

## Enthralled with Modernity: The Historical Context of Knowledge and Theory Development in Public Administration

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*What impact has the "culture of modernity" had on the field of public administration? Guy B. Adams contends that the American cultural preoccupation with modernity has shaped the study of public administration into an ahistorical and atemporal field that stresses technical rationality and has limited capacity to address critical questions facing society. This approach to public administration puts its emphasis on professionalism and the "scientific" and "rigorous" study of the field. Adams calls for greater attention to history that produces a "genuinely open inquiry" in the field.*

*A Century of Progress*

title of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair

*Science Explores, Technology Executes, Mankind Conforms*

motto of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair

Much has been written in the last decade on knowledge and theory development in the field of American public administration (White, 1986; Ventriss, 1987; Hummel, 1991; Box, 1992; McCurdy and Cleary, 1984; Perry and Kraemer, 1986). Although beneficial, none of these analyses has taken a self-consciously historical approach to questions of knowledge and theory development in public administration.<sup>1</sup> This article seeks to place this discourse in its historical context.

The most important aspect of the historical context is the culture at large within which American public administration is practiced, researched, and taught. Today, the culture at large may be characterized as one of modernity (Turner, 1990; also Bernstein, 1985; Bauman, 1989; and Rabinbach, 1990). Modernity is the culmination of a centuries-long process of modernization. Intellectual strands of modernity reach back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but as the defining characteristic of our own culture, modernity coalesced only within the past century. Modernity describes a social, political, and economic world increasingly characterized by "...secularization, the universalistic claims of instrumental rationality, the differentiation of the various spheres of the life-world, the bureaucratization of economic, political and military practices, and the growing monetarization of values" (Turner, 1990, p. 6).

Our culture of modernity has as one of its chief constituents technical rationality (Barrett, 1979). Technical rationality is a way of thinking and living that emphasizes the scientific-analytical mindset and the belief in technological progress. In the United States, the cornerstone of technical rationality was laid down just before and during the Progressive Era (1896-1920). A confluence of two streams occurred during this period which unleashed a flood of ideas and practices into the social and political world (Wiebe, 1967, pp. 145-163). One of the two streams emerged from the then recent history of epistemology in Western culture. This first stream was the scientific-analytical mindset that was the legacy of seventeenth century Enlightenment thinking. The second stream was the product of the Great Transformation of the nineteenth century and comprised the technological progress characteristic of this period of industrialization with its unparalleled succession of technological developments.

In this article, I examine the state of historical scholarship within the field of public administration. The development of technical rationality, along with professionalism and the emphasis on science and efficiency are closely examined. I suggest that the belief system of technical rationality accounts for the persistent atemporality of social science in general and public administration in particular. The implications of atemporality for knowledge and theory development in public administration are discussed. In spite of considerable historical research, the field of public administration continues to echo themes of technical rationality in repeated calls for professionalism and for more "rigorous" and "scientific" research. The identity question of public administration is linked to the culture at large as comprising both a political dimension and an epistemological dimension. Given the historical context of modernity, a context of technical rationality, the prospects for knowledge and theory development in public administration are discussed, and ways in which historical analysis can offer a renewed, critical perspective on the field of public administration are suggested.

## Historical Scholarship in Public Administration

Attention to the historical roots of public administration has ebbed and flowed in the last half century. Dwight Waldo's *The Administrative State* (1948) is clearly the seminal work on the larger cultural context of American public administration. Well into the post-World War II era, those looking to public administration history found little enough beyond Leonard White's four volumes (1948, 1951, 1954, 1958) on the development of public administration institutions, although Paul Van Riper's *History of the U.S. Civil Service* (1958) appeared in the same year as White's last volume. The decade of the 1960s saw the publication of Frederick Mosher's *Democracy and the Public Service* (1968), along with two historical studies of the civil service (Hoogenboom, 1961; Aronson, 1964). The benchmarks of the 1970s were David Rosenbloom's *Federal Service and the Constitution* (1971) and a pair of articles, one by Lynton Caldwell (1976) and the other by Barry Karl (1976), in the bicentennial issue of *Public Administration Review*. An important book by Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State* (1982), appeared early in the next decade but received spotty attention in the public administration literature. Later in the same decade, Ralph Chandler's *A Centennial History of the American Administrative State* (1987) represented a significant contribution.

