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Transformation of Public Administration in the Context of Contingent Social Systems

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Abstract. This study examines the transformation of public administration theory and practice in the new context of contingent social systems. The relationship between the bifurcation development of modern society and trends in administrative reforms is determined. The uncertainty and randomness of social and political processes is reflected in the mixed nature of administrative reforms, which simultaneously employ ideas of state bureaucracy, new public management, network governance, public governance, crisis management, and others. The persistence of bifurcation processes has posed new challenges for public governability, which has led to a search for new approaches and governance models. As the research demonstrates, this has also been facilitated by the development of the concept of contingency and its widespread adoption in governance science. Ontologically, contingency has come to be understood as a necessary variability of reality, which has been incorporated into the consideration of the conditions for the sustainable development of social systems. Concepts of crisis, prototypical, modular, and robust public governance have begun to emerge in the sociology of governance. Author focuses on modular public governance with its principles of decomposition, autonomy, interoperability, recombinability, scalability, and flexibility. The conclusion suggests that the development of various public governance models must now be analyzed in the context of socio- and political-technical systems.

Keywords: public administration, public governability, bifurcation, administrative reforms, contingent social systems, modular public governance

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Трансформация государственного управления в условиях контингентности социальных систем

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Аннотация. Рассмотрены вопросы трансформации теории и практики государственного управления в новых условиях контингентности социальных систем. Определяется связь бифуркационного развития современного общества с тенденциями административных реформ. Неопределенность и случайность социальных и политических процессов выражается в смешанном характере административных реформ, оперирующих одновременно идеями государственной бюрократии, нового государственного менеджмента, сетевого управления, соуправления, кризисного менеджмента и др. Устойчивость бифуркационных процессов поставила новые проблемы для публичной управляемости, что отразилось в поисках новых подходов и управленческих моделей. Как показано автором, этому способствовало и развитие концепта контингентности и его широкое принятие в управленческой науке. Онтологически контингентность стала пониматься как необходимая изменчивость реальности, которая включалась в рассмотрение условий устойчивого развития социальных систем. В социологии управления стали формироваться концепции кризисного, прототипического, модульного, робастного (надежного) государственного управления. Особое внимание уделено модульному государственному управлению с его принципами декомпозиции, автономности, интероперабельности, рекомбинируемости, масштабируемости и гибкости. Сделан вывод о том, что динамику развития различных моделей государственного управления сегодня необходимо анализировать в контексте социально- и политико-технических систем.

Ключевые слова: государственное управление, публичная управляемость, бифуркация, административные реформы, контингентность социальных систем, модульное государственное управление

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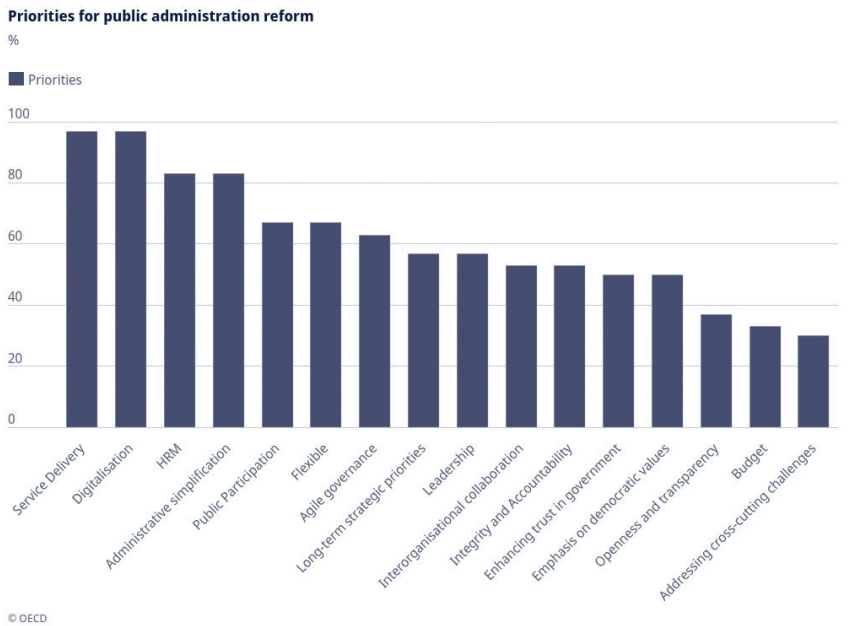
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The Issue of Bifurcation and Administrative Reform

