



## Book review: *The Crisis of Governance* by Owen E. Hughes

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The term ‘crisis’ pervades public debate, research and policymaking. Perhaps owing to the state of exception and urgency the term invokes, it is easily associated with the present. But crises have, of course, been a major feature in political life for a long time. Nearly half a century ago, American historian Christopher Lasch observed that:


The art of crisis management, now widely acknowledged to be the essence of statecraft, owes its vogue to the merger of politics and spectacle. Propaganda seeks to create in the public a chronic sense of crisis, which in turn justifies that expansion of executive power and the secrecy surrounding it. (Lasch 1979/1991:78)

As opposed to treating crises as brought about by concentrations of power, in his recent book, Owen E. Hughes argues that crisis is the objectively existing state of affairs in Western governance. He unpacks this by exploring different aspects of governance, in a book which is broad in scope and addresses important issues. It does so, however, in a way that is often problematic: thin on orientation in contemporary research, overly reliant on newspaper articles as references and simplistic in its application of key theoretical concepts.

Chapter 1 sets out the main argument, of how governance – in government, business, politics and science – is in crisis. To argue his case, Hughes uses a range of examples which are mainstays of current debate: political polarization, alternative facts, populism, the erosion of democracy, and so on. The focus is generally on “the West”, and specifically on the U.S., mainly during the Trump presidency. Establishing a pattern which runs through the book, Hughes uses rather few scholarly references and generally ones which are 20-30 years old, making the book at best vaguely positioned in current research. Instead, much of the contemporary picture is drawn from essays and opinion pieces in publications like *The Economist* and *The Atlantic*. In chapter 1 and beyond, these often form the book’s main source material to argue for the bleakness of contemporary Western society. The book is clearly driven by a normative aim: to “reinvigorate the Weberian aspects of governance, such as the rule of law, evidence-based policy, and to re-emphasize rational-legal authority, efficiency, and effectiveness.” (p56) This represents a defense of what, in its political manifestation, resembles some form of establishment consensus in Western politics. At the center is the U.S., which Hughes portrays as a historical “beacon in the dark, the light on the hill of democracy” (p15), lamenting its current decline.

Chapter 2 provides a conceptual discussion on governance, arguing for a broad definition of governance as the “running organizations of any kind, and about setting up structures or institutional arrangements to enable an organization to be run” (p18). Governance is seen as a general form of steering, associated with relationships and processes, different from government, associated with authority and force. Hughes positions his discussion against the debate on network theory in the manner it appeared around two decades ago, arguing that governance is a better concept for understanding state and bureaucracy. While it’s not a virtue in

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itself to be positioned in the most recent academic literature, the value of Hughes' discussion is unclear: the broad scholarship on governance has already engaged with these types of issues for a few decades. What makes Hughes' work somewhat different is perhaps that his account is less focused on technical aspects of steering, and instead highlights the landscape of contemporary politics.

Chapter 3 proceeds to set out a major line of inquiry in the book. It starts with a discussion of Max Weber's forms of authority, in which Hughes recounts lines of thought so fundamental to the study of public organizations that most readers are bound to have encountered them before. In applying these to governance and administration, however, the book contains a potentially fruitful approach. Hughes suggest that recent decades of research and academic debate on new public management have been too inward-looking, resulting in an ignorance of larger shifts in the political landscape in which public administration is situated. In essence, Hughes says, administration and management reforms in recent decades has been confined within Weber's rational-legal authority. Outside of this, however, the decline of democracy and rise of authoritarianism around the world is seen as representing a resurgence of traditional and charismatic forms of authority. These, Hughes argues, are much more consequential for public administration than, say, the latest version of performance management.

Chapter 4 concerns the role of facts, lies and science in policymaking, relying on a brief and rather reductionist presentation of science as the empirical search for facts. Hughes asserts straightforwardly that "public policy relies on facts" (p68), without unpacking the inherent complexity that characterize many public services, implicitly treating all social life as if it can be evaluated according to criteria from the natural sciences. He generally outlines a battle between the belief in "truth" and "alternative facts", focusing on evolution, climate change and Covid-19. While I am often sympathetic to Hughes' arguments, a problem appears here that recurs throughout the book: the discussion doesn't appear to be seriously interested in understanding what it portrays but is mostly aimed at condemning it. Ironically, Hughes' general lack of references and data in his discussion of science denial makes him come dangerously close to conforming to the pattern which he is vehemently arguing against: that perceptions of what makes knowledge legitimate is contingent upon people's systems of belief. In sweeping over highly complex concepts such as truth, science and rationality, Hughes often reduce these to cliches, such as by saying that "the long conflict between rationalization and irrationality since the Enlightenment has most often been won by the former" (p71).