Some of the more recent research on the historical development of public administration has focused on the Founding Period, which is one of the key periods for the understanding of contemporary public administration.<sup>2</sup> John Rohr's (1986 and 1985) work on the constitutional basis for public administration is a prominent example. Some have appropriately focused attention on the writing of Alexander Hamilton, who stands out among the founders for his attention to matters related to public administration, and certainly for his relevance to the later development of public administration (Green, 1990; Caldwell, 1990).

The tension between democracy and administration, both as they were construed in the American founding and as their meaning has altered through time, has powerfully affected how the public sector in the United States has evolved. A recent article by Laurence O'Toole, Jr. (1987) illustrates how this tension manifested in the doctrines of separation of powers beginning with the Founding Period and later in the Progressive Era in the politics-administration dichotomy. The linkage between the Founding Period and the Progressive Era has also been emphasized in two pieces by Jeffrey Sedgwick (1987 and 1986), which focuses on similarities in the theories of administration between the founders and Woodrow Wilson. Both of these articles show clearly the relevance of these historical periods for contemporary thought in public administration. The focus here on modernity suggests further discussion of the period just before and during the Progressive Era.

## The Progressive Era: A Second Hamiltonian System

The dominant image of the Progressive Era, the period from 1896-1920, is perhaps still that of the age of reform (Hofstadter, 1955). The Progressive Era was a time of popular outrage against the deprivations of big business, social ills, and exploitation of all kinds. The result was a wave of progressive reform: child labor legislation, minimum wage, women's suffrage, direct election of senators, income tax, trust busting, as well as eliminating patronage, instituting clean government, and regulating industry. The image obscures as much as it reveals.

The Progressive Era saw Jeffersonian language emphasizing a laissez-faire, limited government used by conservative businessmen (especially small businessmen) (Weinstein, 1968). The reformers, on the other hand, used Hamiltonian language, promoting an active, assertive national government in the service of not just economic aims but social principles as well. The Progressive aim was a Hamiltonian national government in the service of Jeffersonian ideals. In many instances, this was altered in practice to become a Hamiltonian national government with Jeffersonian rhetoric in the service of commercial interests. Gabriel Kolko (1963) aptly called this age of "reform," the "triumph of conservatism."

Clientele agencies such as the Department of Commerce, which was formed in 1913, straightforwardly served their "client's" interests. Regulatory agencies, created in response to public outcry, often became, to all intents and purposes, client agencies of the regulated (M. Nelson, 1982).

## The Progressive Era Legacy for Public Administration

Considerable attention has been paid in the public administration literature to the Progressive Era (Caiden, 1984; Chandler, 1987; Karl, 1987; W. Nelson, 1982; Stever, 1988; Stillman, 1991; and Ventriess, 1987). This period of time is widely acknowledged as the beginning of public administration as a field of study, with Woodrow Wilson, a prominent Progressive himself, almost universally cited as the founder of modern public administration (Walker, 1990; Link, 1964). However, the 20-year period before the Progressive Era

(1877-1896), during which the civil service reformers were active, must also be included as central to the development of modern public administration (Rosenbloom, 1971). The civil service reformers set the stage for important developments which came together later in the Progressive Era. Two of the strongest historical analyses (Wiebe, 1967; Skowronek, 1982) use 1877 as a beginning date and 1920 as an end date. There is no inclination here to conflate long term historical trends definitively within the 20-year bounds of the Progressive Era. The end of the Reconstruction period in 1877 and the close of World War I in 1920 represent about as clearly defined boundaries as one can achieve with historical analysis.

With some noteworthy exceptions, however, most contemporary public administration literature leaps immediately from Wilson's time to the New Deal era of the 1930s, or to the World War II period, when, it is thought, institutions and practices that most closely resemble the present ones came together (Henry, 1990). Most often in the contemporary literature, a ritual mention of Wilson is followed by a jump to the present time with no historical analysis at all.

The legacy of the period before and during the Progressive Era for contemporary thought in public administration is considerably greater than is generally acknowledged. Laurence O'Toole, Jr., (1984) persuasively argues that basic reform principles and practices endemic in the public administration literature date from the Progressive days. The "new public administration," he states, rather than springing *de novo* from the ethos of the 1960s, shares the same ideology of reform that was elaborated at the turn of the century. I contend that the fundamental trajectory of knowledge and theory development in public administration dates from the period 1877-1920 as well.

