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THE RISK OF REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

CULTURAL THEORY AND INTERLOCAL COOPERATION

Thomas Skuzinski



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Thomas Skuzinski uses a study of local government land use planning in Michigan, specifically the metropolitan areas of Grand Rapids and Detroit, to make a compelling argument for a new approach to understanding regional governance. He applies his sociocultural collective action framework to analyze social and cultural factors to understand why political and civic leaders engage in, or avoid engagement in, local cooperative and collaborative governance processes. This book is a welcome addition to the literature on regional governance.

*David K. Hamilton, Director of the Center for Public Service,
Texas Tech University, USA*

Skuzinski's work opens a promising avenue to explore the challenges and opportunities for interlocal collaboration and more effective regional governance. Beyond more evidence that agreements and consolidations are not all about the costs, his sociocultural collective action model advocates a theoretical turn that may nurture more politically viable structural reforms for a variety of public services.

*Kurt Thurmaier, Presidential Engagement Professor and Chair,
Northern Illinois University, USA*

The Risk of Regional Governance

Creating metropolitan regions that are more efficient, equitable, and sustainable depends on the willingness of local officials to work together across municipal boundaries to solve large-scale problems. How do these local officials think? Why do they only sometimes cooperate? What kind of governance do they choose in the face of persistent problems?

The Risk of Regional Governance offers a new perspective on these questions. Drawing on theory from sociology and anthropology, it argues that many of the most important cooperative decisions local officials make—those about land use planning and regulation—are driven by heuristic, biased reasoning driven by cultural values. *The Risk of Regional Governance* builds a socio-cultural collective action framework, and supports it with rich survey and interview data from hundreds of local elected officials serving in the suburbs of Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan. It is a story of the Rust Belt, of how local officials think about their community and the region, and—most importantly—of how we might craft policies that can overcome biases against regional governance.

Thomas Skuzinski is Assistant Professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech University. He holds doctoral and master degrees from the University of Michigan, and a law degree from Michigan State University. His work uses a sociological institutionalist lens to examine how the rules, norms, and cultures in which local government actors are embedded shape metropolitan governance.

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Cultural Theory and Interlocal Cooperation
Thomas Skuzinski

To Michael and Elvira, and to my parents, for making this possible

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Preface

Around the time I was nearing the completion of the manuscript for this book, a student commented to me that there was no point anymore in learning about what local governments can and cannot do. “It’s not like they can really make a difference now,” she said resignedly. The conversation was in the middle of November 2016, shortly after a presidential election that had stunned even the most sage observers. I knew the student through a class I teach on land use law, and in it the dominant theme is the constraints faced by general purpose local governments—the tens of thousands of cities, towns, counties, villages, townships, and other units that comprise the crazy-quilt of sub-state government in the U.S. In one sense, then, the comment was not surprising because of the highly structuralist perspective from which I had presented the material. Local government actors had to navigate a space of legal limitation filled with constitutional provisions, statutes, regulations, and common law. They could only behave in the ways states dictated. I frequently emphasized to my students that local governments were, in the final analysis, “creatures of the state.” And their decisions were further circumscribed by resource scarcity. I had encountered many theorists in political science, public administration, and the law who imagined the local actor as existing in an institutional space of very limited discretion. My own experience growing up in Michigan and seeing first-hand the decline of the Rust Belt made this conceptualization quite easy to accept. It seemed that my student had picked up on my native impulses, and I suppose I should have been pleased.

But I had also taught about theories of state–local fiscal federalism. I had lectured about the ways in which a quite expansive autonomy had been granted to many local governments through home rule constitutional and statutory provisions, and how land use planning and regulation were—along with public education—the functions that were most strongly localized in the United States. My students and I had started to unpack, too, some of the clever ways local governments had attempted to deal with problems that the state and federal governments could not or would not effectively address. America’s cities and towns were, indeed, places of constraint, but they were also places of innovation and opportunity—a notion of freedom that also had its scholarly adherents. In the wake of a federal election that was poised to fundamentally change the

administration of national environmental and social policies, I found myself—much to my own surprise—touting the virtues of the empowered local government in the face of my student’s frustration and despondency. Local government officials, I insisted, *could* make a difference—really—even under conditions that seemed constraining.

Students can often be a vital source of scholarly inspiration, and it was this conversation that helped me appreciate the timeliness of the theorization and empirical investigation at the heart of *The Risk of Regional Governance*. Allow me a few moments to unpack that title and the basic argument I make in the book. When I write about regional governance, I am referring specifically to formal, voluntary cooperation among general purpose local governments, a seemingly small action that has the ability to dramatically rescale and reform metropolitan policymaking. In the book, I propose that the geography of cooperation cannot be mapped fully with the tools of rational choice institutionalism, as they have been for the last few decades. Rather, the landscape is in significant part shaped by values and ideology, and its contours can be best appreciated from the perspective of a cultural theoretic variant of sociological institutionalism.

Competition and cooperation are formal outcomes of a process of social legitimizing, which is most simply defined as the holistic degree of support for an organization, to paraphrase John Meyer and William Scott from their work in the early 1980s. Legitimacy can come from legal mandates (its clearest etymological interpretation), but also from the norms that develop within and among organizations, and—most relevantly for the purposes of this book—from the cultural dispositions that align individuals with a social “tribe” that exists beyond these organizations. Applied to local governments, we would expect cooperation to be most likely where, for example, state enabling legislation allows it, where it is built on an existing network of cooperative relationships, and where its relative costs and benefits are evaluated in a way that is consistent with professionally accepted practices. But beyond this regulatory and normative legitimacy, we would also expect cooperation to be more likely where it aligns with the values of the individuals charged with its adoption and maintenance—i.e., where it is also culturally legitimate.