Chapters 5 through 7 deal with specific areas of governance: political, international and corporate. The scope of these chapters is a strength in that it offers something to many readers. At the same time, they contain basic orientations in their subjects and there appears to be little interest in taking stock of available research. In the chapter on political governance, for example, we are given a basic introduction in issues such as the difference between parliamentary and presidentialist systems. The rise of authoritarianism is sketched and linked to the resurgence of the traditional and charismatic forms of authority. At times, interesting threads are introduced, such as whether bureaucracy is more effective in autocratic societies. But in all of this, rather astoundingly, there is essentially no mention of the major research dedicated to these topics: a total neglect of major theorists on democracy, for example, as well as research conducted by various institutes entirely dedicated to the study of democracy. In the chapter on international governance, we are given a cursory introduction to the United Nations and various international treaties. In terms of corporate governance, the inclusion of such a chapter itself is highly valuable – even though Hughes doesn't mention this, in Weber's writing, bureaucracy wasn't restricted to the public sector. As Graeber (2015) has pointed out, the disassociation of bureaucracy from the private sector was the result of a gradual development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, Hughes' chapter on corporate governance is mostly dedicated to descriptions of two corporate scandals, concerning Volkswagen and Boeing. Apart from those, we are given sweeping assertions such as that "for the most part, companies are still quite well governed" (p136), without any evidence marshaled to support this.

Finally, chapter 8 contains a summary. Having highlighted lot of critique, it feels fair to point out I am sympathetic to the substance of many of Hughes' arguments and agree with many of the values and positions he espouses. However, it is hard to understand who the intended

audience is. The book has scope, but recounts phenomena which are already well-known and widely covered, without offering a novel discussion of these. Moreover, the application of theoretical concepts is often simplistic, with highly complex concepts such as science, facts, rationality, truth, and democracy bundled together.

The simplistic use of theoretical concepts is seen in the usage of those most central to the analysis: Weber's forms of authority. Weber's writings offer a conceptualization of what he observed as critical features of organizational life in modernity, collected into an ideal-type model of the modern bureaucracy. This ideal type should be understood as a flowing out of macro-historical tendencies in modernity – rationalization, secularization, capitalism and modern industry, and so on. But in Hughes' writings, it's the other way around: rather than the forms of authority and organization flowing out of society, they are treated almost as what determine society. Hughes discusses Weber's ideal types as if they are a toolkit for policymakers, essentially treating the authority forms as something which policymakers choose. Because of this, the discussion about the claimed crisis in governance is mostly restricted to the forms of authority and doesn't engage in the societal landscape from which authoritarianism or polarization emerges – say, increasing wealth inequality, global warming, or the rise of digital technology. Instead, the problem appears to be that lawmakers around the world don't realize that they should choose the rational-legal model when governing, instead choosing to be traditional or charismatic in their use of authority. Given this line of reasoning, it almost appears as if modern bureaucracy originated because governments in the 1920's started ordering volumes of *Economy and Society* published soon after Weber's death and re-engineered their operations after being persuaded by his accounts of rational-legal authority. In addition to this, the presentation of Weber's writing is narrow and make his multifaceted concepts appear one-dimensional: rational-legal authority is portrayed as having a few minor issues but essentially good, and there is no mention of the well-known iron cage metaphor for the darker sides of rationalization, whereby the submission of human life to technical means and formal legal considerations can hollow out individuality and freedom.

Moreover, Hughes' depiction of a struggle between the good forces of rationality, science and logic against the darkness of populism, alternative facts and authoritarianism is too moralizing. He does the reader a disservice by not genuinely trying to understand the widespread resentment of modern politics. Always looming on the other side are the ignorant people, those who back Trump or Brexit, who for the life of them can't understand that the concentration of power and wealth representing established politics in Western society is simply the best way to organize a society. Since polarization and populism are so much in vogue, there is of course a substantial literature to draw on for why established orders in Western society are under pressure. To take just one example, Michael Sandel's (2020) discussion on the darker sides of meritocracy offers one piece to the puzzle. The ideal of meritocracy, Sandel argues, is a dominant system for allocating status in Western society. It builds on the widespread notion that positions should be awarded by merit: those that are most suitable for a position should hold it. In a meritocratic system, people deserve their positions because it reflects the desirability of their abilities. However, this implicitly means that those on the bottom of the status ladder also deserve their positions – that there are insiders and outsiders in society, and that these positions aren't allotted by chance, but rather because people genuinely deserve it. This is further compounded by careening income inequality, which makes college education – a necessary entry ticket into the meritocratic competition – an increasingly privileged phenomenon in the U.S. and U.K. By missing out on discussions such as this and others like it, Hughes unnecessarily restricts his ability to shine a light on the crisis he argues pervades contemporary governance.

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