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Yes, You Can: The “Who,” the “Why,” the “What,” and the “How” of Innovation in American Government

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Sandford Borins, The Persistence of Innovation in Government (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014). 224 pp. \$32.00 (paper), ISBN: 978-0-8157-2560-2.

Innovation persists as a phenomenon within the public sector. “There is skepticism about whether large, hierarchical, monopolistic government agencies initiate and embrace change” (1), but, says the author, “there is extensive evidence that they ‘can’, they ‘do’, and they will” (1). Sandford Borins does not hesitate to affirm that the perspective of public sector innovation has come to replace the “old” New Public

Management: “New Public Management controversies are now history,” he announces in the introduction—a history which is apparently different from one that explains the emergence and consolidation of the scholarly and political interest on innovation.

The skeptical reader who is not convinced with such thesis must be warned that the book will not offer ways to explore it. Borins starts from this premise; he does not develop it. He argues that since the publication of *Innovating with Integrity: How Local Heroes Are Transforming American Government* (Borins 1998), the interest in public sector innovation persists.

The author assumes that public innovation has become a field of interest on its own, differentiated from the New Public Management and other similar paradigms like the Reinvention of Government (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). The era of “big reforms and big ideas” (3) that featured those paradigms seems to have been replaced by the era of local innovations. Today, Borins claims, is the moment of what Pollit and Bouchaert (2000, 191) called the “micro-improvements.” These result from the heroic effort of public entrepreneurs, strongly committed to improving relatively specific parcels of public services and organizations.

Starting from this premise, *The Persistence of Innovation* does not aim to critically inquire into the meaning of public innovation, its origins, the ideological and political context that perhaps explains the growing interest raised by this topic, or the implications of such movement. The main goal of the book is, instead, to provide a panoramic picture of the landscape of innovation in the American public sector, analyzing the characteristics and the motivations of innovators, the obstacles they face, and the results and impact of their efforts.

The interested reader will find an extended and extremely useful literature review on public sector innovation in chapter 2, through which the author demonstrates the emergence, consolidation, and growing diversity of innovation studies. He classifies these according to two key parameters: the focus of the research and the dominant methodology. Borins thus differentiates between studies that scrutinize the innovations themselves (their drivers, their evolution, and the outcomes they have achieved), those focused on the analysis of public sector entrepreneurship (the characteristics of the people who play a major role in launching and sustaining innovations), and finally, those emphasizing the characteristics of innovative organizations. Furthermore, the author distinguishes between research adopting a case study approach and research based on statistical analysis, using methods like descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, multiple regression analysis, factor analysis, and structural equation modeling (14–15). How does *The Persistence of Innovation* locate within this typology? Borins himself answers this question explicitly: the book analyzes innovations (rather than innovators or organizations), and it uses extensive and rigorous statistical analysis.

The main empirical data for the research presented in this book come from the 127 semifinalists of the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Innovations in American Government Awards of 2010. Borins compares these with the original sample of 500 applicants from the same year, with the HKS Awards of 1990–1994—already analyzed in his *Innovating with Integrity*—and, in some instances, with other

databases, such as the 2000 Commonwealth Awards. The author and his research assistants have undertaken an arduous work of coding the questionnaire responses of program applicants, thus developing the empirical database for systematically describing and analyzing the key features of innovative projects. The original questions asked, among other aspects, about the origins and motivations of the initiatives; their innovative value; the process by which they were conceived and launched; their implementation and obstacles faced; their achievements and their shortcomings; their evaluation; the recognition received; and the criticisms faced.

What is the profile of public innovations in the United States according to the data collected in this research? Which dimensions of public innovations have changed since the early 1990s? Do public innovations maintain the same characteristics, or have they changed substantially since then? Borins summarizes the answer to these questions as follows: ...“the *content* of public sector innovation has necessarily changed over the last two decades as innovators have sought solutions to emerging problems, guided by emerging knowledge and new priorities reflecting shifting public and political values. The *process* of public sector innovation, however, has remained largely constant” (188–189).

Among the initiators of innovations we continue to see the “local heroes” that Borins celebrated in *Innovating with Integrity*, defined as middle managers or frontline public servants receiving support from colleagues at the same organizational level. However, when compared to the 1990s, the study identifies greater involvement from politicians, agency heads, and even program clients and partners. In part, says Borins, this has to do with the strengthening of political commitment to public innovation. But the author also links it to what he argues is one of the most significant changes of innovation dynamics in recent decades: the rise of interorganizational collaboration as a fundamental feature of contemporary innovations in the public sector. Heroic leadership, we could conclude, continues to be necessary, but it is not sufficient anymore: public innovation is fundamentally the result of collaborative relationships between actors working at different levels (federal, state, and local) and located in different sectors (public, private, and the Third Sector).

Turning to the motivations of public innovation, the book draws from the narrations of the initiators themselves, to show that initiatives are not a reaction to situations of crisis requiring immediate responses. Instead, they reflect the will to anticipate problems that could escalate to crises if left unattended and aggravated. In many cases, the initiators explain innovation as a response to new opportunities emerging in

the environment. Thus, Borins argues, this evidence would suggest that innovations tend to respond to a fundamentally proactive and strategic logic, rather than to incremental dynamics—something that contradicts the image of innovations as a result of “groping along” (Behn 1988).

