

11.941 Spring 2005: Disaster, Vulnerability and Resilience

Reaction Paper for week 10 (4/25/2005) Nao Omata

*1) In Brunner's opinion what is or are the problem(s) with governance?*

As current problems in governance, Brunner points out “gridlock”, “demosclerosis” and “disconnect”. Gridlock, the most common in the US government, refers to governments’ inability to act on major national issues such as health care reform. Demosclerosis means that government loses its capacity to experiment and so becomes more prone to failure. This symptom is reflected as the postwar government’s progressive loss of the ability to adapt. In the US government structure, disconnect can be defined as the growing separation of the Washington political community from the rest of the country. This disconnect can also create a consequence and a cause of other problems. The structural roots of these problems can be attributed to the separation of powers in the constitutional formula and in the proliferation of interests organized in and around federal bureaucracies over the past century.

*2) What in Brunner's opinion are the current trends with respect to governance?*

One of the current trends is the continuous division of public work, resulting in exponential growth in the number of agencies of the federal government. According to Brunner, in almost every presidential term, the number of federal agencies created is greater than those abandoned. The other trend is the proliferation of interest groups in the civic sector. As a consequence of these trends, the structure of national governance is an increasingly fragmented and dysfunctional. In addition, the proliferation multiplies the number of contacts and complicates the mutual understanding, making the cooperation more difficult with substantive and procedural constraints.

*3) What in Brunner's opinion should our goal be with respect to governance?*

Brunner finds the potential in collaborative community-based initiative. According to him, collaborative efforts often break gridlock and contribute to move beyond a paralyzing stalemate, and the attention on successful collaborative works may encourage local-based initiatives in other communities facing similar problems and frustrations in natural resource policy. Not only limited to natural resource issues, community-based initiative have also succeeded in integrating the different interests of small communities into consensus on policies that advance the common interest in other policy areas as well.

*4) Do these themes resonate with you? If so, how? If not, why?*

Yes, I agree with him on the use of community-based initiative. Government agencies are often constrained to advocate solutions that conform to the organizational established mandate and procedures. I wonder to what extent solutions that come from these agencies which are remote from issues and caught up in formal administrative procedures can make a practical solution to a local issue. In contrast, participants in a community-based approach are relatively free to seek creative, integrative solutions and to proceed in face-to-face situations with fewer constraints on procedures. I have read many cases, like community-based natural disaster prevention, illustrating how local people with their experience and knowledge can contribute to solve problems they face more effectively and efficiently than government agencies. However, supporting this idea should not lead to make light of government agencies. As mentioned in the article, the effects of a community-based initiative are dependent on the support of government agencies and interest groups. The important thing is to incorporate and cooperate with established structures of governance to complement each other, which may produce more creative consequences.