

MATURATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT: LESSONS FROM THE ANGLO-SAXON, LATIN AND SCANDINAVIAN POLITICAL TRADITIONS (*)

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PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POWER

For decades, public administration has been a discipline in pursuit of the most fashionable theory available. This is explainable for a discipline that has been unable to grow up. One important point has escaped most analysis on this regard. If public administration craves being fashionable, this itself is clear evidence of the need for strong roots. But are strong roots available and where? The search for them exclusively among management techniques or abstract theories has been a common mistake. It is our position that public administration's roots are also embedded in each country's political culture or overall cultural tradition.

National cultural traditions vary greatly, and it is clear that the development of public administration has followed different patterns in diverse contexts. We propose to analyze and compare three different traditions of public administration: the Anglo-Saxon, the Latin and the Scandinavian. Obviously these categories are broader in scope than individual nations. Hence they ignore many details of administrative difference among separate countries that fall within each tradition. Yet, we maintain, such overarching, supranational ideal-types can be useful. They give us the ability to highlight the central question we seek to address here. This is how multiple traditions, in different ways, all fail to resolve the most important issue of public administration in a democratic society: the dispensation and delimitation of political power.

The argument of this essay is that without understanding and facing the issue of the amount of power that bureaucrats and politicians possess in any society, public administration will continue to be handicapped in understanding the dynamics of the real world—and hence achieve its full maturity. Not even the current international fashion of public administration, the New Public Management, can resolve this issue, for it makes the grave mistake of denying outright political and organizational power as a control factor. Moreover, NPM proposes the same reform recipe for public administration in all cultural contexts. This oversimplified universalizing is, perhaps, one of its gravest mistakes.

THE ANGLO-SAXON TRADITION

The Anglo-Saxon tradition of public administration has developed itself through *the denial of power*. Its predisposition is to ignore politics and embrace neutrality and professional administration as the main instruments to control bureaucracies and avoid capture. [1] In the Anglo-Saxon tradition it is believed that accountability must be kept strong and that efficiency is the true mission of public administration. [2] In other words, efficient and neutral bureaucracies will lead to development and prosperity in society. [3] Still, bureaucracies are dangerous if power is given to them; hence society must be in control of them at all times. After all, even neutral bureaucracies might misuse power. This makes it necessary to take power from bureaucracies and forbid them to use it. How? By conceiving

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of bureaucracies as simply instrumental implementers of political and social will. Bureaucrats merely execute, as “servants” of the “public.” [4] According to this worldview, whenever politics enters public administration, problems arise and efficiency is distorted.

THE LATIN TRADITION

The Latin model is quite different. In this tradition, *power is omnipresent*. Politicians and bureaucrats are assumed to be clearly powerful. [5] They are explicitly entitled by society to exercise power, to distribute it, and to control uncertainty by means of it. [7] At the same time, they are responsible for its proper use; in the Latin context, this means creating the conditions for development. [7]

Yet any power arrangements should be such that society is allowed to grow up. [8] The main concern in this regard is how governmental leaders can be sufficiently close to powerful private groups that they can deal sensibly with society’s needs without becoming wholly beholden to those groups. Hence the Latin model faces the issue of power directly and assumes that politics, economics and administration are well intertwined. [9]

Nonetheless the problem of controlling power remains in this ideal type. Assuming such control is possible, it is most likely achieved through strong linkages among politicians, bureaucrats, and key civil society figures. [10] The ensuing political discussion among them must clearly endorse the values of different parts of society. At the same time, bureaucracies need to be able to accept the political plurality that exists and to realize the consequences of public action upon different social groups. [11] In other words, public administration requires political sensibility because efficiency cannot be the only way to measure success; political and social stability within a plural and conflictive society are also very important, often more so than the efficiency agenda. [12]