The broad structural and ideological outlines of the modern welfare liberal state came together in the Progressive Era, rather than much later as the conventional wisdom has it. As Weinstein (1968) puts it, "...the political ideology now dominant in the United States, and the broad programmatic outlines of the liberal state (known by such names as the New Freedom, the New Deal, the New Frontier and the Great Society) were worked out and, in part, tried out by the end of the First World War" (p. ix). A similar argument, made in part by Skowronek (1982; also Lustig, 1982) holds for public administration. The basic parameters and trajectory of the field became visible during the period just before and during the Progressive Era, and the evolution of public administration since that time, both in practice and in thought, has not deviated significantly from that framework.

Skowronek analyzes the reconstitution of the federal government during this period, reaching back to the end of reconstruction in 1877 for the beginnings of this process (see Higgs, 1987). This transformation began as patchwork efforts to repair first one area and then another, often in response to the political pressure brought to bear by one or another socially powerful group. These efforts often went awry (M. Nelson, 1982). After the watershed presidential election contest of 1896 between Bryan and McKinley, however, a more

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systematic reconstruction was undertaken. Thus, the federal government, according to Skowronek, was reconstructed during the Progressive Era to serve new goals and interests that were growing more and more important. The themes of this reconstruction were 1) the promise of a new democracy, 2) the embrace of corporate conservatism, 3) the lure of professionalism, and 4) the quest for administrative rationality (Skowronek, 1982, p. 18).

### **Technical Rationality and Professionalism**

The scientific-analytic mindset and technological progress which combined during the Progressive Era unleashed a powerful current of technical rationality and professionalism. Impressed by the tremendous achievements of science and technology in the physical world, the Progressives naturally wanted to apply them in the social and political world, to achieve science-like precision and objectivity in these spheres as well (Bendix, 1956; Graebner, 1987).

Technical rationality led irresistably to specialized, expert knowledge, the very life blood of the professional, and then to the proliferation of professional associations in the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries (Larson, 1977). Without the legitimacy derived from specialized knowledge, the professional could not have gained the social status nor the autonomy and control over the practice of the profession, which are the ultimate goals, even if sometimes unstated, of every profession. The compartmentalization of knowledge demanded by technical rationality also inevitably led to a contextless, or timeless, practice (eg., witness the lack of historical consciousness across the professions and disciplines.) The practice of a profession with little or no sense of context has precluded meaningful engagement with the larger ethical and political concerns of a society (Guerreiro-Ramos, 1981). That is to say, professionalism, fed and nurtured by technical rationality, led inexorably to a naked public square. This is the antipolitical dimension of modernity (Arendt, 1954).

It is important to note that the Progressives and the civil service reformers who preceded them were not uniform in their thought (Noble, 1958, 1970; White, 1957). Many differences in their thinking were interwoven in their debates. James Stever's (1990, 1986) work, for example, points to the tension between organic idealism and scientific pragmatism, which is visible both in Woodrow Wilson's (1887) writing and Mary Parker Follett's (1918) work, among others. Nonetheless, technical rationality, with its emphasis on the application of scientific method and procedure, won the day (Miller and O'Leary, 1989).

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Progressive Era as well. The development of professional associations of all kinds began in the mid-nineteenth century, at first more rapidly in England and then in the United States (Larson, 1977, p. 246). The characteristics of professions, which were fully visible around the turn of the century, include a professional association, a cognitive scientific base, institutionalized training (usually within higher education), licensing, work autonomy, colleague control, and a code of ethics (Larson, 1977, p. 208). Larson emphasizes the connection between the development of professionalism and the broader process of modernization, "...the advance of science and cognitive rationality and the progressive differentiation and rationalization of the division of labor in industrial societies" (p. xiii).

## **Modernity and Technical Rationality**

In the context of modernity, technical rationality is the convergence of the scientific-analytical mindset and technological progress (Turner, 1990). Beginning in the Progressive Era, it was applied to the social world and placed on the political agenda. Technical rationality is quite similar to "functional rationality" as described by Karl Mannheim (1940). Mannheim saw functional rationality as the logical organization of tasks into smaller units, originally in the interest of efficiency. Mannheim contrasted this with "substantive rationality," the ability to understand the purposeful nature of the whole system of which a particular task is a part. Technical rationality is also closely akin to the notion of "instrumental reason" discussed by Max Horkheimer (1947). Instrumental reason is the narrow application of human reason solely in the service of instrumental aims. Until the modern era, reason was conceived as a process incorporating ethical and normative concerns as well as the consideration of merely instrumental aims. In the public administration literature, similar points have been made by Alberto Guerreiro-Ramos (1981).

