

Agneta Bladh: *Decentraliserad förvaltning. Tre ämbetsverk i nya roller* (Decentralized Public Administration. Three Government Agencies in New Roles. English summary). Studentlitteratur, Lund 1987, 176 pp.

Gunnel Gustafsson: *Decentralisering av politisk makt. En studie av svensk byråkrati i kontakt med sin omvärld* (Decentralization of Political Power. Trends in Swedish Government Agencies). Carlssons, Stockholm 1987, 164 pp.

Strictly speaking there are two ways of analysing decentralization processes. One can regard them from the centre, as initiated by a single decision or a series of decisions. This is a giving from the top to the bottom. One looks at the local level trying to discover those acts which are taking place as an effect of the central decisions. Decentralization is a matter of evaluating the effectiveness of the central system. It is possible to conclude the investigation within the dichotomy centralized–decentralized.

The alternative way consists of choosing a local point of view in order to study the development in terms of an always more or less ongoing struggle between different forces inside as well as outside the public sphere. Decentralization is not only given from above but also taken and created on the local level. The result of these processes is gone into in terms of degrees of autonomy. Decentralization is a matter of understanding the different sources of discretions and responsibilities, not necessarily dependent on specific central decisions and intentions. You can summarize your findings in a discussion of parallel centralizing and decentralizing forces.

The dissertation of Agneta Bladh is produced in the first-mentioned mainstream of decentralization studies, while Gunnel Gustafsson's book partly represents an orientation towards the other way of analysing decentralization. Independently they have been studying certain Swedish decentralization processes during the 70's and 80's. Both of them have also used case studies and many public documents. However, they differ on two important methodological points. While Gustafsson also makes use of interviews, Bladh is content without such sources. Gustafsson furthermore concentrates her analysis on the regional and local levels, whereas Bladh's methods lead her to pay attention to, above all, the central levels.

Bladh focuses on the development of the relationships on the central level of governmental administration in Sweden during the last decade. She helps us understand the general background by classifying the debates held in the Swedish Parliament since World War II. She states that the term 'decentralization' has had several meanings. Its ambiguity has been exploited for conflicting purposes. Its chameleon character is shown by the fact that the spirit of the times has brought out different aspects of its latent content. It was not until ten or fifteen years ago that the term received

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more widespread ideological support. At that time it became an officially held principle for designing governmental bodies at different levels.

Then she specifically wants to investigate the decentralization policy's impact on three governmental agencies, namely the National Board of Education, the National Board of Health and Welfare, and the National Board of Universities and Colleges. For each of them the mix of six governance systems is reviewed. Even if she for instance unmasks the premature qualities of the management instruments, her most substantial conclusion is that independent of the style of decentralization the agencies have become increasingly dependent upon the Government and both the formal and informal conditions set by the Government and *Riksdag*. Her case studies also allow her to discern how the agencies devote more time to working towards the Government, less to their traditional function of working downwards and externally. They are offering service to the Cabinet staff.

Unfortunately Bladh's methods are not very appropriate to her aim of monitoring the relationships within the agencies. The Gustafsson study is on the contrary thoroughly strengthened by such a discriminating arsenal of methods. In general, the latter study is worth appreciation for its open-mindedness and unprejudiced approach. Beginning with a broad discussion of governability-problems in the welfare state, she exposes the changes in the norms, namely the so-called administrative culture, the discretions and the organization formally as well as informally. She shows that substantial changes in both formal and informal respects have occurred in the direction of fewer details and broader professional discretions on local levels. Much more than earlier, the settlements nowadays are negotiable within a meta-policy orientation. It is also possible for her to read off the effects of these alterations in the norms on a behavioural variable.

One of Gustafsson's most general developable conclusions is that her object, i.e the Swedish administrative physical planning system, is distinguished by turbulence in all of the above-mentioned respects. But even if welcoming it in principle, she does not include the external setting for the public administration, and it may be for this very reason that the summary is written in terms of ambiguity, imbalances, discrepancies, and uncertainty. Independent of their functions and mandates the public actors seem to be more and more pessimistic concerning their possibilities of governing. An overall impression of the Swedish administrative culture is unwillingness to take responsibility as well as to express clear-cut opinions.

Both Bladh and Gustafsson depict an administrative system in search of unambiguity and determinative straightforwardness. Both of them also note synchronous centralistic and decentralistic movements. Bladh more generally deduces the reasons behind policy decisions at the top. Gustafsson on the other hand indeed assigns these decisions some explanatory power

but also marks the importance of local initiatives and deeper displacements between the top and the bottom levels, as well as between the public and the private spheres. Where Bladh discovers intentions and rational considerations, Gustafsson detects more riderless processes.

One has to be critical of the historical superficiality in the present two studies. When Gustafsson, for instance, in her comparison of earlier decades with the present says that today's initiatives for change more often come from the bottom, it probably tells us more about her methodological apparatus than about the object. We are still without the local part of the history of decentralization. Up to now it has mainly been written from above. In fact, we do not know much about the pre-history of the decentralization tendencies in Swedish politics. Although her empirical findings only in patches can be understood in the light of her theoretical skeleton, Gustafsson's case studies constitute at least the embryo to an alternative decentralization concept. Until further notice decentralization researchers do have good reasons not to exclude other variances in this multi-dimensional network, for instance what Meyer/Scott have called the uncanceled phase.

Bladh and Gustafsson finally contribute to our understanding of most of all the present states of affairs. Their respective findings are in harmony with each other. Furthermore, they corroborate the international picture of the welfare state's administration as deviating from the rationalist ideals, though their methods may mislead them with regard to dating and historiography. However, their conclusions on the premature and asymmetric character of the present Swedish management systems coincide. Obviously the product of all more or less conscious acts in this field is a very unstable system with severe problems in respect of securing the dirigibility of the democratic control mechanisms. Like Bladh and Gustafsson, one can feel tempted to make a virtue of necessity, and explain the drama as a matter of adaptation. Still the reader may wonder if at any rate the politicians care about this schizophrenic feature and its legitimacy problems. Notwithstanding differences in perspectives and methods, the authors' picture if interpreted normatively is anything but comforting.

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