and the “positioning”, the cultural and some additional schools of SPM. Others, however, are presented as “the” approach, such as the process-based approach in Chapter 4. The practice-oriented, normative elements extend, importantly, to functional and problem areas such as SPM in the third sector (Chapter 5) and SPM's implications for performance management (Chapter 7). While satisfying the conceptual and didactic needs of conveying the normative “message” of SPM the authors consciously and coherently reflect on the roles played, and effects exerted by, the diverse geographical and cultural contexts in which SPM takes place. This happens not only in a separate chapter dedicated to the issues emerging out of the different “politico-administrative houses” hosting SPM practices (Chapter 6), but this sensitivity penetrates most of the other chapters as well.

A second major strength of Ferlie's and Ongaro's book emanates from the emphasis it puts on illustrating theoretical deliberations by concrete and well-elaborated, in-depth examples. It is an important challenge for teachers of SPM to explain to their students not only the abstract concepts and their interrelations, but

to highlight their “real”, practical meaning and significance, too. Not only our first-hand teaching experience but a number of systematic research endeavors (such as Thompson 2000 and Wrenn and Wrenn 2009) suggest that students display greater interest, and achieve higher levels of competence, in topics they can relate to real-world experiences. This book helps to gain a better understanding and deeper knowledge during the learning process by making a transformation from the fundamental concepts and theories to the practical applicability: besides the comprehensive and profound theoretical approach of different phenomena it illustrates the importance and practical applications of concepts by including 17 “boxes” authored by key authors of the SPM field.

Finally, the book provides a broad reflection with a conclusion chapter, which considers the nature of public strategic management in the public sector. Taken together, the authors conclude that “public administration is both ‘science’ and ‘art and profession’” (Chapter 9). But no matter whether we consider management a science, art or profession, we must have a good understanding about its features, characteristics and the meanings of how it can contribute to either to the science or the profession world. And this book seems to successfully accomplish these objectives.

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