



On the Current State of Public Administration Research and Scholarships: Political Accommodation or Simply Increasing Irrelevance?¹

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In many aspects, the past several decades appear to have been very productive ones for public administration research and scholarship. New scholarly associations, such as the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration of Central and Eastern Europe and the Latin American Group on Public Administration, have proliferated. New journals have multiplied, seemingly at warp speed. For example, the world's largest public administration association, the American Society for Public Administration, which a half century ago published one journal, the *Public Administration Review*, now through its over twenty sections sponsors at least sixteen journals.

Nevertheless, and in contrast, in many, arguably most, parts of the world, the past half century has not been a kind one for public administrators. While, on the one hand, demands for government services have grown, providing adequate funding has become ever more difficult, as taxes are cut, and then cut some more. Simultaneously, the widespread, frequently erroneous, glorifying of the efficiency of the private sector, often at the expense of the public sector, has taken its toll on both the functioning of government and, in particular, upon those who work within it and, even more significantly, who manage it. Government agencies at all levels, and in many countries around the world, find themselves constantly under attack and egregiously understaffed.

¹ The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author.

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Civil service systems also have come under attack, and politicians from all sides of the political spectrum are advocating the return to what are essentially the patronage systems prevalent a century ago. Even in the European Union, where civil service reform was a critical element in the admission of new states, political leaders are back sliding in order to manipulate such systems to serve elite political interests. At the same time, especially in the United States, issues of public employee compensation and pensions have increasingly become topics of much political controversy, as often dubious evidence, not to mention slanderous hearsay, is mobilized to make the case that public administrators are both overpaid and incompetent. In many other parts of the world, similar issues are increasingly topics of political controversy, even when public employee salaries are at such a low level as to virtually guarantee the prevalence of corruption and/or moonlighting.

Unfortunately, the situation for the democratic governments in which many public administrators work, and which are almost always central to sustaining equitable, effective and accountable public administration, has become equally fraught in recent years. The past decade has witnessed the rise of and/or the intensified impact of authoritarian political and governmental leadership and one-party domination of government in many countries – China, Egypt, Hungary, Nicaragua, Poland, Russia, Turkey and Venezuela are just a few of the more notable instances. Nations once thought to be making at least small steps towards, if not, in some cases, firmly on the road to democratic government have seen the rise of ever stronger strong men and growing dominance by political parties with highly authoritarian tendencies, which, although, in some instances, chosen in reasonably democratic elections, are increasingly moving to monopolize the institutions of governance and undermine civil society.

Most notably, popular concern about the future of democratic government in the United States (US) has been on the rise. Its President, who has demonstrated a remarkable affinity for authoritarian leaders, has aggressively sought to undermine traditional institutions of democratic governance that have long held the confidence of the citizenry and helped bind a very diverse country together. Of particular note have been the sustained attacks on what many have long considered to be the most important of the nation's institutions that serve to insure political and administrative accountability – a free investigative press. While the United States, unlike various countries on many other continents, has not experienced the assassination or jailing of journalists critical of the government, many worry that the actions of the Trump administration could lead to this.

Similarly, the actions of the current US leadership has not been reassuring as regards the maintenance of independent judiciary and law enforcement sectors. Equally notable has been the recent dramatic decline in executive self-restraint, as well as Congressional oversight, long key elements in maintaining accountable democratic government. At the same time that government by deflection and

chaos seems to have become the norm, the current US President appears to be intentionally working to undermine those international alliances that have played important roles in ensuring some measure of global stability and significantly contributed to increasing democratic development in many parts of the world. Such a strategy seems likely to increase even further the desire of his core followers to support the rise of a strongman President and this development, most likely, is not an accidental coincidence.

PA Scholarship: Where it has been and might go

In the face of four decades of very powerful and successful anti-public sector activism, capped by what, in the past few years, many scholars (and citizens) perceive to be profound threats to the future of democracy all across the world, one cannot help but ask where is the public administration (PA) research community and how has it responded to these developments? The answer, at least as one reads the most recent issue of, for example, *Public Administration Review* (PAR), or that of numerous other prominent journals, is that PA research scholars are busily analyzing and furthering the development of the numerous long- and short-term management and administrative strategies that facilitate accommodation with the principal characteristics of the increasingly anemic, or “hollowed out”, public sector. This is entirely consistent with the contemporary public sector as it has been defined and redefined for almost a half century in many parts of the world by political leadership, specifically such research serves especially well to accommodate the logic and reality of continually reduced public sector staff capacity and dramatic reductions in available funding of government activities and services (Hacker and Pierson 2016).