In recent decades, public administration has been obliged to adapt to new circumstances, transforming its practice and, as a result, theory. The concepts of new public management (NPM), network governance, public value governance, and renewed bureaucracy eventually ceased to reflect the dual nature of social development

[Gaman-Golutvina, Smorgunov 2023; Ansell et al. 2025]. Furthermore, since a Global bifurcation is observed, as some researchers argue, global challenges are problems of unprecedented complexity; therefore, a secular paradigm shift is needed from an excessive emphasis on allegedly neutral standpoints, a mechanistic picture of the world, and deductive logic towards accounts of emergence, of systemicity, informationality, and conviviality, which eventually complement each other and together create a transdisciplinary edifice of the sciences for, and by the inclusion of, citizens [Hofkirchner 2020].

Contemporary administrative reforms in various countries, with varying degrees of detail, have included common priorities that respond to bifurcation processes: service delivery, digitalisation, human resource management, simplification of administrative functions and structures, public participation, flexible and agile governance, focus on long-term strategic priorities, leadership, interorganizational collaboration integrity and accountability, enhancing trust in governance, emphasis on democratic values, openness and transparency, budget policy, addressing cross-cutting challenges. Figure displays the global distribution of administrative transformation priorities by importance (OECD Public Governance 2023).



Priorities of administrative reforms in the OECD countries, %

Source: Public governance and administration reforms. (2023). Site OECD. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/public-governance-and-administration-modernisation.html

In all countries, the primary goals of administrative changes were driven by a desire to address public governance issues through the study of new conceptual ideas. In his monograph on contemporary administrative reforms, Sean Goldfinch notes the diversity of new terms that have emerged, including "Third Way", "new governance", "post-NPM", "public governance", "public value creation", "new public governance", "public values leadership", "public values management", "integrated governance", and "Neo-Weberian State" [Goldfinch 2023: 9].

Growing uncertainty has begun to manifest itself in public administration in the search for new goals, such as the increasing importance of the political functions of the top bureaucracy, a focus on projects, programmes, and experiments, the constant reorganisation of structures, levels, and functional tasks, the extreme fluidity of governance institutions, the complex balance between centralisation and decentralisation, the digitalisation of services and control alongside citizen engagement in governance, transformational leadership instead of managerial dominance, and more. Financial instability in the economy, political radicalism, the transition from globalism to a multipolar world, natural disasters and environmental threats, and pandemics in recent years (particularly COVID-19) have compelled a rethinking of the problem of maintaining social system resilience by reducing uncertainty and integrating resilience and change. The well-known metaphor, "to keep your balance, you must keep moving" (A. Einstein), has only begun to capture the new reality.

Along with the velocity of change, social growth came to be influenced by contingent occurrences, which not only complicated social systems but also introduced new demands for deconstruction, which began to be perceived as a threat to security and a risk to development. The postulated synergetic idea of "order from chaos" [Prigogine, Stengers] served as the foundation for the search for conditions that promote social system balance, including the reform of public governance. Beginning in 2008 (during the global financial crisis), the number of publications on contingency in the public sector surged dramatically. For example, a specific study examined 159 publications published between 1979 and 2024, including 143 journals, 7 conference proceedings, 6 books, and 3 book series, illustrating the importance of the theme of social contingency [Hadiyanti et al. 2024: 3].

The tendencies in administrative changes that have characterised previous decades in several countries have been discussed above. They were driven by a combination of practical motives and ideological roots. It has been observed

that the New Public Management responded ineffectively to contingent events; more appropriate in this regard were networked public governance, where horizontal relationships, collaboration, and communication allowed for the expansion of the space of public governability, and the state bureaucracy model, where rational bureaucracy became more adaptive to changing conditions, combining normative certainty with strategic and contingent planning. It has also been correctly pointed out that "unlike crisis management, which often involves a few decision-makers at the apex of government who are prompted by the urgency of the situation to make swift and bold decisions, the response to turbulence tends to be more distributed, as it involves actors in different organizations and at different levels. It also seems to be more protracted, as it aims to hit a moving target in the form of a set of unpredictable dynamics with uncertain and inconsistent effects" [Ansell et al. 2025: 5].

At the same time, specialised ways to evaluating new systems and processes in public administration have arisen, based on the concept of contingency: anti-crisis, modular, prototype, and robust public governance. Anti-crisis management in public spere is a set of measures and institutions designed to diagnose, prevent, and overcome socioeconomic crises by developing and implementing comprehensive measures and strategies to stabilise and resolve the situation [Kuipers 2022; Hollis, Ekengren 2025]. Prototypical public governance is founded on project thinking, with the goal of developing prototypes for solutions to complex systemic problems, testing them through experiments, and incorporating them into administrative practice [Johns 2022].

