PARADOXES OF MODERNIZATION: UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF PUBLIC POLICY REFORM

Helen Margetts, Perri 6 and Christopher Hood (eds)

This edited collection takes as its starting point the interesting question of why, after two centuries of modern social science can planned, rational, evidenced based public policy interventions result in surprise and paradox? In particular, is there something about the modernization process, which produces a particular type of surprise or unintended consequence? The editors begin with a discussion of the key terms in the book, ‘modernity’ and ‘unintended consequences’ which they describe (p. 7) as ‘surprisingly fuzzy and slippery’ (Hood, Margetts and 6). Margetts posits three clusters of modernization reform which might be associated with surprise, disappointment and other unintended or unanticipated consequences: economic efficiency; integration and interconnectedness; and an emphasis on specialization, scientific advancement, expert knowledge, and technology in economic, political and social life. Margetts also distinguishes between three types of modernization which vary depending on the role played by the state in the process. Social innovations are where the state reacts to societal trends; by contrast, state-centred reforms originate from the state’s attempts to modernize; and modernization of the state (state-to-state) are where reforms are aimed at improving the state apparatus. Perri 6 develops a useful typology which helps the reader to understand the differences between unintended, unanticipated and unwelcome consequences, and hence the nature of what is paradoxical about modernization reforms. These three pillars and types of modernization form the organizing conceptual framework for the book – a critical analysis of modernity and unintended consequences explored through the use of eight case studies which examine public policy initiatives and practices.

It isn’t immediately obvious why the specific case studies were selected in the edited collection beyond their prima facie capacity to explore unintended and unanticipated effects and on first reading they appear rather eclectic. They do not, the editors concede, provide examples of every type of unintended, unanticipated or unwelcome consequence in Perri 6’s typology but are offered to provide ‘adequate diversity across the three types of modernising intervention’ (p. 222).

Social innovations are examined through case studies on: ranking US public affairs higher education programmes and how this process influenced universities’ behaviour (Frederickson and Stazyk); the history of the internet and the onset of cybercrime (Hofmann); and along similar lines, the development of the World Wide Web, the Semantic Web (a new term for this reader) and major social spin-offs (Wilks). State-centred reforms are illustrated through case studies in: under-nutrition in India, an intriguing account of how a World Bank funded project, hailed as exemplary, failed to take account of local circumstances (Sridhar); the introduction of a major IT project to implement a standardized patient information system in the NHS and its failure, yet a reluctance to abandon some seven years on (Keen); and the performance of Britain’s railways measured by the speed of travel and whether British Rail invested in the ‘right’ lines (Leunig). Modernization of the state is examined through case studies in: the introduction of performance-related pay systems in the UK Civil Service and their failure to motivate public servants on the one hand but create greater alignment between individual and organizational goal setting.
on the other (Marsden); and, the success of the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) system in English local government and its subsequent replacement (Boyne, James, John and Petrovsky). The latter makes comparisons between the reputational value of CPA scores, where local authorities were graded in five categories from ‘poor’ to ‘excellent’, with the competitive world of university gradings in the RAE/REF. Does the fate of CPA as a means of performance assessment offer similar lessons for academe? As the final case study in the collection, Boyne et al. present a particularly interesting paradox in that although performance management regimes were commonly expected to fail, the CPA was deemed successful from the authors’ extensive research on the process. To pique the interest of the reader, the replacement of CPA is explained in this way: ‘In politics success is usually short-lived. The CPA was probably too successful as it created improvement across the board and thus removed the differences between authorities and the competitive drive inherent in the system’ (p. 217). Or as the editors put it, even though the end of CPA was intended and anticipated by its architects, why stop it?

On a general point, the case studies demonstrate the difficulty in striking a balance between experts in the field explaining sufficient detail of their work to illustrate the paradoxes and unintended consequences without losing the reader in the substantive minutiae. Wilks’ chapter on the World Wide Web and Leuning’s chapter on post-war railways are cases in point where the technical detail eclipsed the theme of the book for this reader. Is it really necessary to know the levels of annotation and objects in the Semantic Web or the coefficients of variations in train speeds respectively, to understand the paradoxes of modernization? These technical details were mitigated by an editors’ prelude in each of the case studies which helpfully picked out for the non-specialist where the unintended and unanticipated consequences occurred.

The editors’ concluding chapter neatly synthesized what emerged from the case studies and developed, through comparative analysis, a provisional hypothesis with the aim of theory building (Margetts, 6 and Hood). Their argument is that successful modernization depends on ‘requisite variety’ described as: ‘balance or countervailing relations between the three strategies of modernization (economic efficiency, integration and specialization); and counterbalance or countervailing relations from the basic institutional forms of social organisation’ (p. 227). On the basis of this hypothesis the editors offer some normative recommendations to policy-makers: modernization reforms should include strategies from more than one of the clusters of economic, efficiency, integration, and specialization; and reforms may need variety from outside modernization (beyond the dominant worldviews of hierarchalism and individualism). They suggest future research on ‘the precise way in which the three pillars of modernisation are combined and the particular style of relationship between the different elementary ways of organisation’ (pp. 235–6). For practitioners of modernization, these recommendations could perhaps have been better illustrated with examples as they will read as being too abstract to implement in practice.

Unlike some edited collections, this book is coherently structured by the editors, helped via their extraction of core arguments from each of the case study chapters where it wasn’t always apparent that individual authors saw their contribution to generating the concluding hypothesis. Overall the book provides a fascinating account of the unanticipated and unintended consequences arising from modernising reforms and, importantly, concludes with a hypothesis on the paradoxes of modernization derived from a wide range of case studies. This edited collection therefore offers a very useful
base line for further research on this topic to prove, refine or refute the editors’ contention on public policy reform.

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