

BOOK REVIEW:

RIGHTING HISTORIC WRONGS & CONFRONTING OUR PAST TO BETTER MEET THE FUTURE
PAN SUK KIM AND DEMETRIOS ARGYRIADES (EDITORS 2015)
DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE, PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION:
THEMATIC DISCOURSE AND GEOGRAPHICAL CASES, BRUSSELS, BRUYLANT/IIAS

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In September 2015, with Pope Francis in New York, the General Assembly of the United Nations convened to evaluate its progress in accomplishing a set of Development Goals. These were enshrined in a landmark Declaration at the dawn of the Millennium on 18 September 2000 (United Nations A/Res/55/2/18.9.2000). At the top of its agenda was the eradication of poverty. What happened in the interim; how well had nations coped; how close was the global community to closing the chapter on poverty, and moving on?

The volume here reviewed attempted to answer these questions. A compendium put together by a team of twenty experts from all the world's main regions, it looked at the issue of poverty from a much broader perspective than "eradication" or simply "alleviation" would suggest. To start with, what is poverty; how has it been defined, what forms does it still take and how effective governments and civil society world-wide have been at combating its symptoms? The volume, which appeared only a few days ahead of the General Assembly, but took two years to write, to edit and to publish, addresses all these questions in a comparative light. More especially, it draws on relevant data from Africa, East Asia, South Asia, the Arab States, the Americas and Europe. As its title aptly suggests, the thematic discourse on the subject is combined with geographical cases. An overview of conclusions, in Chapter XII, tries to pull the threads together.

One may, therefore ask the question: what is the *value added* of this ambitious project, other than its global scope and exhaustive exploration of a topic that remains of paramount importance; what are its major findings; what may the reader claim, be he a scholar or practitioner, as his "take" after reading this large book of some 500 pages? Well, for starters, what it tells us is that the war on poverty is still very far from over. Progress has been uneven, leaving certain parts of the world, Africa in particular, in the throes of misery and want. Indeed, it has transpired that overall global success has chiefly been the work of the two giant countries, the People's Republic of China and India, which between them account for a third of the total world's population. Readers from Central Asia and the Asia region in general will be interested to read chapter IX, especially the section contributed by Drs Munira Aminova and Saltanat Liebert on the transition process in this important region on which the Regional Hub and Journal have set their focus. Indeed, it may be argued that the chapter and the book both offering analyses of major topical challenges from comparative perspectives represent a "must read", which ought to find their ways into university libraries of schools and institutions of our region that teach in fields of governance and public administration.

The outcome of these efforts of fifteen years and how these were accomplished contain important lessons for humanity as a whole. In fact, the lesson number one may be none other than the self-evident truth that *government* and *governance* matter a very great deal. It is hardly symptomatic that the two countries in question, China and India, exemplify a pattern in which the State apparatus assumed a pivotal role in planning, strategizing and

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implementing the war on poverty. Over time, they changed its course and modified priorities, often learning from mistakes or with a view to addressing new challenges emerging in the process of fighting this war. When we speak of the state apparatus, we need to understand that this includes all the several layers of government and public administration. Indeed, as Chapters IX and X, respectively covering East-Central and South Asia have made it abundantly clear, a very major part of the total war on poverty was fought on subnational levels under differing degrees of central direction and control. This should come as no surprise except for the fact that humanity, during the past three decades, has been hostage to a “philosophy that [said] that every problem can be solved if only government could step out of the way; that if government were dismantled ... it would benefit us all” (Obama, 2009).

Remarkably these words of President Obama are cited in the book under review (p. 436) in a detailed comparison of contrasting models of governance which prevailed around the world during the past half century. The book has made no secret of its overall conclusion that the “market model of governance”, sold to the world during the concluding decades of the twentieth century, must take responsibility for many a signal failure, as well as several maladies that still plague governments in several parts of the world. Corruption, maladministration, blatant abuse of power and resulting arbitrariness, marginalization and exclusion of large segments of residents and citizens are the manifestations, explored in some detail, which this erroneous model produced in a wide range of countries.

Not surprisingly, the conclusion to be drawn from this global survey is that public service reforms and improvements in the governance and administrative systems play an important role both in advancing the agenda and sustaining the positive outcomes of the ongoing war on poverty. Manifestly, the war is far from over, and the course it follows is not linear, but chequered. As the book has pointed out, in two telling chapter titles, it can lead “From Rags to Riches” – chapter IX - but also “From Riches to Rags” – chapter XI. Nor are the goals the same for all times and for all countries. As the book has also shown, increasingly the world over, poverty itself is morphing into such disturbing trends as galloping disparities and the related phenomena of exclusion, marginalization, disaffection, alienation and *anomie* of large numbers of individuals in several parts of the world. Unaddressed these major challenges may soon reverse the progress of recent years and seriously undermine both democratic governance and international peace. Both perils are avoidable. Public administration and public service reform when undertaken in earnest have certainly part of the answer.

Reference List of related publications of the IIAS

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