

Book Review

Jacob Torfing

Collaborative Innovation in the Public Sector

Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

1.

We seem increasingly to live in an era of so-called “populist” insurrection or, at least, of unanticipated outcomes of elections and referenda. From the United States and the United Kingdom to Turkey and India, large portions of the electorate seem intent on, at best, “shaking things up” and, at worst, casting votes for politicians and positions that do not, in the gentle words of US President Abraham Lincoln (2008), represent the “better angels of our nature.”

There is a noticeable increase in intense nationalism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, religious bigotry and the overall politics of *ressentiment*—an often irrational sense of hostility toward people identified as the cause of real or perceived injustice. It is frequently deployed more to scapegoat minorities by vulnerable members of a dominant demographic. So, in Europe and America, “white” members of a precarious middle class or an unstable industrial working class may take out their anger on immigrants and, more recently, refugees. They may also show bitterness toward traditional political parties, existing government leaders and democratic institutions. In doing so, they may act against their own rational self-interest, allowing their emotions to govern their behaviour. The implications are troubling.

The immigrationist religion is an insult for human beings, whose integrity is always bound to one national community, one language, one culture. – Marine LePen, 2016
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For some, events in 2016 such as the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States (despite losing the popular vote) or the (narrow) decision of the voters in the United Kingdom to take the risk of the “Brexit,” foreshadow a return to the fraught politics of the 1930s. Then, economic depression, religious bigotry, ideological intensity, disrespect for the rule of law permitted charismatic leaders to initiate a process that led to conflagration and common destruction, the Holocaust and the Cold War. Whether the fears of alleged “neofascism” are justified is, at the moment, an open question. It cannot, however, be denied that the uprising of right-wing, authoritarian movements and parties are disruptive of “politics as usual,” whether or not they actually win power. Their emergence has irrefutably altered the political landscape in the liberal democracies and elsewhere; and, of course, what changes politics also changes government, public administration, public policy and the entire ethos of the public sector.

From one perspective, nationalist, ethnocentric, economically protectionist movements that are obsessed with cultural identity and the protection of borders are *innovative*. They are seeking to redefine politics and government. They seem intent on breaking down fundamental norms in a rage

of “creative destruction.” They have succeeded at least to the point where some people are openly speculating on the survival of the European Union. They are threatening multiple “free-trade” agreements and the whole concept of “globalization.” They are promoting mass movements of people intent on “taking their countries back” from alien influences and global economic arrangements that they believe to be the cause of economic uncertainty and hardship. Whether their alienation is rightly judged to be the result of cultural differences, a self-interested political and bureaucratic class or other antagonisms related to what Huntington (1996) famously called “the clash of civilizations” is now almost beside the point. Polarized opinions within nations and deep suspicion among nations are amply evident; voices of compromise and moderation are largely absent.

“[Trump’s victory sends an] exciting message that needs to be delivered in Canada as well. It’s why I’m the only candidate who will ensure that every visitor, immigrant, and refugee will be screened for Canadian values.” – Kellie Leitch, Conservative Party leadership candidate, 2016.

From another perspective, politicians and duly chastened members of the public sector, seeking to avoid the fate of the 50,000 security and civil service personnel who were purged very early in 2017 by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, seem understandably anxious to determine precisely how they have lost public confidence and how they might regain public trust. They want to demonstrate that they have not, in fact, “lost touch” with ordinary people and they are rightly concerned that popular disillusionment and disaffection may threaten civil society and democracy. The fact that not only widespread criticism of the political and administrative classes may be partly justified, but also partly manipulated by self-interested billionaires and shamelessly ambitious politicians seems not to have dawned on some people—the so-called “elites” and the inchoate opposition alike; but, however imprecise, analogies to the rise of fascism can hardly be ignored.

2.

In such times of anxiety and uncertainty, it is immensely reassuring to read a book like Jacob Torfing’s *Collaborative Innovation in the Public Sector*. It calms the nerves and helps to displace, at least temporarily, the latest hyperbole and hypocrisy to occupy newspaper headlines and cable news. It alludes to a word the Balinese people use to refer to the era before the arrival of the Europeans; in translation it means “the time when the Earth was steady.”