The real conceptual power of a sociological institutionalist framework for making sense of interlocal cooperation is that it can accommodate the surface logic of rational choice institutionalism by regarding it as a set of socially constituted norms that will *sometimes* dominate decision-making processes. We would, for example, expect decisions about water treatment or garbage collection or snow removal to be guided by considerations of efficiency and transaction cost economizing, for reasons that—if not evident now—will become so later in the book. For other targets of cooperation, however, rules permit a wide range of discretion, costs and benefits are highly uncertain, information is lacking, and norms of reciprocity are weak, creating what Elinor Ostrom would refer to as a sparse setting. The standard menu of rules and norms may be unable to signal a clear logic of instrumentality, but in their absence culture can still afford the logic of appropriateness on which local officials can draw.

To my student, I had presented two competing visions of local governments as places of constraint and places of opportunity. These were also descriptions, respectively, of the contexts in local policymaking when elected and administrative officials would and would not rely on heuristic reasoning—the gut instincts, intuitions, moral codes, ideologies, and biases that are bound up in cultural worldviews. If we know when this reasoning is most likely to dominate, and we additionally know the cognitive processes that translate worldviews into policy preferences, then we are afforded two policy moments—an institutional one and a cognitive one—at which we can try to leverage or mitigate the operation of cultural worldviews. *The Risk of Regional Governance* can be read as a guide to divining those moments.

If we instead continue to imagine the local official as a rational, instrumental functionary strategically interacting with other like-minded actors in an institutionally rich setting, then I propose we are left with surprisingly few tools, and many of them rely on intervention by the state that has proven historically unpopular and politically untenable. Certainly not one of these tools is capable of dealing with the messiness of ideology. The election of 2016 will likely impart many lessons, but perhaps the most immediate one is that there is real value to be gained from respecting the power of heuristic reasoning. By developing a culturally grounded sociological institutionalist framework for metropolitan governance—what I refer to more simply as *sociocultural collective action*—and providing a preliminary test of it, I hope to demonstrate the value of cultural worldviews as a cognitive institutional tool for making sense of and perhaps even improving metropolitan areas.

The book is written with several audiences in mind. Anyone interested broadly in the function and dysfunction of metropolitan areas should find relevant the arguments and evidence presented in *The Risk of Regional Governance*, and that statement applies to academics, students, and lay readers. The book provides a primer on how we currently think about interlocal cooperation—an essential pathway to regional governance—and it offers an alternative perspective. The book also tells a story of Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan, and in doing so speaks to the dynamics that have shaped so many Rust Belt cities and that continue to fascinate so many of us, including many social scientists and other academics. It is a story about the suburbs of these two large cities, and how the local elected officials serving them think about reaching across boundaries to engage in cooperative land use planning and zoning.

The Risk of Regional Governance should be of some use to the political scientist or scholar of public administration working at the boundary between rational choice institutionalism and sociological institutionalism, as many have in recent decades. It injects cultural theory, which remains an underused way to theorize about the presence of culture in sociological institutionalism. And, along those lines, it uses a method for operationalizing culture—cultural cognition—that could prove highly useful. More broadly, the book focuses attention on local elected officials, who continue to be regrettably ignored. I have attended many conferences in which the panels that deal with local government

are few, and within those most authors tend to skirt very close to committing an ecological fallacy by treating the individual and the organization—the local elected official and the local government—as synonymous. This may be true sometimes, and may be quite often justifiable for local administrative officials, but I do not believe based on my own observations that it is often true of local elected officials. The book also deals not with the big city mayors that so often garner attention when a study does focus on local government leadership, but rather with the suburban legislators who so often go unnoticed. In part this has been driven by a persistent view, traceable to Charles Tiebout, Paul Peterson, Gerald Frug, and others, of local governments as highly constrained and rational. This position is often warranted, but it should not preclude us from further investigation of these jurisdictions or the officials in them.

The Risk of Regional Governance is also written for theorists interested in the cultural and cognitive turns in the social sciences. If you ever looked at a policy or planning process, or participated in one, and felt there was some explanatory power for values, beliefs, and ideology, then you will likely find much of the material in this book resonant. Many scholars have surveyed and described the social world from this perspective. In the field of planning, my disciplinary home, theoretical work by Patsy Healey, Judith Innes, John Forester, and Frank Fischer, among many others, has helped us recognize how pervasive values are, even in the supposedly rational, objective, and value-free work of public officials. Planning, particularly in its intersection with policy analysis, has taken an argumentative and communicative turn, and that certainly helped push me toward the theoretical turn toward sociological institutionalism and cultural legitimacy I am advocating in this text.

Lastly, *The Risk of Regional Governance* is for those working to make local and metropolitan governance better—not just more efficient, or more effective, but more equitable. In the field of planning, theory and practice are inextricable. In 2016, I taught a class with the title *Theory and Practice of Planning*, and I found that only in making a conscious effort to weave the two together could any real lessons be learned—more often by me than my students, I suspect. We have many tools that are directed at improving participation and cooperation, but at least in the subfield of metropolitan governance we have not had a theory able to explain *why* and *when* such tools might matter in the context of interlocal cooperation. This book attempts to lay a few bricks in that foundation.