## **Recent History of Epistemology**

To understand how technical rationality became pervasive in the social and political world, and therefore in the public administration world as well, a brief look at the recent history of epistemology may help. By the time of the seventeenth century Enlightenment, science, as physical science, had emerged on the scene and had begun to exert a powerful influence. Epistemology became preoccupied with a quest for the stubborn and irreducible facts of existence. By the eighteenth century, the split between European and Anglo-American epistemology and philosophy had begun to be visi-

ble (this split has blurred considerably more recently). European philosophy may be represented as a series of attempts to resuscitate epistemology and metaphysics from the problems posed by science and its method of empiricism (Hegel, 1965; Heidegger, 1926; Nietzsche, 1956). Anglo-American philosophy, in contrast, may be represented as a series of attempts to reconstruct the concerns of philosophy according to the insights of science and its method (Whitehead and Russell, 1910; Wittgenstein, 1922). In our culture, the scientific-analytical mindset captured the way we thought, and the study of epistemology was largely reduced to commentaries on the history of science. The scientific-analytical mindset, then, represents one part of the confluence that occurred in the Progressive Era; technological developments comprised the other.

## **The Confluence of Science and Technology**

The astonishing succession of technological developments during the Great Transformation of the nineteenth century provided the physical, tangible embodiment of the sheer power of scientific thinking. What could have been more convincing? What could have been more plausible than to apply technical rationality to the social world in order to achieve science-like precision and objectivity? Frederick Taylor found a ready audience for the notion of scientific management during the Progressive Era (Noble, 1977; Merkle, 1980; Haber, 1964). Technical rationality became the vehicle of hope in the social and political world and created a wave that before World War II prompted new professionals, managers, behaviorists, social scientists, and industrial psychologists toward a world view in which human conflicts appeared as problems fit for engineering solutions (Bendix, 1956; Ellul, 1954). By the present time, as William Barrett stated (1979, p. 229):

it would be silly for anyone to announce that he is 'against' technology, whatever that might mean. We should have to be against ourselves in our present historical existence. We have now become dependent upon the increasingly complex and interlocking network of production for our barest necessities.

## **The Persistent Atemporality of Public Administration**

The tendency to ignore and downplay history and context is not unique to public administration. This impoverished historical consciousness is found across the professions and academic disciplines and, more broadly, is deeply embedded in the culture at large (Smith, 1990). That part of the belief system of modernity which finds expression in technical rationality is fundamentally atemporal. Borrowing its approach from turn-of-the-century physical science, social science remains dominantly committed to the notion of developing knowledge or certainty through atemporal causality (or the closest available approximation thereto) (Faulconer and Williams, 1985). Human action is to be explained through the development of general laws and models independent of

time and space. There is, in this view, no need to include history and culture in accounts of human behavior.

This somewhat bald and radical statement of method is only rarely the overt, stated methodological or epistemological perspective of current-day researchers in social science and in public administration (McCurdy and Cleary, 1984, p. 50). However, it remains deeply embedded in the culture at large. Although there may be impediments and some accommodations may be needed, the application of scientific method should yield up certain knowledge (or at least knowledge as certain as possible). This belief represents a root assumption of modernity within American culture and helps account for public administration's persistent atemporality, which logically entails a diminished place for historical analysis, an approach concerned fundamentally with time.

### **Diminished Historical Consciousness in Public Administration**

I do not wish to suggest that the scientific method was adopted within public administration at the turn of the century and little has changed since then. There have been large differences within the practice of research as to what "science" and "scientific method" have meant. What has remained constant is the scientific-analytic mindset, the attachment to application of scientific method, however defined, as the best way to knowledge by *most* researchers in the field. At the turn of the century, doing science meant in part the application of the new method of statistics.<sup>3</sup> Richard Ely (1982, p. 282) in his founding statement in 1886 for the American Economic Association called for the application of statistics, while William Allen (1907) exalted the role for statistics further:

At first glance there is hope in the far-reaching remedies suggested: universal education, referendum, manual training, proper home surroundings, opportunity for child play, wholesome recreation, civil service reform, woman suffrage, municipal ownership, Christian spirit, prohibition of the liquor traffic, doing good, electing good men to office, etc. But important as each remedy may be, we have abundant testimony that none is adequate of itself....There is one key—statistical method—which offers to trusteeship...a prompt record of work accomplished and of needs disclosed (pp. 11-13).

