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*John Kristen Skogan, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*

Johan P. Olsen: *Statsstyre og institusjonsutforming* (with contributions by Morten Egeberg, Per Lægveid and Harald Sætren). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1988, 336 pp.

For more than 15 years now Johan P. Olsen, University of Bergen, has been one of the most productive and creative political scientists in Scandinavia. This book contains 14 articles and some of his most important contributions to the understanding of political life in Norway. Except for a short introduction all the articles have previously been published in books or journals from 1972 to 1986.

The book is structured according to the following four headlines:

'Scientific Perspectives'. Here five articles deal with new-institutionalism and some of the 'ever-lasting' problems in political science and organization theory – i.e. the historical constitution and development of political institutions, relations between structure and meaningful actions and possibilities for choice and rationality.

'Processes of Change and Reform': This chapter contains three contributions to the understanding of recent changes in public administration in the Nordic countries. None of the contributions rely on systematic empirical findings, but try to locate topics and describe paths for further research.

'The Institutions of Democracy': In four articles some of the empirical findings from the Norwegian Power Study 1972–82 are used to describe trends in how the government and the public administration in Norway have come to be organized and to function as elements in a system of interest representation and societal coordination.

'Decision processes and the elaboration of meaning': In this chapter two rather different articles are collected. One describes how the Norwegian mass media are organized and function as channels for the formation and articulation of interest. The second describes organizational prerequisites for decision-making and identifies two ideal type models for how decisions are taken within pre-given organizational conditions.

Seen together all the 14 articles bear witness to the wide range of problems dealt with by Olsen and colleagues over the years and to the still current interest in some of the analytical results from The Norwegian Power Study. On the other hand, they also point to some of the problems in Olsen's more recent efforts (together with James G. March) to transcribe these extensive empirical findings and analytical results into a general (although middle-range) theory of institutions and their

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transformation. Olsen, in five of the articles, tries to pinpoint stabilized phenomena, while on the other hand, in the more metatheoretical discussions, he revolves around the problem of change and of how to describe institutions as dynamic orders in flux.

So, how to go beyond simple structural analysis to assess the dynamics of institutional change, seems to be the major problem springing from this book.

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R. B. Bertramsen, J. P. Frölund Thomsen & J. Torfing: *State, Economy and Society*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1991, 233 pp.

A social theory or a set of hypotheses in the social sciences is basically an instrument in the conduct of empirical research. The distance between the model and its use in the interpretation of data need not be close. On the contrary, theory could be developed on its own track travelling a long distance from empirical information in order to derive the major implications, as is often the case in the social or public choice school. However, at some point one would ask: How can the model and its implications be employed for the understanding of what actually goes on?

Whether a theory is true or false depends not on its model assumptions, but on what is meant by the concept of truth. Since theories cannot be verified or falsified in themselves, their future is determined by deliberations about their complexity and the number of ad hoc hypotheses that are admissible. What decides the fate of a theory is the actual or potential availability of competitive models. The growth of knowledge does not stem from a direct confrontation of the truth of the assumptions of a theory but from its contestability in terms of alternative approaches. When rescuing a theory means accepting too much complexity over against the demand for theoretical simplicity or facing too many falsifying instances, then theory competition is the key to the interpretation of the data. As there can never be a direct test of the basic assumptions of a theory, all kinds of theory contestation are about the pros and cons of various implications of alternative theories when making sense of the empirical information.

Thus, theories and their models are in no way true pictures of reality; they are instead instruments of interpretation by their making certain assumptions and deducing interesting consequences. They catch certain aspects of reality while neglecting others. Yet, their instrumental role is not eternal. To the great chagrin of its most fervent supporters, the value of a theory may dwindle as the conduct of inquiry moves along, but since theories have no value in themselves, the growth of scientific knowledge cannot stop in reverence to the old authorities.

*State, Economy and Society* proceeds from the opposite strategy. Being tied into the Marxian perspective, it wishes to adapt its core to new findings and interpretations. No doubt the authors do well, integrating three developments in modern Marxist theory: strategic-relational state theory, discourse analysis and regulation theory. Yet, one may ponder on what the entire enterprise is for: rescuing Marxism, arriving at new instrumentally fertile models or devising a new plan for practical revolutionary action.

Each author has a chapter: Torfing writes about the hegemony approach to capitalist regulation, Bertramsen takes on the strategic selectivity of the state and Frölund Thomsen discusses the state as an institutional ensemble. In joint