Torfing, of course, does not intend his book as a soporific. It has a noble and vital purpose, and it succeeds very well in accomplishing its goal. At the same time, the context of its publication cannot easily be ignored. Accordingly, it takes on a somewhat deeper importance than its author might have intended. The book was conceived as a description and an explanation of genuinely innovative methods of dealing, in Sanford Borins’ words, with “wicked societal problems with inescapably cross-organizational problems.”

The world of public policy is complicated. The problems are serious and, in some cases, potentially catastrophic. The path to making decisions—to say nothing of making the right decisions—is difficult. The seemingly antique Weberian idea of bureaucracy as a framework for making rational-legal decisions is obstructed by factors and forces that defy reason and occasionally

challenge the rule of law. Torfing, however, wants to show us not only how to go about making effective decisions, but also a little about making the morally correct decisions in terms of the public good. He takes on such issues as the need “to remove policy deadlocks” and to “enact policy reforms.”

These are both administrative and political predicaments, but Torfing has in mind a way to promote therapeutic innovation using collaborative, cross-disciplinary techniques. The mere fact that he is focused on the obstacles and quandaries arising out of our preoccupations with fiscal constraint and the impulse to austerity is, in itself, uplifting. The fact that he does so in the presence of expressed dissatisfaction with essential public needs borders on the courageous. The fact that he seems to think that these obstacles can be removed and the quandaries can be resolved is a mark of the eternal optimist, and optimism is a rather precious commodity—not to be wasted on anything but a clear and unsentimental appreciation of reality.

How does he do it? How well does he do?

3.

Had he provided a “magic bullet,” a “miracle drug” or a PowerPoint presentation outlining a twelve-step program for recovery, recuperation and redemption, I would not have wasted your time, my effort or these pages of *The Innovation Journal* screen space to comment. Since this review does exist, you may be sure that there’s more to Torfing’s work than can normally be found in the self-help section of a “big box” bookstore.

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, I must acknowledge that Jacob Torfing is not unknown to *The Innovation Journal* and its attentive readers. Together with his colleague Eva Sørensen (currently professor of public administration and democracy in the Institute of Society and Globalization at Roskilde University in Denmark), he co-edited *The Innovation Journal*’s special edition on (not coincidentally) “collaborative innovation in the public sector” (Vol. 17, No. 1, 2012), and his book, *Enhancing Public Innovation by Transforming Public Governance*, (2016), co-edited with Peter Triantafillou, was favourably reviewed in this journal last year (Doughty, 2016). This book moves on considerably.

In the admiring words of Nancy Roberts (perhaps counterintuitively to the casual reader) Professor Emerita in the Department of Defense Analysis at the Naval Graduate School in Monterey and Professor at the Institute for Whole Social Science in Carmel, California, *Collaborative Innovation in the Public Sector* is a “highly recommended resource for researchers and informed practitioners interested in public sector governance networks. ... The book’s propositions set the agenda for the next generation of research on collaboration and innovation in governance networks.” I could scarcely agree more.

The key word is “propositions.” There is no shortage of studies that describe and discuss the place of “collaboration” in public sector innovation. Often presented in the form of case studies, they can be insightful, provocative and encouraging as models for others to follow in the elusive pursuit of “best practices.” There are also plenty of attempts at theorizing innovation according to a variety of Platonic or even Jungian archetypes. While they can be momentarily engaging, they

seldom do more than mimic inadequate and stale applications of abstract, reified taxonomies that ought to have been discarded decades ago, but have been kept at hand because they are easy for uninspired “change champions” to slip into a slide show already overpopulated with clichés. What Torfing provides is a rich propositional inventory, a fertile catalogue of thoughtful ideas about what collaborative innovation is, how it works and why it should be encouraged to work.

It’s not that Torfing has anything against focused empirical studies or a fully developed theory of collaborative innovation; it’s just that he realizes and unashamedly expresses the view that the time is not right to attempt a comprehensive theory. We are in a pre-paradigmatic stage of scientific understanding. So, any attempt to set down the final word on the matter would be embarrassingly premature. His book does not lack for ample examples of revealing studies and enticing partial theories of one or another aspect of the field. Each one is carefully selected and seamlessly integrated into his elaborate but always engaging narrative.