Robust governance, according to its developers, seeks to avoid both the Scylla of a backward-looking sustainability strategy and the Charybdis of a radically transformative flexibility strategy, insisting that during times of social instability, the public sector's mode of operation must be transformed to maintain certain key public functions, goals, and values. As a result, rather than viewing change and stability as mutually exclusive opposites, the robustness concept views them as mutually determinative: change is required to ensure some level of stability, while the need for stability guides and controls the change process [Ansell et al. 2023; Kupryashin 2023; Ansell et al. 2025].

The notion of modular public governance, which is gaining traction in political and administrative practice, demands special consideration, not least due to the influence of management and digitalisation. While modular management illustrates the efficacy of this model in the economy, digitalisation, with its emphasis on platforms, big data,

and interoperability, creates the socio-technical prerequisites for modular governance in the public sector. The urge for modular governance in the face of uncertainty and contingency in social systems originates from two fundamental considerations: modularity provides for a variety of organisational forms and appears to be relevant to modern techno-social development trends.

The Principle of Social Contingency

The concept of contingency is not new in political philosophy. In general, it combines elements of chance, possibility, and uncertainty in opposition to the notion of politics as an action based on necessity, steadiness, and repetition. The concept of contingency gains particular significance in volatile historical periods characterised by a high degree of openness to future outcomes in political activity.

In relation to the present, this is a problem of finding paths of development; in relation to the future, there is a conscious uncertainty as a basis for the freedom of historical creativity. This is why Kari Palonen wrote in the introductory article to a specialized issue of the journal on political contingency: "Why is contingency so fashionable today? It would not make any sense of "explaining away" it by some external "factors". The point is, rather, that the idea of contingency is so multi-faceted that almost everyone can recourse to some of its faces to one's own purposes" [Palonen 1999: 5]. Thus, for example, for representatives of structural functionalism, there are systemic processes that significantly shape the actions of actors; but these stable processes are not the only factors that lead to social outcomes. There are also accidents, such as deviant behaviour, which also play a role. And for critical realists, there are more significant structures that influence the social world, shape results, and which can occur at any moment in time; but there is also agency, which makes a key contribution to the contingency of events in the social world [Kemp, Holmwood: 2012].

Let us cite two characteristic statements here. The World Economic Forum conducted a survey of 900 experts in 2024–25 on the issue of assessing development prospects. Here are the overall results: "A majority of respondents (52 %) anticipate an unsettled global outlook over the short term (next two years), a similar proportion to last year. Another 31 % expect turbulence and 5 % a stormy outlook. Adding together these three categories of responses shows a combined four percentage point increase from last year, indicating a heightened pessimistic outlook for the world to 2027".[1]

[1] *The Global Risks Report 2025.* (2025). 20th Edition. Geneva: the WEF.

The second assertion concerns the international situation and is expressed in the latest report of the Valdai Club[2]: "It would be impossible to access the probability for any of these scenarios. The spectre of an all-out universal war will keep haunting us, maybe forever. While possible, it is never a given and does not have to happen, which does inspire some optimism. Arguing that the system of international relations has depleted its potential for radical change can serve as a starting point for understanding where it is headed" [Barabanov et al. 2025: 9]. The first assertion indicates the prevalence of the opinion about turbulent times today, with an increasing proportion of people registering this in their consciousness. The second assertion directly points to one of the significant aspects of this contingent situation regarding the prospects of an all-out universal war "while possible, it is never a given and does not have to happen".

Although the concept of contingency is now well-known, it has existed in political theory in various contexts. Aristotle, in his Nicomachean Ethics, already associated politics with rational action concerning the good and evil of man, based on free decision rather than necessity. He wrote: "No one decides on what cannot be otherwise" [Aristotle 1983: 173]. Machiavelli considered valour combined with fortune to be the core of a prince's activity. And it was realpolitik, as John Pocock recounts, that contributed to the transition in the thinking of his time from universal categories to the particularities of politics subject to contingency [Pocock 2020: 40–42]. Max Weber considered the recognition of chance as an element of politics. Particularly in the last years of his life, as Kate Tribe suggests, he viewed the development of capitalism and party democracy at the end of World War I with a growing emphasis on the concept of contingency [Tribe 2022].

