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Advanced introduction to public management and administration

Christopher Pollitt (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing; 2016; ISBN 978-1-784712-33-4; 192 pp; £15.95)

Christopher Pollitt's advanced introductory book to the field of public administration and management offers an insightful account of how an intricate field such as public administration developed, of how it must be approached and of the prospects for the near future. Through his eloquent and humorous writing style, reading his work is an immensely enjoyable undertaking.

What kind of a subject is public management (PM)? In fact, would we be better off to call it 'public administration' (PA)? This book looks to provide an answer to these and many other questions, seeking to be as comprehensive as possible over its approximately 190 pages.

It is not solely a theory book, but also a book about how such theories can be put into practice and what methods can be used to bring this about. Pollitt also discusses the history of the development of the field and provides a lucid account of the current structure and concerns of the PA/PM scholarly community. Pollitt aims to assess all these aspects and to relate them to each other. He also analyses the relationship between the academic world and the world of modern administration, between how the discipline works in theory and how it works in practice. The book's broad scope and connectedness should enable the judicious reader to develop a cogent picture of PA as a working community and as an amalgamation of ideas and practices.

Despite the manifold advantages of this comprehensive approach, understandably the time devoted to some issues remains insufficient, with some even being excluded, as the author himself apologetically concedes. Indeed, the book is aimed at those who already have at least a rudimental acquaintance with the field. Pollitt, however, compensates for this by including extensive references to other works pursuing a more in-depth discussion of a specific area. This may be

observed particularly with regard to Chapter Two (focusing on theory) and Chapter Three (examining methods). Pollitt lays no claim to comprehensiveness, as he himself explicitly states at the beginning of the book.

Chapter Four focuses on the PA academic community from a more anthropological perspective. Pollitt affirms that the field comprises predominantly anglophone Western males, to the detriment of other ethnic, linguistic and cultural subcategories. Even within the Western world, universities with a substantial presence in the field are not evenly dispersed geographically, with most being situated in the US. However, this intellectual hegemony is being increasingly eroded, owing to the expanding economic and political strength of Asia and, according to Pollitt, the 'unsatisfactory results' of PA reform ideas and practices from the Anglosphere over the last two to three decades. This renders non-Western countries more disinclined to emulate the latest management trends emanating from London or Washington.

Indeed, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries are likely to gain not only confidence but also more influential roles within such international institutions as the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. These sit at the hub of networks that are instrumental for the dissemination of PA ideas. Furthermore, according to Pollitt, a number of these states, particularly China, possess not only the necessary economic and political clout but also long and historically well-established administrative traditions. Overall, however, Anglosphere dominance is unlikely to decline precipitously overnight. It is likely that its influence for the next couple of decades will remain stable.

Chapter Five examines the relationship of PA with practice. Pollitt contends that, traditionally, the discipline has always enjoyed a close relationship with the world of practice, a trend which has gradually reversed over the last fifteen to twenty years. One manifestation of this, for instance, is a shift in the balance of research published in the foremost PA journals. Fewer of these articles address genuinely substantive issues and more of these tend to focus on theoretical, conceptual and methodological subtleties of limited practical value. For instance, it has become unusual to see PA research devoted to public infrastructure, ill health, poverty or justice. Conversely, there has been a profusion of articles dealing with conceptual and theoretical approaches to governance, innovation, transparency, leadership and public-private partnerships.

Pollitt justly laments that, at the beginning of his career, it was commonplace to have academic journals containing papers delineating potential solutions to issues with public sector organisational structures, public expenditure planning or civil service training. Although these issues are still of significant concern, they are mostly excluded from academic journals, receiving most coverage in think-tank pamphlets or consultancy reports. Similarly, while most large academic PA conferences were formerly attended by large numbers of senior practitioners, this practice is now increasingly rare. There is an increased level of separation and/or specialisation. Pollitt identifies this as the 'bête noire' that could plague the discipline's future.

In conclusion, this book is aimed at a diverse audience, whose common denominator is their concern with public sector management, networks and organisations. Pollitt's core purpose is to outline the ideas, institutions, methods and people constituting present-day PA and PM. In so doing, the author gives a lucid summation of the forces impelling this discipline. Its eminently accessible style makes it a must-read for new students, public administrators and veterans endeavouring to chart out the discipline's future.

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