The emphasis on statistics was no accident. In the classical formulations of the seventeenth century enlightenment, science meant a grand explanation of some aspect of nature. By the Progressive Era, science came to mean the application of scientific method: "Science had become a procedure, or an orientation, rather than a body of results" (Wiebe, 1967, p. 147). For many progressives, this view toward science had its parallel with politics, which also came to be viewed increasingly as procedural. Woodrow Wilson and Charles Merriam are but two examples of progressives who saw a harmonious link between the proceduralism of science and that of politics (Van Riper, 1990; Rabin and Bowman, 1984; Karl, 1974).

Politics, especially in its democratic versions, also had to undergo considerable revision in order to be made compatible with this new emphasis on science and procedure. Herbert Croly's (1909) writing is particularly revealing of this resolution. The new requirements for professionalism, the demands for expertise, the growing calls for a politics/administration dichotomy, the adage that there is "no Republican way to build a road," all rendered the greater democratic involvement of people in politics more and more problematic (Hanson, 1985). This tension between a meaningful democratic politics on the one hand, and a professionalized, scientized, expert administration on the other, has commanded attention in the public administration literature since the turn of the century. It was central to Waldo's *The Administrative State* (1948), and indeed, to most of his later writing. It has been noted more recently by Barry Karl (1987), among others (see O'Toole, 1987; Caiden, 1984; Redford, 1969), and has a central place in the recurring and persistent discussion of the identity of public administration (Adams *et al.*, 1990).

### **Three Examples of Modernity in Public Administration**

One of the central tenets of modernity, along with technical rationality, is the notion of progress (see the motto at the beginning of this article), which suggests the first example. One influential version of public administration history views the development of the field as occurring through five successive stages (Henry, 1990). The period of primary focus in this article, the Progressive Era, is labelled the politics/administration dichotomy. This period was then superseded by the "principles of administration" in the 1930s, followed by public administration as political science and public administration as management in the 1950s, and, finally, the culmination since 1970 of "public administration as public administration." This progression is characterized by the increasing professionalism of public administration and by its increasing development of the characteristics of an academic discipline with a scientific base. In this version, public administration has a history, but its origins, less than 100 years ago, are outmoded and have been superseded.

The 1960s, which offer the second example, saw the development of an apparently significant force in the field, the so-called "new public administration" (Marini, 1971; Frederickson, 1980). Ironically, the new public administration writers, many of whom explicitly saw themselves as constructing an alternative to technical rationality, were at the same time following in line with one of modernity's other central tenets, the progressive development of knowledge (O'Toole, 1984). New public administration was seen as a clear break with the orthodoxy of mainstream public administration. However, as O'Toole so usefully points out, this "break with orthodoxy" was entirely compatible with the tenets of reformism as developed in the Progressive Era. According to O'Toole, the development of public administration may best be viewed "...not as successive efforts of apolitical experts to superimpose an artificial rationality on a pluralistic world, but as a continual, tension-filled struggle on the part of those who are deeply committed to some vision of democracy but who see the seeming inevitability of large-scale government bureaucracy" (p. 149). Even the new public administration, which saw itself as departing from technical rationality in its "antipositivist" stance, ironically remained

well within the confines of modernity. Perhaps more tellingly, the new public administration seems almost quaint from the perspective of two decades later, given the occurrence of recent, repeated calls for greater professionalism and for greater rigor in the application of scientific method in the field (McCurdy and Cleary, 1984; Perry and Kraemer, 1986).

A third example comes from the characterization of public administration offered by Orion White, Jr., and Cynthia McSwain (1990). They characterize contemporary society, as well as public administration, as dominated by what they call the "technicist episteme," roughly what I call here technical rationality. They see the technicist episteme as characteristic of modern public administration, which they date as beginning after World War II, and they contrast modern public administration with "traditional" public administration, which occurred during the 1930s and 1940s. While their analysis of contemporary public administration and its predicament is insightful and important, their historical analysis, I would argue, is flawed.

