

Rezension zu:

Stockmann, Reinhard/Meyer, Wolfgang/Taube, Lena (Hg.): *The Institutionalisation of Evaluation in Europe*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020. xxiv + 522 Seiten, 103,99 EUR, ISBN 978-3-030-32283-0

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Background

The times that one could characterize ‘evaluation’ (in Europe) as an *infant industry* are behind us. Apart from the sheer number of evaluations (annually) carried out, also the number of administrative arrangements (including regulations) conditioning evaluations, the attention paid to knowledge production and dissemination, the role evaluation plays in society, as well as the ongoing professionalization, are important drivers behind this development.

Stockmann, Meyer and Taube and their 30-plus authors have inventorized, analysed and tried to explain what this institutionalisation of evaluation entails; in 500 plus pages.

Why did they do this job?

One reason is that earlier studies on the development and institutionalisation of evaluation like Furubo, Rist and Sandahl’s (2002) *Evaluation Atlas* or Rosenstein’s (2015) internet-investigation of legislated evaluation policies are either out-of-date, incomplete, or focused on a too small number of countries. Widmer, Beywl and Fabian (2009) studied the development of evaluation in a number of topic areas and compared Switzerland, Germany and Austria.

A second reason is that a theoretical *exposé* in – for example – the *Evaluation Atlas* is absent or very thin. And finally, the range of aspects investigated and the methodology applied by Stockmann and colleagues is different and with more breadth and depth than in (some of) the earlier publications.

The book “The Institutionalisation of Evaluation in Europe” is number one in an (expect-

ed) series of three. “Because we [the editors, fl] are, after all, Europeans and we are most familiar with Europe, we decided to start with this European volume. The American volume will follow soon in 2020. The African volume (2021) and the Australian-Asian volume (2022) are to follow.”

Four Eastern European countries are investigated, three Southern European, seven Western European, two Northern European countries and the EU, next to a very informative introductory chapter and an (also well-done) final chapter which draws conclusions, trends and ‘*Erklärungsskizzen*’.

On theory

Stockmann, Meyer and Taube’s theoretical analysis of the development of evaluation in Europe “starts with the institutions”. Insights from (classic) sociology (Parsons, Weber, modernization theory, the theory of social differentiation), economics (using Coase’s theory on transaction costs and Ostrom’s work) and political science (with March and Simon’s as one of the references) are used to sketch why and how evaluation became institutionalised and continued to do so. The authors (p. 11) rightly argue that from this “heterogeneous bundle of scientific literature from various disciplines” insights can be deduced for “research on the global success story of evaluation as a new instrument for governance. For the institutionalisation of evaluation, one has to look for

– Rules, norms and regulations on evaluation, implemented in the already existing social subsystems. (...)

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- Evaluation processes, procedures and routines, implemented within
- a broad set of organisations or networks at least as a possible way of practice within a certain policy field.” And:
- finally, institutionalisation as “the process of incorporating new rules, norms and regulations into an existing institutional system for adapting it to new demands from outside, improving its effectiveness and/or efficiency by including innovations, and/or for extent its task and influence to new fields of activities.”

Next, this is transformed into a categorization of concepts and variables used as guidelines for the authors to do their empirical work. Table 1 and in particular the “Appendix: Analytical Guideline: Compendium on the Institutionalisation of Evaluation” (pages 24-29, very informative) are the spin-off of this work. In a separate section of chapter 1 the methodological approach is outlined.

On case studies

16 country reports and one on the EU are the empirical backbone of the book. Most chapters follow a more or less similar structure, including an introduction, the institutional structures and processes (in which evaluation regulation, evaluation practice and the use of evaluations are discussed); the role of evaluation in society (sometimes called ‘societal dissemination/acceptance (Social System)’), professionalisation and discussion and conclusions.

On conclusions and discussion

In a book review, it is impossible to discuss all the interesting items that the editors/authors have formulated. I limit myself to these two.

The first item is the institutionalisation of evaluation in the political system. One of the findings is that “if we examine the embedding of evaluation within legislation, it is conspicuous first and foremost that hardly any general national laws prescribing the use of evaluation exist. Whilst regulations at a national level are rather scarce, in all countries there are laws, regulations or policy strategies relating specifically to a certain policy field. In most cases, the individual ministries decide what is to be evaluated, why, and to what extent. Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIA) can be considered part of the legislative institutionalisation of evaluation”.

Stockmann Meyer and Taube also discuss to what extent “there are genuinely internal evaluation units, or rather units within which eval-

uation — alongside accounting, controlling or other functions — plays a certain role”. In some countries there are also independent stand-alone bodies for evaluations. For example, in Switzerland there is the “Parliamentary Control of Administration”, which reports to parliament (Switzerland, p. 210). Or in Denmark, the “Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman” (Denmark, p. 46), and in Italy, the “Impact Assessment Office” (Italy, p. 278).

The role of parliaments is also investigated for the respective countries. Parliaments “are not only important in connection to their law-making power, i.e. their ability to pass evaluation laws or enshrine evaluation clauses in other legislation, but also to their ability in some countries to instigate or even directly commission evaluations. On top of this, parliaments can be important users of evaluation results”.

