

Studying Myths and Recipes in Organizational Studies

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Organization Theory and the Public Sector: Instrument, Culture, and Myth, by Tom Christensen, Per Lægreid, Paul G. Roness, Kjell Arne Røvik, London, Routledge 2007

Mythology, legends, folklore, cooking tips, and delicious ingredients came to mind when reading *Organizational Theory and the Public Sector*. If you need a little help to jump start your creativity in organizational design, then instructors will find this informative text useful for international organization studies, because Tom Christensen, Per Lægreid, Paul G. Roness, and Kjell Arne Røvik offer readers a new prescriptive organization theory. Those who work in and shape organizations frequently envision the borrowing or replication of an organizational hierarchy. Undergraduate and graduate students studying systems analysis and organizational design can easily find simplified lessons in this book, because each chapter has learning objectives, chapter summaries, discussion questions, and further reading sections designed like a textbook. The authors' discussion on myths, recipes, and especially their views of leadership enlighten our understanding of international organizations for enhancing efficiency and modernization.

First, the authors explain the main characteristics of each of the three perspectives: instrumental, cultural, and myth. They offer analysis on how public organizations differ from private organizations. They challenge conventional economic analysis of the public sector, arguing instead for a political-democratic approach and a new prescriptive organization theory. Organizational studies departments within business schools may find their arguments more related to public sector organizations. But public sector wonks will savor how the authors focus on institutional language and colorful metaphors to describe how reforms should be carried out.

A key focus of this book is how myths and recipes are part of many reform initiatives in public administration. "Myths are more or less clear recipes for how to design an organization" (Christensen, Lægreid, Roness, Røvik 2007). They believe myths spread quickly through imitation by institutions and individuals who produce and mediate such ideas. These socially created norms or myths are rationalized symbols according to the authors because institutions and individuals can use them as tools for enhancing efficiency and modernization. In their argument of how organizations can intentionally manage the design of public organizations by using the myth perspective, the authors take us through their logic of action.

The authors describe “decoupling” which is a process that is meant to fool the public into believing that an organizational policy change has happened but it may in fact be only window dressing. The authors say when rationalized myths are adopted by organizations sometimes decoupling occurs. The institutional environment sometimes pressures an organization to adopt popular concepts that don’t clearly fit within the organization’s structure so these authors suggest decoupling. “One way of tackling this dilemma is to adopt modern concepts, but to deliberately keep them decoupled, so that they have little effect on activities, or at any rate the activities that are significant to the organization’s ability to make decisions and to these goods and services effectively” (Christensen et al. 2007). The significance of this concept is how many public sector reforms are driven by these symbolic acts.

The authors discuss a wide range of “popular recipes” such as leadership, formal organizational structure, organizational culture, and processes. Readers will be spellbound to learn the seven reasons why recipes spread. The authors argue that when public organizations adopt these recipes, there can be various outcomes: quick coupling/implementation, rejection, decoupling, or the slower process of translating ideas into practice. The authors also provide a lengthy list of “linguistic labels” and say that these individual recipes have a distinct literature usually derived from the private sector: total quality management, transformative leadership, management by objectives, and downsizing. The book notes how organizations attempt to duplicate the success of these recipes. In other words, a recipe may also be designed so that it poses no threat to existing practices in the organization, like varnish or a kind of window dressing to make the organization look modern or efficient without changing much on the inside.

In addition to myths and recipes, the authors encourage us to understand leadership in a new light. They say from an instrumental perspective, leaders make collective decisions and put them into effect in a process where they regulate behavior through a formal framework and steer through mechanisms of control. This perspective is more case oriented and objective. On the other hand, a cultural perspective “presupposes leeway or discretion within a formal framework for various institutionally based and informal processes to play out” (Christensen et al. 2007). The third perspective these authors examine are the symbolic aspects of leadership and steering from a myth perspective. The myth perspective says leadership can be passive or active. External forces matter from this perspective, because leaders are conditioned by myths, cultural constraints, or contexts that limit them.

For comparison, James MacGregor Burns (1978) depicts leadership as “leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations—the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations—of both leaders and followers.” In contrast, Christensen et al. stress the difference between leadership and steering. The authors say, “According to an instrumental and formal definition, leadership means to plan, decide, coordinate and control according to a set of formal goals and a range of operations leaders want to realize” (Christensen et al. 2007). Christensen et al. are not concerned with leadership traits or qualities; instead, these authors present leadership and steering through an instrumental, cultural, and myth perspective. They say “steering can denote a leadership’s attempts to make collective decisions and to influence behavior through a set or system of formal steering and control instruments” (Christensen 2007). The elected officials give administrators the power to “steer”

according to laws and forms of organization. Steering is different than leading. They argue there is more freedom and participation from organizational members when they are being steered as opposed to being led. As insightful as the distinction between steering and leadership is, it is missing certain aspects of the psychology of motivation that Burns (1978) offers.

The strength of this book is their contribution of innovative organizational studies literature on recipes and linguistic labels, but further improvement could be made by explaining how organizations use recipes in ethical or unethical ways.

REFERENCES

- Burns, J.M.G. (1978): *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Christensen, T. (2007): *Organization theory and the public sector: Instrument, culture and myth*. London: Routledge.