The central tenets which they ascribe to the technicist episteme did not emerge and develop after World War II, rather they emerged as the dominant (but not the monolithic) ideology from the Progressive experience at the turn of the century. This is not to deny the important differences with technical rationality (or in White's and McSwain's terminology, the technicist episteme) exhibited by the "traditionalists." Much like the later new public administrationists, the traditionalists in part attempted to think their way out of technical rationality. Most important among these differences expressed by the traditionalists were those beliefs which emphasized the political and social context and connectedness of public administration.

White and McSwain do not call for a return to "traditionalism" in public administration, rather they investigate how traditionalist ideas can be reconstructed in ways relevant to present conditions. This proposed reconstruction is anything but sentimental, relegating a reconstituted public administration to agency "enclaves." They see very clearly the predominance of technical rationality and the difficulties of thinking and acting our way out of its confines.

It is an ironic symptom of modernity that careful analyses such as White's and McSwain's do not locate accurately the crucial historical moment when modernity coalesced, and thus, misconstrue the ways in which we are enthralled with modernity. Ironically, even when theorists construe their efforts as a departure from modernity, like the new public administrationists, they find themselves still enmeshed in its framework. Most of the public administration literature, however, contains both less irony and less historical analysis. Modernity also has important implications for the persistent legitimacy question so often addressed in the field of public administration.

## **Modernity, Legitimacy, and Public Administration**

Although it is clear that sufficient literature exists within the field of public administration to justify at least one chapter on the historical development of public administration, only a handful of the scores of public administration text-

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books published since World War II have done so (e.g., Rosenbloom, 1989; Stillman, 1987). Virtually all such textbooks conclude, however, with a chapter on future prospects of the field, echoing modernity's theme of progress.

The recently published volume (Lynn and Wildavsky, 1990) on the "state of the discipline" of public administration has an initial section entitled "Professional History and Theory." Unfortunately, only one of five chapters in this section is explicitly historical in approach, and that chapter (Henry, 1990) begins its analysis in the 1930s. Two authors of chapters in this section, Dwight Waldo and John Rohr, have written extensively elsewhere on public administration history, but their entries in this section are not concerned significantly with historical analysis. One can only conclude that the "state of the discipline" includes little in the way of historical study.<sup>4</sup>

When public administration's historical development is mentioned, in virtually every case, Woodrow Wilson's (1887) essay, "The Study of Administration," is cited.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Van Riper (1983) has recently called its salience into serious question. He notes that Wilson's essay was not cited in the central publications of political science or public administration between 1890 and World War I, and that indeed, the article had little apparent influence until the 1950s.

Probably the next most cited historical figure in the development of public administration thought is the German sociologist Max Weber (Cuff, 1978; also, Weber, 1979). His work also had minimal impact in the field until the 1950s, remaining untranslated into English until the late 1940s. Moreover, the reading of Weber's work has been selective and often out of context.<sup>6</sup> In the public administration literature, the focus has been on what Weber wrote about bureaucratic organization, and especially that part of it concerned with the internal organization of bureaucracies. Weber, of course, was far less concerned with the process of rationalization as it impacted the internal workings of organizations than he was with the social implications of the process of rationalization. The former is both more consistent with modernity and far easier to treat ahistorically than the latter.

One of Weber's central themes was legitimacy, particularly legitimate authority. Clearly, as modernity was coalescing, Weber saw the increasing legitimacy of bureaucratic authority, based as it was on scientific procedure and professionalism. The issue of legitimacy has been an important one for public administration as well.

Recent discussions of legitimacy in public administration are not symptomatic of an ostensible transition to a postmodern era (Marshall and White, 1990); rather they are simply the latest versions of attempts to reconcile the tensions between democracy and administration endemic to a liberal state (Stillman, 1991). These tensions date from the American founding, but they are brought to the forefront and exacerbated by modernity and become more prominent during and after the Progressive Era. Waldo's *The Administrative State* (1948) is a thorough analysis of these tensions covering the first half of the twentieth century. Later versions raise and extend the same themes (O'Toole, 1987; Karl, 1987; Kass and Catron, 1990; Wamsley *et al.*, 1990).