Systems theorists developed the principle of double contingency as a condition for the generation of social systems. While Talcott Parsons, in his theory of social systems, linked its content to the interdependence of the expectations and actions of the self and the other, Niklas Luhmann, developing the concept of autopoietic systems, wrote about the confrontation of at least two opposing systems of alternative possibilities [Vanderstraeten 2002]. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory describes social systems as a recursive interaction between agency and structure, where the random actions of agents can strengthen or change social structures [Giddens 2003].

The concept of "triple contingency" (Pete Strydom) has also been proposed, taking into account that the growing differentiation and organization of communication processes has led to the recognition of the epistemic authority of the public, which, in turn, necessitates

[2] Barabanov, O., Bespalov, A., Bordachev, T., Lukyanov, F., Sushentsov, A., & Timofeev, I. Doctor Chaos, or How to stop being afraid and love disorder. Report of the Valdai International Discussion Club, 2025. 28 p. (In Russian). Rertrieved November, 12, 2025, from https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/reports/doktor-khaos-ili-kak-perestat-boyatsya/

the conceptualization of a new level of contingency. Therefore, it is necessary to take the first step toward theoretically capturing the role of the public in communication societies through what could be called such a "triple contingency" [Strydom 1999]. In the 1990s, Gary Itzkowitz, drawing attention to the concept of contingency in social theory, wrote that it should stem from an analysis of the connection between the micro- and macro-worlds. Since two autonomous levels can arise both in contradiction and simultaneously, their interrelationship becomes contingent and unpredictable. In this regard, theorists should abandon the search for universal laws governing society and turn their attention to the interrelations of the autonomous development of micro- and macro-worlds, contrasting this dynamic with postmodern chaos [Itzkowitz 1996].

All approaches to examining contingency in political theory took into account the complex nature of political activity and were accompanied by the renewal and improvement of practical politics and political science through the development of situational analysis, the theory of conflict and risk, deliberative democracy, the event-based approach, the concept of tracing processes based on Bayesian logic, actor-network theory with the precautionary principle, etc.

In this century, with the rise of various dangers and the development of uncertainty, the concept of contingency has come to be interpreted more radically, considering contingency not simply as one factor in political activity, but ascribing it a more radical significance. This radicalism is associated with another ontological turn in political knowledge and finds expression in the intellectual movement of speculative realism (Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and others). It should also be noted that in management theory, a shift is being observed from an epistemological understanding of the connection between contingency and crisis to its ontology: "Thinking about contingency as an expression of indeterminacy asks us to see the world in a specific way. Through an ontological lens, this reality entails that we have free will: the ability to make choices intentionally, unbridled from determining conditions such as history, birth, fate, or scientific laws" [Hollis, Ekengren 2025: 3]. In contrast to previous approaches to considering contingency in general on the basis of probabilistic thinking, the current approach includes the justification of a number of provisions directed against the principle of determinism and the causal determination of events arising in politics.

In its radical form, *contingency is opposed to necessity*: everything could have been different. This meaning, with a high level of striving for logical expressiveness, was presented by Quentin Meillassoux. Justifying an objective view of reality as it is without reference to the universality of statements about it (against so-

called “correlationism”), along with a critique of the principle of sufficient reason, he asserts the absolute necessity of the contingency of any thing: “The unequivocal relinquishment of the principle of reason requires us to insist that both the destruction and the perpetual preservation of a determinate entity must equally be able to occur for no reason. Contingency is such that anything might happen, even nothing at all, so that what is, remains as it is” [Meillassoux 2008: 63]. At the same time, Meillassoux believed that what happens should not be contradictory, but absolutely and necessarily contingent. The proof of this is highly speculative and is directed against the metaphysical-religious search for a primary cause of everything and fideistic fanaticism with its assertion of the primacy of the truth of faith over the truth of thought. This semantic paradigm of contingency reveals a curious aspect of the formation of responsible human behavior in a contingent system: not a Kantian obligation, but a non-causal acceptance of responsibility [Kim 2018].

The second aspect of contingency aims to define its meaning in *contrast to chance*. Speaking about the term *contingens* (Latin), G.G. Maiorov emphasized that this adjective is sometimes translated into Russian as “random”, but “randomness” in Russian is often associated with unpredictability and spontaneity, which are absent in the Latin word [Mayorov 2001: 44]. Contingency is embedded in the system in such a way that it is characterized by a certain positiveness that stems from its relationship with the real system, on the one hand, as its ability to be or not to be, on the other hand, as its necessity for the system itself. Yuk Hui defined the functionality of the contingent for the life of systems not as an error or noise, but as a targeted plan of the system to limit the so-called “negentropy” [Hui 2020: 32–33].