THE SCANDINAVIAN TRADITION

The Scandinavian model of public administration emphasizes a strong belief and confidence in *the capacities of collectivities to administer themselves*. [13] Power exists and it is a necessary feature of social relationships, but it is expected that individuals and groups endorse the general value of collectivity, a value that endorses the general well being of society and makes it the centerpiece of their behavior. Scandinavian countries have a long tradition of a homogeneous and parliament-based political leadership living in peaceful coexistence with all factions. Contrary to the Anglo-Saxon model which is based on distrust among self-interested individuals, the Scandinavian model regards trust as its most important value. [14]

In this situation, control is needed not because it is the nature of individuals is to be egoistic, but because persons need time to learn, and to become aware of collective needs. Unlike the Latin model, the power of Scandinavian elites is not something “outside” societal control. While in the Latin tradition power and its use by elites is a solid reality, requiring continuous vigilance in behalf of broader societal interests, in the Scandinavian tradition elites are an integral part of society—and as such, they are supposed to be well aware of collective needs. Hence public administration in Scandinavia is basically a structure formed by the aggregation of needs and a “black box” that produces results attuned to “the general will”. [15] Public administration must enhance the responsibility of individuals to participate in the general welfare, and its ongoing preoccupation is to yield equitable and collectively just governmental results. Power, thus, is not a problem; it is an instrument for responsible collective action.

ANALYSIS OF THE THREE MODELS

An assessment of these three very different models shows that none of them is completely right or entirely wrong. But their pros and cons are quite different.

For its part, the Anglo-Saxon model is *unrealistic in its apolitical view of government management*. It does not acknowledge that intra- and inter-organizational power struggles are common in every public organization and institution. Instead, the model condemns such struggles as pathological—a sickness that must be replaced by a “neutral,” “aseptic” yet effectively controlled bureaucracy. [16] Hence the model emphasizes creating a strong set of instruments for controlling bureaucracies. Building institutions effective enough to supervise and control them is a high priority. [17] As a consequence the Anglo-Saxon model has been very effective in creating controls, checks, and balances over bureaucratic management. The important cost that Anglo-Saxon societies have had to pay for their approach is that even though it is clear that public administration must ultimately deal with politics and power, it also needs to keep this side of its reality hidden from view. [18]

The Latin model is *more realistic yet at the same time more cynical*. In it, society distrusts, admires, and envies the power of government and politicians, all at the same time. The role of government is clear and important and bureaucrats are an integral part of the political system, and nobody denies this. However, given their power, the bureaucrats must be responsible for development. But since development never advances far enough to achieve satisfactory results, a vicious cycle is generated whereby more power is always needed in order to achieve more development. This makes it even more difficult to control bureaucracy. The Latin model has thus been less effective than the Anglo-Saxon in controlling bureaucracies and limiting their power. In fact the clear vision of the Latin model regarding consensus within plural societies has actually promoted the formation of huge and powerful bureaucracies, unaware of their responsibility to use public resources efficiently and to accept control and accountability. [19] Conflict in this tradition is ubiquitous and reining in powerful bureaucracies always difficult.

The Scandinavian model, by contrast, is *based on neither innocence nor cynicism, but trust*. The humanistic side of this model is undeniable. At the same time it also hides the reality of different scales of power among groups within society. In addition, it tends to underestimate the capacity of individuals to pursue their own interest, obscured from view by the received rhetoric of a collective good. [20] Clearly, equity and justice are not universal categories, but social constructs that need to be discussed and rebuilt as necessary. Competing interests must continually negotiate. Thus Scandinavian public administration always faces policy dilemmas despite an overall allegiance to mutual trust and collective values. [21] Nonetheless whenever particularistic interests operate beyond the limited framework of the common good, the Scandinavian tradition tends to hide the inefficiencies and self-serving behind the façade of general discourse rather than recognize openly that individuals and groups are seeking private rewards. [22]

As can be seen, there are advantages and disadvantages in each model, and the capacity to achieve more maturation for public administration requires a tolerance over where the discipline stands in varied specific situations across different countries and cultures. Each national example of public administration must come to grips with its own tradition’s political framework of power and the imperative of societal control over that power. At the same time, all countries need capable governments and politicians and, at the same time, the need to make them accountable, not only regarding processes and outcomes, but also with respect to justice and equity. However, none of these three models seems to provide a clear route to this objective.

