

Book review

The Politics of Information, Frank R. Baumgartner, Bryan D. Jones

Action editor: Peter Erdi

George Kampis

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This is an important book because it masters to combine cognition and complex systems and apply it to public policy making, in particular to questions of the institutional organization of policy making. Yet the book is clearly not for the complex systems researcher, nor for the cognitivist. The choice of the default reader (political scientists, policy makers, politicians who decide about organizational matters, etc.) makes it a difficult read – at least for the above-mentioned categories, i.e., complex systems researchers and cognitivists to which the current reviewer belongs.

The closer subject is how to coordinate cognitive agents that cope with complex decisions. The book powerfully argues for a novel view of political science as one beyond an inert body of knowledge or skills but being genuinely event-driven, where quantitative indicators are applicable to uncover and manage patterns of stability and change in process of continual transition. Information is fundamental to this process, as it is what grounds conflicting decisions. But what is information, and how is it obtained?

The cognitive moment is related to the recognition that our understanding or social problems (and all problems in general) crucially depends on what we consider relevant facts, or information sources. The authors bring this point home by illustrating it on different examples, among them various views on Obamacare, which is something like a “dog’s breakfast” for many, and for various different reasons. But that is the whole point: if we ignore certain facts as “irrelevant”, we get a one-sided picture, yet one that makes policy evaluation and decision possible. There is a trade-off here: the same simplification that makes decisions possible renders a dialog between different views and policy decisions difficult if not impossible. Cutting ahead of the entire line of thought followed in the book: the authors propose a pluralism of approaches to cope with this

situation, and defend the fragmented current US policy against charges that many institutions working in parallel, and in part “against each other” signify nothing but just a waste of public money and effort. Quite the opposite, so the complex systems argument goes: pluralistic competition and the multiplicity of views represent different ways of defining and handling information, and thus of reality. Taken together they are more efficient than taken alone.

As such, this view is close to what was once called “facetism” in systems science – facets here are understood as the flat faces on the geometric shape of a cut diamond, and the idea in facetism was that a system is effectively the combination of its aspects (or “models”), as the diamond is all of its facets taken together.

The best parts of the book (to me) are the ones talking lively about the inherent complexity of the cognitive tasks associated with policy decisions. It explains, among other things, that complex problems are not engineering problems, and better “search” (i.e. information identification and acquisition) yields more problems, painfully raising the question, what to ignore? To the complex systems researcher, this is a familiar situation – we may think of the semi-universal powerlaw-like rank distributions of complex systems, where we can find is no clear cut-point (or scale), above which point the items are important to tackle but below which can be safely ignored as unimportant for the analysis - hence the term scale-free. A well-known example is the roles played by banks of different size in the 2008 financial crisis. There is no critical size above which there are the big and important banks responsible for the crisis. The puzzling role of information in policy decisions may be similar to this: there is no point where to stop, but we must stop somewhere.

The expert use of information is often contrasted with the “entropic” use of information and the book raises the

question whether to organize for expertise or for complexity. By analogy from what is said above, we may conjecture that the answer is *both*, and indeed this is the message of the book. Experts use censorship of information, what is not on their radar will never be detected. But the argument is that in such a case not the expert is to blame but their organization if the experts are not organized in a complex and dynamic way, balancing their delegation and centralization. The authors propose an “organized anarchy” model, a way to keep things fluid and redundant. They explain at length that the wastefulness of redundancy is in fact required, and that the entropic, diverse information plays an important role. Perhaps a way to locate this in the cognitive space is to allude to the contrast between convergent (expert-based) and divergent (entropic) thinking. Again, agencies in competition with other agencies for money, attention, and recognition are best at finding the balance together.

The approach of the book is methodological, not declarative or anecdotic: rather than jumping around (as we do it here) it in fact crawls from stone to stone, analyzing problem search and problem solving, analysis and prioritization, and many other aspects of policy making in a systematic, step by step fashion. Most of Part I of the book is dedicated to this kind of analysis, with conclusions left as milestones on the road, to be collected later, in Part II and in Part III, applications.

Part II is devoted to an analysis of governmental policy making institutions and their history from the conceptual point of view developed in the first part. We look at the creation of agencies and their different layers, their work division and parallelism with a different eye at this point. Many of the more theoretical topics of the first part are reflected here, for instance when pointing out that democratic, distributed control and hierarchical control are wrong alternatives. In these case studies the authors powerfully argue that information use is less determined by politics and government of parties, but the underlying processes and what the authors call “context” – the complexity of life, social processes, the logic of complex systems.

In a nice and somewhat poetic part of the book, the authors confess that they regard complexity as something disorganized and even confusing, “yet it works”. By contrast, simplification leads to “censoring and problem festering” (worsening). – The reviewer is tempted at this point to draw a parallel with the planning economies of the one-time Soviet system, where experts tried to foresee, plan and calculate everything. The miserable result is well known – they could be best experts but only forgot about one thing: life.

In summary, the main argument is that collecting information is at the core of politics, and that in acting it out, we should not suppress the attributes of complex systems. The book is a plea for recognized complexity, and the implications of the complexity.