Another important finding is that “in countries where evaluation is strongly anchored at an institutional level, evaluations are carried out in a wider scope and also with greater intensity and frequency. In countries without such institutional frameworks, the implementation of evaluation is lagging far behind”.

The second item regards the institutionalisation of evaluation in the Social System. One of the interesting and somewhat disappointing results of the cross-sectional analysis is that “evaluation results usually do not play a major role in providing knowledge for decision-making by civil society organisations. Only in two out of sixteen countries an existent general use of evaluation within their civil societies can be reported. An explanation for the limited use of evaluation by civil society could be found in the fact that the existence of a differentiated, active civil society in a country might be important. Switzerland and Belgium have such characteristic civil societies. But this also applies to many other European countries, where civil society hardly makes use of evaluation results. Some country experts in this volume (Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal) came to the conclusion that a reason for this gap of institutionalised evaluation in the civil society might be that, due to the democratic systems of the countries where more than one party often comprises the government, decisions are made in a bargaining process between parties, are related to certain political ideologies, or are simply based on coalition contracts. Thus, in such a decision-making process evaluation might not be necessarily needed, or that evaluation results are known, but shift to the background in the course of the policy debate and discussions. In

summary, it can be stated that CSOs [*civil society organizations*] and NGOs hardly incorporate evaluation results into the political decision-making process, even in those countries in which they would have institutionalised possibilities to do so via referenda, advisory boards or steering committees. In addition, it can be concluded that CSOs and NGOs are not involved in a systematic, formalised way in the planning and the implementation of governmental evaluations. This even applies to countries such as Switzerland, the Netherlands and Finland, which have a high degree of political institutionalisation of evaluation and in which a high degree of political participation of civil society as part of the political culture prevails”.

The book discusses several other challenging conclusions, dealing with the societal perception of evaluations, the professionalization and a few more. The final section is on “Conclusions: Correlations and Interlinkages”. Let me end with what is the opening text of that section as it is real *Food for Thought for us, evaluators*. “It can finally be said that there has been an enormous growth in the overall evaluation landscape regarding the institutionalisation of evaluation in the last decades. However, the development is not linear, and it differs from country to country. In some of the former forerunning countries, the level of development has slowed down to a certain degree, in some cases even a high level, but has lost its dynamic (UK, Denmark, Finland, Switzerland and Germany). Institutionalisation is *stagnating or even declining* in yet other countries (e.g. in Spain)”.

My appreciation of the book

I am positive; the book gives an interesting overview of where the countries/EU come from and are (going), which trends can be detected and what the future could bring. Readers interested in organizational, institutional and societal aspects of the *Evaluation Business* will know much more after scanning or – preferably – reading this book. The very fact that the editors worked on the basis of several theories is important and positive, and the same goes for the analysis in the final chapter. Luckily the editors are a little bit *old school* which means (for me) that they refrain from presenting *Grand Theories*, *Great Narratives*, *Big Stories* or *Swollen Normative Perspectives*. Instead, they stick to the evidence. Nevertheless, I have the following critical points to make.

– The first is that issues like the ‘*skeptical turn*’ in evaluation (Dahler-Larsen 2019) or the existence of *performance paradoxes* are not

mentioned, let alone discussed in the book. Dahler-Larsen made the point that “as evaluation becomes a ‘standard operating procedure’” and turns into what he calls “the Evaluation Machine”, it reveals weaknesses that were not manifest and visible when evaluation was a new and promising ad-hoc activity. Notably, Dahler-Larsen refers to the panacea problem of evaluation: a situation where a systematic regime requires evaluation to be carried out as a general prescription even where it is not needed just because otherwise it would not be systematic evaluation. In a forthcoming chapter Raimondo and myself (2020) analyse several mechanisms that are behind this development (like ‘evaluation capture’, ‘budget-maximizing evaluators’ and the phenomenon of the ‘loose coupling’ between monitoring and evaluation on the one hand and what really matters in organisations (see also: Raimondo 2018) on the other.

– The second point of critique is that this book does not discuss the (epistemological) quality of the thousands and thousands of evaluations being done. It is one of my hypotheses that the limited use that is made by (civil) society of evaluation results is related to the quality (in terms of depth of the studies/reports). Evaluations have become standard practices with often standard results. Theories of change often look like log frames, visualized as colourful pictures with boxes, arrows, fancy presentations but with very limited substantial insights. Ray Pawson once said that nowadays it pays off to link oneself as an evaluator to theory-driven (realist) evaluations claiming that mechanisms are studied that make (or kill) policies and programs while in fact it often is nothing more than carrying a ‘fake handbag’. It was 20 years ago that terms like ‘evaluitis’ and ‘death by evaluations’ started to be used (incidentally) in the evaluation world. Since then, production numbers of reports, organizations, guidelines, frameworks etc. have increased, but that went hand in hand with the introduction and diffusion of ‘germs’ of a stagnation, if not a downturn. As Stockmann, Meyer and Taube (p. 516) mentioned that “evaluation institutionalisation is stagnating or even declining” (in Spain), it is clear that the editors have an ‘open mind’ to look into unintended and even perverse effects of booming ‘evaluation markets, cultures and structures’. I therefore expect that in the two volumes to come, this topic will also be discussed and investigated.

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