### Professionalism and Scientific Rigor in Public Administration

The recent public administration literature includes prominently legitimation claims that call for increased professionalization and research-based expertise (McCurdy and Cleary, 1984; Perry and Kraemer, 1986; Houston and Delevan, 1990; Stallings and Ferris, 1988). These legitimation claims are in keeping with the themes of modernity and represent an orthodoxy in public administration that became fully visible in the Progressive Era and has continued, albeit with ebbs and flows, to the present.

The calls for increased professionalization are perhaps most prominently marked by the publication of two full symposia recently in the *Public Administration Quarterly* (Winter, 1985; Spring, 1986). While professionalism is most concerned with the *practice* of public administration, it is also of serious concern to academics in the field for reasons spelled out clearly in historical perspective by Larson (1977):

The unification of training and research in the modern university is a particularly significant development. As graduate and professional schools emerged at the top of the educational hierarchy, the professions acquired not only an institutional basis on which to develop and standardize knowledge and technologies; they also received in university training, a most powerful legitimation for their claims to cognitive and technical superiority and to social and economic benefits (p. 136).

Of course, public administration is still poorly organized as a profession by comparison with law or medicine, for example, and is unlikely, in the American context where government has consistently been viewed as little better than a necessary evil, to achieve the degree of professionalization to which many clearly aspire.

In the orthodox view, a well-organized discipline must have a scientific knowledge base. The calls for greater scientific rigor in public administration follow this credo which gained ascendancy during the Progressive Era. In spite of acknowledgment of other research traditions, such as the interpretive or critical (White, 1986), this literature judges public administration research according to the "...criteria that conventionally define careful systematic study in social science" (McCurdy and Cleary, 1984, p. 50). (The text cited in

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reference to this statement is by Kerlinger, [1964].) Later, McCurdy and Cleary assert, "If public administration is to be a mature field of study, we feel it must reach agreement on criteria of this nature" (p. 55). A 1986 article by Perry and Kraemer examines "How PAR Methodologies Measure Up Against Mainstream Social Research" (p. 216). Houston and Delevan (1990) assert that "Sound theory however is developed only through the testing and refinement of empirical propositions derived from theory" (p. 678). They find little evidence of such work in public administration and are troubled by this.

A recent piece by Gregory A. Daneke (1990) on knowledge and epistemology in public administration is more balanced in its treatment of other research traditions. He recognizes and accords legitimacy to the interpretive and critical research traditions, among others, while advocating an "advanced systems agenda." It is telling, however, that the article's title, "A Science of Administration?" echoes, except for the question mark, Luther Gulick's words of just over a half century ago (Gulick and Urwick, 1937).

There were alternative research traditions and a variety of versions of epistemology in the Progressive Era, as there were in the 1930s, and as there have been for the last quarter century. Nonetheless, the calls for increased professionalism and increased scientific rigor echo down through the decades of public administration history.

### The Implications of Modernity

Modernity has fostered technical rationality, which is part and parcel of the culture at large. The continuing impact of technical rationality on knowledge and theory development in public administration can perhaps be illuminated by a brief example from another literature (Adams and Ingersoll, 1990). Recently, much attention has been paid to the concept of *culture* as it applies to the study of organizations. However, culture has been utilized in the study of organizations in ways consistent, for the most part, with technical rationality (Barley, Meyer, and Gash, 1988). That is, rather than focus attention on culture as the larger context of meaning within which organizations are nested, the focus was quickly narrowed to individual organizations, as if each evolved its own largely idiosyncratic "culture" *de novo*. Very quickly, organizational "culture" became another *technique* for the manager's tool bag, and many companies and agencies set out to reshape their corporate "culture," in much the same way that, say, a strategic plan might be initiated.

What accounts for the degeneration of a rich metaphor (in this case, culture) into a passing managerial fad? How is it that we in the field appear unable to think our way out of modernity sufficiently to produce anything other than



ephemeral results? Both the example of the literature on organizational culture and the persistent calls for professionalism and scientific rigor in public administration remind one of *pentimenti*, the products of a long-standing practice of artists. Because canvas and stretcher bars are expensive, it has been a common practice for centuries for artists to paint over their earlier paintings in an effort to save money. Over the years, though, an image—a *pentimento*—from the earlier painting may bleed through what has been painted on top. Likewise, over the years, public administration theorists have painted new versions of public administration theories over the old, with the traditionalists (White and McSwain, 1990), the new public administration, and the interpretive and critical versions, all among them. Although each of these versions of public administration is thought of as affording an entirely new view of the field, the old images continue to bleed through. These old images—images of technique and rationality—are part and parcel of modernity, and they are not so easily covered over.