With his primal admission of modesty, he allows us to take the rest of his book seriously for what is—a preparatory text upon which a more complex conceptual framework might be constructed and from which additional steps toward the holy grail of a “unified theory covering all aspects of collaborative innovation in the public sector and offering a coherent set of empirically testable hypotheses.” His book aims, therefore, “to develop a systematic set of reflections and derive some general propositions about some of the key issues in the emerging field of collaborative public innovation.” That, in itself, is ambitious enough.

Innovation is an intended but inherently contingent process ... that challenges conventional wisdom and disrupts established practices. – Jacob Torfing

Each of the book’s ten chapters is worthy of extensive comment, mainly in appreciation of the author’s ability to take formidably complex topics and render them in language that the intelligent laity may grasp. It is a remarkable achievement to take theoretically and methodologically sophisticated, often discipline-specific and sometimes almost intentionally opaque academic work and make it accessible to the people who could actually use it for practical purposes, and to do so without being condescending—trusting the readers to be patient and to work some things out for or, better, incorporate some things into themselves. I will not say that this is a book that can be read lightly. The content requires that attention be paid if it is to profit the reader; nonetheless, if it is read thoroughly, critically and well, the benefits will more than adequately reward the effort.

I shall offer just one example. I once studied some with (almost literally at the feet of) Gregory Bateson, a once popular “guru” of cybernetics, learning theory, schizophrenia, alcoholism and dolphins. I was therefore impressed with the way in which Torfing wove together fascinating material on learning theory and information theory, as well as empirical studies to elaborate and explain how the processes of “mutual learning” can overcome the limitations of isolated learning to stimulate the far more advantageous creation of “communities of practice.” The romantic ideal of the solitary genius in the lab or the loft may appeal to our sense of mythical heroism, but it is not conducive to the education of people alone, in groups or in the

larger society. Transformative knowledge is most often the product of collegial relations, engaging people in a common project and permitting ideas, research, innovation and modification to grow and proliferate in unanticipated directions using the expertise of all concerned—collectively, if not “dialectically.”

In his discussion of different *kinds* of mutual learning, Torfing managed to condense ideas from a broad range of sources, to suggest practical strategies for collaboration, and to relate accounts of specific situations to models of learning as action and application that introduced me (at least) to the very clever work of Yrjö Engeström (2008), who had expanded upon Bateson’s original hierarchy of learning (1972) and not only built upon my old mentor, but refined his initial ideas, and made them broader, better and more applicable today than when they first persuaded Governor Jerry Brown to dabble in the effort of improving higher education in post-Reagan California (but pre-Reagan America) and, in 1976, appoint Bateson to the University of California’s Board of Regents.

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we ... may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. – Jack Mezirow

That initial encounter took place in Chapter 5. I normally start reading a book by consulting the index, finding something with which I am familiar and beginning the adventure wherever that initial reference leads; so, I found myself going back to the opening and then forward to the end, treating each chapter as an essay (in the old French sense of an exploration into unknown territory).

In Torfing’s book, I found the kind of generous and unselfconsciously deep thinking that finds little favour in the contemporary politics of braggadocio and bombast, or even in the administrative sciences of public management. The reason, I suppose, is that *Collaborative Innovation in the Public Sector* is driven by a dual commitment. Explicitly, it is about making public sector innovation (and therefore the day-to-day operations of the public sector in theory and practice) better both functionally and (dare I say it?) morally, albeit by reliance on evidence-based truth claims. Implicitly, it relies on an essentially democratic temperament which puts it at odds with what we are being trained to call “populism.” As such it may embody one of our last, best hopes.

How others may approach the book, what experiences they may bring to the task of reading and how the two may mingle in the process of education and self-education is of course unknowable to the outsider or even to ourselves before we make the necessary connection. I am confident, however, that anyone who is genuinely interested in positive or even palliative change will do well to read this authentically pioneering work.

Of course, at the end, you may find yourself thinking twice about the desirability of ever achieving that “holy grail” of paradigmatic science, that ultimately comprehensive and unified theory. For one thing, the journey itself assumes the possibility of a form of understanding dominated by a number of axioms from which descriptions and explanations of reality can be deduced. That, Torfing has convinced me more than ever, is a fool’s errand. And, for another thing, it would imply a closing of the door to innovation itself, and that, I dare to speculate, would not please Jacob Torfing either. Not only is the destination chimerical, but the never-ending exploration is too rewarding to bring to necessarily false closure.

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