THE NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

To make things worse for the field, the tidal wave of New Public Management washing ashore on all seacoasts of the world seems to bypass this question entirely. The NPM has a one-type solution for every reality, rejecting as unnecessary consideration of public administration’s varied forms of democratic management in different societies. [23] We now develop this point further in connection with each of the three models.

With respect to the Anglo-Saxon model, *the NPM proposes more of the same*—more isolation of public managers from the “pernicious” influence of politics. What is claimed as necessary is more neutral bureaucracies, controlled through a neutral judge, i.e. the market or any institutional

substitution therefor. [25] NPM again hides the political nature of public administration, avoiding the issue of power and the responsibility of public bureaucracies for maintaining order and equity in society, as well as the responsibility of politicians to direct the action of bureaucracies.

In the Latin model, *NPM tends to generate even more cynicism*. It is seen as another strategy used by powerful groups to impose certain agendas over society, utilizing for this purpose a technical, economics-oriented discourse. [25] Market solutions from the standpoint of the Latin model are regarded as a way of manipulating power in modern, technocratic garb. The call for more neutrality is seen as a strategy mounted by experts to give themselves decision-making power at the expense of common citizens. Society would have a role under this model, but centered on the complaints of clients rather than the power games by which politicians and bureaucrats avoid control from society. [26] The Latin literature on NPM has made it clear that when its true nature is exposed clear winners and losers emerge, bringing the power issue more alive than ever. [27]

Finally, in the Scandinavian model, *NPM ideas are regarded as both pessimistic about human intentions and naïve about human motivations*. The former is yielded by NPM assumptions that bureaucrats and politicians are basically selfish actors, the latter by the NPM dream that officials will ardently respond to performance or outcome measures. From the Scandinavian viewpoint, the prescribed self-regarding behavior will lead to disregarding concerns for justice and equity in favor of efficiency while the performance orientation will downgrade the ideal of collective will. [28]

CONCLUSIONS

These brief ideas are intended to make it clear that there is no perfect model, nor any clear solution. Public administration needs to mature. But this is not because it is failing to accept the latest fashion. The path to maturity, rather, lies in pursuit of best ways to work out, in the context of each system's tradition, the great dilemma between needed bureaucratic action in behalf of development, order, justice and equity on the one hand and satisfactory control, supervision, and accountability of that action on the other. Hence efficiency is not a neutral word; political debate is still necessary.

Public administration will grow the day it accepts the reality that we are dealing with power, that it needs to deal with individuals and groups within a society in need, sometimes, of collective and communitarian solutions. Power distributes welfare, resources, rules, opportunities, and possibilities. Public administration is about exactly that. In a plural society these issues mean conflict and struggle, because they involve political and ideological positions. Public administration will grow when it understands that professionalism is fundamental but that neutrality does not mean zero responsibility and allowing the market to yield the "correct" answer or the "right," "best," or "optimal" policy. Professional public administration means the ability to be publicly controlled, to be able to explain in a dialogic structure how decisions are made, and be responsible for that process, creating the condition for liberal discussion with outside groups and within government itself.

To sum up, ideas stemming from the Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and Scandinavian traditions are important in order to understand what is needed to allow public administration to "grow up." These models can and should learn from each other. At the same time, to keep worshiping neutrality as zero politics means a less dialogic government, and a less responsible and capable public administration. It means a government with less capacity to engage in discourse over the appropriate terms of justice and equity interwoven with concerns for efficiency. The only way to deal with the reality of power is to open the dialogue: nobody can show that one has the truth, the superior solution over other options or ways of life. [29] Dialogue stimulated by the cross-fertilization of cultural models of public administration might produce new ways to deal with old problems, allowing the discipline to mature. In any case, the discipline of public administration is alive with cultural models that make us think. In this sense, the future seems bright, multicultural and open.

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