Summer Reading Circle

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The Politics of COVID-19 and its Aftermath

Over the course of the summer we read three books on the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications in different parts of the world. At our first meeting in June we discussed “Federalism and the Response to COVID-19: A Comparative Analysis”, a collection of previously published reports edited by Rupak Chattopadhyay et al. (Routledge, 2022). The book analyzes how subnational governments around the world have been at the forefront of policy innovation, especially in the field of social protection. The second meeting took place after the faculty retreat in September, owing to the summer travel plans of the group’s participants. At the second meeting, we discussed Luuk van Middelaar’s Pandemonium. Europe’s Covid Crisis (Agenda Publishing, 2021), a book that focuses on the pandemic in the context of domestic failures of representation in Europe and in the aftermath of the crises preceding it. As a counterpoint to Middelaar’s wide-ranging and theoretically-minded study we also took up Guobin Yang’s The Wuhan Lockdown (Columbia University Press, 2022), which documents the lived experiences of that city’s residents through their own testimonies.

For Paul Petzschmann reading the latest work on the politics of COVID-19 was an opportunity to review literature for some upcoming courses that are dealing with the subject. A case study on the politics of COVID-19 is part of his course comparing European welfare regimes as well as part of a Summer Liberal Arts Institute he offered at Carleton over the summer. Middelaar’s book in particular is of interest because he previously used his work in teaching about the European Union. As expected, “Pandemonium” builds on previous work that employs the distinction between “procedural” politics and a “politics of the event” to make the argument that although the Union has been slow to react to crises the publicity generated by them has ultimately forced the EU to reform itself and burst through the constraints imposed by procedural politics. As Middelaar notes, “the qualities of rules-politics can turn negative. A multiplicity of internal equilibriums can topple over into stagnation and indecision, while procedural caution can lead to bureaucratic sogginess and a loss of connection with the public.” This “paradox of rules” - that in times of crisis the public wants predictability yet the “politics of rules” is unable to provide it - diagnosed by Middelaar provides an opening for populist politics. For Huan Gao, the reading circle allowed her to reflect on the COVID-19 lockdowns as a window into how physical space affects state-society relations, social mobilization, and political behavior; the
Wuhan lock downs are one of the case studies analyzed in a work in progress. *Federalism and the Response to COVID-19* proved especially illuminating, as one of the key ideas from the volume is that fiscal centralization was a key determinant of policy processes and outcomes. This provides another theoretic approach to understanding the wild swings in covid response in China over the past two years. For Juan Diego Prieto, the reading circle offered a chance to think about "the local" as a site of social policy experimentation and transformation, as part of an ongoing book project and his broader research and teaching interest in subnational comparative politics. Until now, the promise of COVID-19 politics to provide the political scientists with a “laboratory” to study the effectiveness of different sub-national responses have remained unfulfilled. In practice, existing studies amount to little more than isolated examples but allow for little by way of systematic comparison. While there is some evidence that sub-national politics allows for policy innovation in some situations - such as when there is a great degree of intergovernmental conflict such as in Brazil, Mexico and Kenya it seems that overall state capacity is still what matters most. The most interesting contributions to the discussion on federalism and COVID-19 have come from comparisons of fiscal autonomy of sub-national units as these seem to play an important role in the effectiveness of crisis politics.

While the books we have read presented an uneven picture, partly owing to the very different approaches taken, the participants in this reading group nevertheless came away with some general observations. As if often the case when researching ongoing events it is important for researchers to focus on the specific rather than reaching for broad generalizations. As shown by Yang’s (2022) *The Wuhan Lockdown*, an ethnographic approach that captures what it’s like to live in that moment and what the moment means to different people is probably more lasting value. Similarly, a theory-driven account such as that of Middelaar’s offered some interesting insights because it managed to fit the COVID-19 story into an already well-rehearsed account of the European financial and refugee crises. Perhaps predictably, the editors of the collection of essays on Federalism and COVID were unable to reach any sort of general conclusion as to whether unitarism or federalism was leading to better or worse outcomes. If anything the current literature on COVID in political science seems to underscore the need for methodological pluralism.