## Public Administration: Past and Future

Modernity exacerbates the question of a legitimate role for public administration within the American state. The tension between a meaningful, democratic politics and an expert, specialized administration, embedded in our nation's founding and intensified greatly by the flowering of technical rationality nearly 100 years ago, remains at the forefront of any possible claim to legitimacy for public administration in the American state. An atemporal public administration has considerable difficulty even addressing this question, because in its very essence it is an historical question.

Attention to public administration's past suggests that the broad parameters of knowledge and theory development in our field were established in the Progressive Era. Recent calls for increased professionalism and more scientific and rigorous research echo claims first made nearly a century ago. Thus, while there has been considerable historical scholarship in public administration, the *role* of historical analysis in the field remains highly problematic. Remaining enthralled with modernity, we remain unable to locate ourselves in our present historical circumstances, and thus relegate ourselves to issuing "new" calls for science and rigor on into the future.

If critical, historically-based studies were in the forefront of public administration research, we could more readily consider questions crucial to the present and future configuration of public administration. For example, I have argued here that the identity question in the field of public administration has both a political dimension and an epistemological dimension, which leads to one interpretation of the Progressive Era. If one were to follow Hofstadter's 1955 account, far greater emphasis would be placed on the political dimension as the chief driver of developments in public administration (e.g., Rosenbloom, 1971). Hofstadter views the Progressive Era as

an epic clash between two political cultures, one the immigrant-based machine model and the other the reform-minded "Yankee" or WASP model (1955, Introduction). Within public administration thought, however, the emphasis on method and procedure—the scientific-analytic mindset—seems warranted. As Furner (1975) argues, objectivity (science) won out over reform (advocacy) in the development of social science.

Greater attention to our history would better enable the consideration of other questions as well. Consider the relative importance of the law in contemporary public administration institutions and practices, scarcely mentioned in this discussion. A focus on the law would turn our attention much more prominently to the Founding Period, and the thinking of Alexander Hamilton (Green, 1990), and to 1946 when the Administrative Procedure Act was passed (Rosenbloom, 1983). Such a focus (e.g., on due process in law) would certainly be compatible with the Progressive emphasis on procedure, but some shift in interpretation would be called for as well. These and other important questions, which bear directly on present conditions and future prospects, need historical analysis to complement other approaches.

A genuinely open inquiry in the field of public administration is needed. Such free and open inquiry precludes hegemonic assertions as to what constitutes knowledge (and what does not). Free and open inquiry includes not only the so-called qualitative methods, but also the interpretive (Hummel, 1990) and critical (Forester, 1989; Denhardt, 1981) traditions. Critical, historically-based studies are sorely needed to address in a meaningful way both the political and epistemological dimensions of modernity as they bear on public administration. Free and open inquiry offers no easy or sentimental guarantees to a happier future for either public administration or the American state, but continued inattention to these questions will surely condemn us to the future Max Weber (1958) saw and feared 87 years ago.

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved' (p. 182).



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## Notes

1. Waldo's work (1948) is obviously an exception, but the reference is to the *recent* discussion. O'Toole's 1984 article probably qualifies as an exception, but it is rather narrowly focused on the new public administration, rather than on knowledge and theory development per se.
2. Also mentioned by some in the literature are the World War II period and the New Deal (White and McSwain, 1990; and Henry, 1990); the Jackson era draws some attention as well (Crenson, 1975).
3. As the highly sophisticated statistical methodologists of today are apt to point out, turn-of-the-century statistics meant rather rudimentary calculations of means and the like.
4. There are two recent handbooks of public administration (Rabin, Hildreth, and Miller, 1989; and Perry, 1990). The former includes considerable historical discussion, while the latter includes none.
5. Daniel W. Martin (1989) concludes, citing a famous remark by Peter Odegard, not only about Wilson's article, but about most "classics" of public administration that they are "...more often cited than read" (p. 426).
6. For a thorough and grounded reading of Weber's work, see Hummel (1987).

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