

BOOK REVIEW

REINVENTING LEVIATHAN: THE POLITICS OF ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Edited by Ben Ross Schneider and Blanca Heredia

MICHAEL BARZELAY
LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

GUILLERMO CEJUDO
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Reinventing Leviathan: The Politics of Administrative Reform in Developing Countries. Ben Ross Schneider and Blanca Heredia, eds., Miami, North-South Center Press, 2003, 319 pages

Under the label administrative reform, any reader can find books ranging from a best seller full of recipes derived from success stories to theoretically informed analyses of reform experiences. *Reinventing Leviathan* belongs to this latter part of the spectrum. The volume, which focuses on Latin American cases of second generation reforms, including administrative reform, is empirically rich and attentive to explanatory approaches within political science. The book casts about for political explanations for reform where it has occurred and for continuity where reform is largely absent. By transitioning from a focus on reform ideas to reform experience, the editors and chapter authors have made a significant contribution to the study of public administration in developing countries.

The book opens with an introduction by the editors, in which the topic is defined and the volume's theoretical context is discussed. It is followed by six country chapters on second generation reform episodes in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Hungary, Mexico, and Thailand, and by a third part which includes a further chapter on Brazil (a discussion about reforms in the social security and tax systems, as well as managerial reform) and a discussion of reforms in the judiciary in Latin American countries. The conclusion, by Robert Kaufman, is a comparison of three competing theoretical approaches that can be applied to the study of administrative reform in developing countries, and it comments critically on the ability of these approaches to provide practical insights about the reform process. As in any edited volume, each chapter is in some ways a project unto itself and reflects the professional and research interests of the authors, but all—with the exception of the chapter on Brazil by Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira, which is more a memoir than an empirical study—proceed in some kind of communication with the theoretical aims set forth in the editors' introduction.¹

Direct all correspondence to: Michael Barzelay, London School of Economics, Interdisciplinary Institute of Management, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. E-mail: m.barzelay@lse.ac.uk

In the introduction, Schneider and Heredia announce that their goal is to provide insights into why some countries achieve significant reforms while others have not. They argue that most of the literature on this topic is too focused on a specific set of factors (political circumstances, economic pressures, strategic choices of actors, or international influences), and that it fails to do systematic comparison of reform experiences. The editors call for more sophisticated political explanations. The specific approach recommended places the emphasis on the strategic choices of political and bureaucratic actors and on the coalitions they form to pursue specific policy choices. A second element of their approach is the attention paid to the distributional effects of administrative reforms. This political economy angle seeks to understand reforms by analyzing “who wins and who loses and why the political settlement came about in the way it did” (1). Schneider and Heredia argue that this research project contributes with two new specific generalizations: first, administrative reform is less likely to occur in countries where the administrative and political elites are not clearly separated (as is the case in Thailand and Mexico); and second, that the programmatic commitments of external actors influence the agenda of reformers and the prospective outcomes of enduring reform initiatives.²

This explicit intention of finding political explanations for administrative reforms is the book’s main contribution to the literature on administrative reform in developing countries. Most of the case studies show consistent evidence with the theory that the trajectory and outcome of any reform is heavily dependent on its surrounding political conditions. The book also provides good coverage of administrative reform episodes among four of the major countries in Latin America, always with some historical detail. The main limitation of the volume is its relative lack of systematic case comparisons. The conclusion offers a further theoretical discussion that hovers above the case studies.

The chapters on Argentina and Mexico follow the editors’ research agenda most closely. The Mexican case study chapter, by David Arellano and Juan Pablo Guerrero, argues that the fusion of political and bureaucratic elites, the unchecked authority of the presidency, and the electoral invincibility of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) explain the absence of significant administrative reform prior to 2000 (when this third factor no longer obtained). This argument is a convincing explanation for the lack of major changes in terms of second generation reform. However, in order to account for the limited reform initiatives that actually took place during the 1990s, the authors had to look for explanations that lie beyond the political economy framework outlined in the book’s introduction. The chapter includes an extended discussion of a failed attempt to establish a career civil service, which shows that the failure to achieve significant reforms in Mexico has not only to do with the systemic structural constraints, but also with the unfolding strategic interaction of bureaucratic units (the Ministries of Finance and Comptrollership) and their officials. In this sense, the Mexico chapter is an illustration of the potential and the limits of the theoretical framework put forward by Schneider and Heredia.

In the conclusion, Kaufman argues forcefully that the political economy approach provides relatively little insight into the politics of administrative reform episodes. After comparing three different approaches—international political economy, institutional rational choice, and institutional sociology—and discussing their relevance for the understanding of the case studies of administrative reform, he concludes that none of these approaches, by itself, is sufficient to elucidate the causal processes that bring about administrative reform. Most contributors to the volume appear to agree, since the most convincing explanations of

reform experiences—those that actually suggest some causality—pay attention both to the systemic context and the process of reform. The chapter on administrative, social security, and tax reforms in Brazil, by Marcus André Melo, is a good example of how much can be learned from analyzing similar experiences that provide comparable case narratives. Political economy explanations are a good way of getting the big picture but, as some of the chapter authors seem to acknowledge, the details of the process of reform can only be grasped with more detailed instruments, placing the appropriate emphasis on the effects of actors' efforts, and, furthermore, on the mechanisms that translate efforts into effects.

In sum, *Reinventing Leviathan* is a convincing invitation to do systematic comparison on the trajectories of public administration reform in developing countries. The reader gains insight into complex processes of administrative reform in developing countries. Specific insights are that reform episodes follow diverse courses and that they are to a great extent shaped by domestic politics. Above all, the volume sheds light on the enormous benefits of using research tools, concepts, and methods from political science to study the process of administrative reform.

NOTES

1. Most authors hold PhDs from American, British, or French universities and most of them are members of the academic community of the countries they are writing about or are involved with international institutions working on those countries.

2. At this point, it may be relevant to quote the overall argument of the introductory chapter (even if it is not closely derived from, or followed by, the succeeding chapters): "In sum, economic factors, especially fiscal crises, are triggers that help explain the timing of reforms. Reform proposals may be enacted under the duress of fiscal crises; however, their medium-term implementation depends more heavily on political factors, both institutional in the sense of the structure of the party system, as well as coalitional, in terms of which groups support reform and how strongly. The major determinants we started with are the degree of fusion—and hence the initial costs of reform—and the degree of programmatic commitment—or the willingness to bear costs over the long term. In countries where the interests and careers of politicians and bureaucrats are closely linked, the likelihood of decisive action on administrative reform tends to be lower than in those in which a greater separation between the two groups exists. Where top political and policy elites hold anti-statist and strong pro-market views, the salience of administrative reform will tend to be lower and more focused around downsizing than in cases where elites hold more positive and pro-active views about the role of the state" (18).