Let us note a number of ideas that comprise *the conceptual structure of radical contingency.* First, the necessity of the existence of contingent events for a system, indicating that they arise as developmental capacities. Second, the consistency of events — that is, an event cannot be what it is not, and its life is subject to possible change under the conditions of contingency. Third, contingency denotes the latency of an event; its occurrence is not phenomenal and does not characterize its potentiality or probability; in this regard, a contingent event is unpredictable in its consequences. Fourth, a contingent event is absolutely irreversible, both in the sense that it cannot be repeated and in the sense that, once it occurs, it cannot be undone. Fifth, the influence of an observer of an event, if there is one, is as real a fact as the observed event itself.

This understanding of the concept of contingency generates a type of knowledge conditioned by the principle of factuality, which states that current events are indeterminate: what could not have happened, happened. Considered in a political

context, this understanding of things and events generates a number of interesting positive implications, but also dangerous challenges to the political. Among the positive aspects, in our opinion, we note the functionality of the contingent in the system, the possibility of a non-fatalistic attitude to social development, and also the actualization of politics and science. Among the dangers of depoliticization, we emphasize the objectification of political reality, the lack of distinction between objectivism and objectivity, the deprivation of politics of its value-orientation and communication function, as well as the noted trend of increasing positivism in political science. In the theory and practice of public administration, the challenge of contingency has been expressed in the use of the concept of modular public governance.

Modular Public Governance for Contingent Systems

The idea of modular public governance originates from businesses, which, responding to the challenges of uncertainty, built their production and management systems on the basis of various modules. Richard Langlois emphasizes that the idea of using modularity is not new and appeared in the literature on technological design in the 1960s, and since the 1990s, modularity has become increasingly important due to the increased complexity of modern technologies [Langlois 2002: 19–20]. In business management, the modular principle of management found its direct expression in the last quarter of the last century. In an analysis of the development of this model in management, it is noted that "modularity is an attribute of a complex system that advocates designing structures based on minimizing interdependence between modules and maximizing interdependence within them that can be mixed and matched in order to obtain new configurations without loss of the system's functionality or performance" [Campagnolo, Camuffo 2010: 259]. The degree of modularity (a) is contingent upon the type of system being analyzed, (b) may vary depending on the unit of analysis, (c) must be measured on a continuum from integral to modular structure, and (d) may change over time, since modularity is also a design principle [Campagnolo, Camuffo 2010: 260].

Niko Waesche describes several principles and approaches to modular business management based on the component business model and its application in the public sphere [Waesche 2008]. This approach is not based on processes or departments. Instead, it focuses on corporate activities and assets. It is a methodology that breaks down all elements of work performed by a company into "services" and then identifies the assets necessary

to successfully deliver the service. Each of these groups of assets is called a component, and its service can be provided internally or externally. Combining assets into a single common component allows a single module to serve the entire company, thereby eliminating redundant work and infrastructure. The key challenge here for the component business model is determining which components truly differentiate the company, which are auxiliary, and which are generic. Each component has varying degrees of importance to the company's strategy and operations. There are strategic, control, and execution components. In a contingent environment, a company deploys the component, or module, that contributes to solving a complex problem and contributes to the company's sustainability. Also important is the identification of areas of activity that relate to the external environment and form components for interaction with it or the outsourcing of tasks to it. In general, modular governance is a principle for constructing a governance system according to which the system consists of relatively autonomous but interconnected "modules" or components. Each module performs separate functions but can be flexibly integrated, recombined, or adapted without restructuring the entire system. With regard to public administration, Waesche notes the diverse possibilities of modularization, including not only modularity in the internal structure of governments but also their interactions with business and the non-profit sector: "Government, similarly faced by threats of commoditisation and competition as well as rising costs, can adopt a strategy of modularisation as well. Modularisation allows governments to bundle their skills, access external know-how found in NGOs, commercial companies and even other governments, interact more deeply with their citizens and lower their costs. As a result of these strategies of decomposition, the worlds of government and enterprise will come together and form new combinations" [Waesche 2008: 52].

The proliferation of governance tasks in the public sphere, the increasing role of the state in the development of market economic systems, the modern digitalization of public governance, and the focus of public policy on development in complex contingent conditions facilitate the implementation of this model in practice. A modular governance structure provides a powerful foundation for responding to unforeseen circumstances, as it allows public governance systems to be flexible, scalable, and resilient. Dividing the governance system into autonomous yet interconnected components allows for a faster and more accurate response to unforeseen events without paralyzing the entire system.

