

Cities and Complexity

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Jan Whittington

Karen Christensen's *Cities and Complexity* is a remarkably non-partisan foray into the structural and analytical details comprising intergovernmental relations in the United States. Informed by years of work with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, teaching and research with the University of California at Berkeley, and a vast body of literature regarding organizational theory, this is a particularly multi-dimensional, yet practical, impression of the sprawling institutions we call "government."

Published as part of a series intended to inform academics and practitioners alike (Sage Publications' *Cities and Planning*), Christensen rises to the task of bridging this gap with ease. For the academic, she knits together history and theory. For example, she brings together work in the Madisonian tradition, and the organizational-theory classics of Chester Barnard, Herbert Simon, and others with contemporary practice and premises, invoking recent illustrations of consensus building across governments, as in the joint planning efforts of CALFED Bay-Delta Program (1996).

For the practitioner, her careful mixture of diagrams, salient examples from across the nation, and accessible language combine to form a uniquely readable roadmap through the possibilities and pitfalls of interactions between governmental agencies. If she could be said to lay blame for any of our governmental systems' perceived biases or inadequacies, fault would lie with a tendency for grants-in-aid to support the emergence of "powerful vertical linkages" within technical sectors as "rich and powerful factions that area governments cannot counter."

Hers is not only a normative contribution. She devotes two chapters to explicating the hazards of premature, technical-based policy prescriptions in line with vested interests, and shows the reader that potential corrections are available to those who face the uncertainties of intergovernmental relations. In the tradition of Thompson (1967), Christensen embraces the inevitability of uncertainty, and urges us to shirk our "delusions of certainty," and in the process break away from systemic forces associated with "known technology." The resulting positive theory provides a framework for viewing uncertainty in the

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form of “variations” in organizations, the problems they are likely to face, and the policy and planning process choices available to them.

And in keeping with the theme of this edition of the *Berkeley Planning Journal*, Christensen’s work is applicable to planners theorizing and operating with ideas of relevance to regions. She does not only keep to descriptions of cities, states, or national organizations. One can deduce from her images of the multi-jurisdictional and geographic puzzles created across regions that she is indeed informed of the various proposals and opinions that abound regarding the need for more comprehensive forms of regional organization yet she cautiously avoids prescription.

Even within such a broad, theoretical construct, one is hard pressed to find weaknesses or contradictions. Christensen’s occasional juxtaposition of private against public organizations seems rather strained, lacking the wealth of connections to literature and practice so clearly provided in her explorations within the public realm. For example, publications in the new institutional economics and economic sociology attest to a multitude of goals held, enacted, and adapted on the part of private organizations, where profit-making can be shown to be of relatively small concern (Cyert and March 1963; Podolny and Page 1998). If anything, the structure and decision making characteristics of private entities are being found to mirror Christensen’s portrayal of activities along a continuum, where many forms of collaboration (networks) are sandwiched between autonomy (markets) and mergers (vertical integration, or hierarchies) (Williamson 1998).

But then, such criticisms could also be considered trivial, given the overwhelming focus of her attention in this publication and her extended career in public service. Altogether, hers is a solid contribution to anyone concerned with planning and governance in the complex environment of the United States.

References

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