Borins offers data to show that current public innovations involve more actors working jointly, although the formal coordination between them does not result in significant changes. According to the author, this seems to reflect that informal coordination and flexibility—rather than the setting of new inter-organizational structures—is the main cement of collaborative networks. The scale of innovative efforts continues to be very similar to the early 1990s (the population reached by the innovative projects used to be between 200,000 and 240,000), although the average operating budget of the innovations has increased significantly and the funding sources have diversified, again suggesting the growing interest in public innovation in the country.

Innovations, of course, continue to face different obstacles, which are very much the same than in the early 1990s. Half of the obstacles relate to internal factors (mainly, logistical problems and bureaucratic resistance), whereas over 30% relate to external factors (such as public distrust and difficulty reaching the innovations’ target groups). The rest are due to scarce resources. The initiators also acknowledge that innovations often receive criticisms. The most frequent by far—about half of the total—have to do with the innovations’ philosophy—their “informing theoretical concept, model, or approach, a criticism often voiced by those advocating an alternative course” (99). The author tends to see the nature of such criticisms with optimism. His interpretation is that critics “tend to be a community of informed observers and participants with professional expertise, or, at the very least, interested individuals engaging with current theoretical debates and taking the business of both government and innovation seriously” (188). Persuasion (showing the benefits of an innovation, social marketing, and demonstration projects) and accommodation (consultation, co-optation, and providing training for public servants affected by the innovation) are the main strategies innovators report as using to cope with the criticisms and the obstacles they face.

Borins underscores three significant changes with respect to the results of the early 1990s study—beyond the above-mentioned buildup in collaboration. First, innovations seem to be more exposed to formal external evaluations. This, according to the author, reflects a broad culture shift within the public sector, entailing a renewed emphasis on performance measurement. Second, the author highlights the intensification of knowledge transfer and sharing of

experiences among practitioners. He associates this with the growing availability of information through the Internet, the expansion of innovation awards programs, and the rising public expectations around innovation. Third, the focus and the contents of innovation have also evolved significantly. Currently, for example, public security innovations related to community policing have lessened, probably because “community policing has been widely embraced as an established approach, moving from innovation to fixture” (183). Innovations in the transportation, infrastructure, and environment field tend to focus on two key priorities today: increasing energy efficiency and reducing the emission of greenhouse gases. In the Health and Social Service field, Borins highlights the rising incidence of programs designed to provide better care for uninsured individuals. Finally, in the Management and Governance area, the study stresses those initiatives involving information technologies such as apps, transparency websites, and social media.

The skeptical reader would not find in *The Persistence of Innovation* an in-depth discussion about the origins and the implications of the present concern with public innovation. Indeed, the book tends to uncritically take for granted the growing importance of the public innovation movement, of which Borins himself is an active participant. The author says that he is “gratified to think that innovation will always be with us, that there will always be public servants and politicians seeking ways to make government better—more efficient, more responsive, more economical, more accessible, more proactive, more creative” (205). He also expresses the hope that “there will always be engaged and resourceful researchers (...) exploring new ways to understand these future innovators’ efforts” (205).

It is the case that innovation has become some sort of a magic word which inevitably generates a wide consensus: who could oppose innovative initiatives, particularly when they are associated with such positive values as efficiency, responsiveness, economy, accessibility, proactivity, and creativity? The skeptical reader could reasonably argue that “innovations” do not necessarily entail progress and that sometimes they may even provoke retrenchment of social and political rights. Taking the perspective of “policy change” (Baumgartner and Jones 2009), which is more neutral than that of innovation, one could suggest that change is not necessarily positive. As a matter of fact, any policy change entails a redistribution of costs and benefits among different social groups and, as a consequence, it may become a potential source of conflict. The skeptical reader will not find a detailed explanation of the orientation and the content of innovations analyzed in this research, and he or she might feel a bit anxious with the fact that the substantive characteristics of the

featured innovations are not explained until chapter seven (147–179). Up to then, the reader may feel forced to blindly believe in the positive value of the innovations that became semifinalists in the HKS awards. Do they deserve our attention simply because they are “innovations?” The skeptical reader may also feel uncomfortable with the fact that the main sources of information for the analysis of these initiatives are those who launched them.

The skeptical reader may have liked to find other questions, other perspectives, and other methodologies in the book, but then he or she should search another book to read, not this one. This book is what it is, and it must be stressed that it perfectly fulfills the goals that it pursues: it raises a set of very clear and specific questions, and it is able to answer them in a very rigorous and systematic manner, thanks to the use of a robust methodology. The book offers a systematic analysis of a set of initiatives that define themselves as innovative, and which deserved the recognition of a highly prestigious institution such as the HKS. Thanks to this research, we now know more about the “local heroes” that launch innovations in an apparently hostile environment, about the processes that made them possible, about the goals they pursued, and about the impacts they have had on their environment. Thanks to this study, we also know more about how all these facets have evolved since the

early 1990s when the first HKS awards were created. Borins even ventures to make a set of recommendations to those actors who aim to launch innovations in their organizations, as well as to those who want to analyze them more in-depth—especially those interested in doing so with the aid of statistical methods. The book represents a most important contribution to innovation research in public administration, and will certainly become an indispensable point of reference in the academic debate. As Jorrit De Jong states on the back cover of the book: *The Persistence of Innovation* “is a must read for both optimists and skeptics of innovation in government.”

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