Developers of modular interorganizational and network governance emphasize the difficulties of using a modular approach to social systems. First, defining social system modules by tasks or areas of activity is difficult due to the complex integrity of systems. Second, defining an interface, or a set of standard norms that will define the boundaries of interaction between modules to maintain system synergy, is difficult. Third, the cybernetic approach to modules as "black boxes" is limited, given that modular agents are only formally limited to the module's scope. In this regard, the modularity of network governance requires further development and empirical testing [Jha et al. 2021: 6–7]. Modular governance helps to increase the adaptability of social systems, strengthen their resilience, create an effective mechanism for managing complexity, and stimulate innovation for both public governance and contingent social systems.

And finally, the following key principles of modular management can be outlined here:

Decomposition. Complex administrative tasks and processes are broken down into distinct modules with clearly defined boundaries, formalizing or standardizing their analysis and solutions.

Autonomy. Each module has independent decision-making capabilities, allowing it to function independently, especially in complex, unforeseen circumstances.

Interoperability. Modules are designed to interact efficiently through standardized interfaces or communication protocols. The modular structure facilitates dependency control in complex socioeconomic systems by isolating tasks and establishing clear communication channels.

Recombinability. Modules can be added, removed, or rearranged without compromising the system's integrity. In unforeseen situations, modular governance allows for the rapid replacement or correction of damaged modules while maintaining the functionality of the overall structure. By decentralizing risk, a failure in one module does not lead to the failure of the entire system.

Scalability and flexibility. The governance system is capable of adapting to changes by modifying distinct modules based on needs and evolving situations. Distinct modules can stimulate the development of new methods and approaches, and successful solutions can be easily integrated or scaled within the system.

Let us look at some examples of the use of a modular approach in public governance. Russia has a Unified State Digital Platform (GOSTECH), which unites various ministries and regional administrations through compatible digital services. It operates as a modular system, in which individual agencies retain autonomy in their IT systems

(modules), but use common data standards and interfaces. Sectoral government agencies (e.g., Rosatom for nuclear energy, Roscosmos for space programmes) are also noted, operating on the basis of specialized, autonomous powers.

In Singapore, for example, city government is divided into specialized agencies responsible for various areas (transportation, environment, health, housing, etc.); they operate as modules with clear mandates but are interconnected through integrated data platforms. In the United States, the emergency management system is modular; local governments, federal agencies, and non-governmental organizations in this area function as separate modules; each module can operate independently but interacts during crises through standardized protocols. Department of Defense programmes utilize the design principles of the Modular Open Systems Approach (MOSA) and open business practices [Zimmerman et al. 2018]. The use of a modular governance logic in security provision in East Jerusalem is also noted. Within this model, urban security is broken down into various modules — security actors, actions, technologies, and practices — that can be recruited, deployed, instructed, intertwined, separated, and recalled at will. Three features of modular urban security provision are highlighted: the heterogeneity of its public and private components, the development of reserve capacities, and the differentiated multifaceted nature of its actions and practices [Volinz 2018].

Conclusion

Public governance or administration is currently developing very dynamically. It is forced to respond directly and quickly to changing realities. At one time, it absorbed the neoliberal shift toward the dominance of market and managerial tendencies, shaping its structure as a New Public Management. The networked society of horizontal relations exposed the narrowness of the economic approach to public governance and reinstated the issue of fairness, retaining efficiency as the economic criterion for assessing state performance. Networked public governance emphasized the interaction between the state, business, and citizens, placing this at the core of public governance. Clearly, public governance was not limited to these two approaches, as demonstrated in the article.

The increasing complexity of reality required not only a multitude of approaches but also interdisciplinarity. In the context of developing bifurcation processes associated with uncertainty and randomness, public governance required a range of new mechanisms and processes to integrate the objectives of sustainable development with social and

managerial innovation. In this regard, the concept of contingency acquired a categorical meaning and demanded an ontological, not merely epistemic, understanding. Public governance began to be viewed through the prism of contingent social systems and was expressed in a number of new models of public administration — crisis, prototypical, modular, and robust. It is also evident that public governance and policy practice are beginning to utilize approaches, institutions, mechanisms, and assessments associated with these models, both directly and intuitively. Apparently, it will be promising not only to analyze these trends within the framework of political and administrative complexes, but to include in their consideration a broader range of governance issues related to social and political-technical systems.

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