What PA scholars and researchers are, for the most part, not doing is pursuing research which either might suggest alternative approaches to defining the public sector or even attempting to examine and/or address what a few years ago, in a very insightful short volume, Alasdair Roberts characterized as the “large forces” which define our approach to public administration research. Indeed, as readers of almost all journals in the field will quickly see, the answer to the politically defined “realities” of the 21st century is, whether consciously intended or not, to accommodate the dominant anti-public sector political ethos as best as possible. One sees this in the themes of articles prevalent in most public administration journals which increasingly focus upon increased reliance on the private and nonprofit sectors for the coproduction of public services, engagement in greater intergovernmental cooperation to supplement shrunken local capacity and the placing of greater emphasis on voluntary compliance and the use of volunteers for service delivery. Also, for good measure, one can find many articles focused upon assessing the utility of one or another research methodology.

It should be noted that this is not an atypical response by the current crop of journal editors in terms of addressing the public problems created by the actions, or inactions, of our “real world policy makers”. In much of the discipline, for far too long there has been a preoccupation with accommodating the political realities created by our anti-public sector, and increasingly self absorbed, political leadership rather than seeking to analyze or challenge them. To illustrate, one need only do a quick review of the subjects of PA research as reflected, for example, in articles appearing throughout the years in *PAR*. Over the journals almost 80-year history there have been 399 articles which had the word “management” in their title and 174 that had the word “performance” in their title. In contrast, during those same 80 years, 45 articles had the word “democracy” and a grand total of three had the word “inequality” in their titles.

Not surprisingly over the years, the pages of PA journals continually have been filled with articles concerned with how the increasingly fiscally starved public sector can accommodate to its new reality by introducing NPM techniques, cut-back management and the like. In turn, the more specialized journals in the field point to, for example, the need for governments to move from defined benefit to defined contribution public employee pension in order to avoid budgetary disaster and fiscal default. However, one cannot help but wonder, where, in keeping with the spirit of say, Mary Parker Follett or Dwight Waldo, one finds public administration research and scholarship that addresses, given the circumstances of today’s public sector, what would seem like many equally obvious questions such as:

What is the impact on the ability of public administrators to operate effectively in an environment where the normal ambiguity involved in the implementation of complex policy is exacerbated by both frequently contradictory policy pronouncements and the increasingly obvious disjuncture between heads of government and government departments and agencies?

In the face of the past four decades of policymaker preoccupation with ever lower tax rate in, for example, the United States, which, it is asserted, will produce ever greater economic well-being, how does one explain the four decades from 1940 to 1980? That period, one of high tax rates, nevertheless produced the greatest economic growth of the past century for that country and dramatic declines in poverty and income inequality. In contrast, the most recent four decades of lower and lower tax rates have produced, at least for the great majority of that nation’s workers, stagnant economic growth and extraordinarily dramatic increases in income and wealth inequality.

To what extent have attacks on public employees’ salaries and pensions played a major role in the shrinkage of the middle-class, thus undermining the consumer demand that is an important driving force in the success of the most economies, while at the same time driving up dramatically the growing individual problems of inequality which undermine a nation’s democratic stability?

Are the increasing attacks on civil service systems and, more generally, on the effectiveness of government as an institution, which have characterized the politics of the last four decades in many parts of the world, resulting, whether intentionally or not, in undermining public confidence in democratic institutions and, in so doing, lessening their capacity to respond effectively to the very real problems facing contemporary society throughout the world?

To what extent have the budget cutting and tax strategies of the past four decades been intended to destroy the capacity of national governments to sustain established social safety nets and thus, whether intended or not, helped to greatly undermine social mobility?

As we continually limit governments' capacity to act effectively, are we undermining its capacity to provide the physical and technological infrastructure needed to support today's private sector commerce, not to mention future societal innovation.

One could go on listing many more potential questions which public administration scholars and researchers, were they so inclined, might seek to address. In fact, the issue being raised, while most assuredly exacerbated by events of the past several years, is certainly not a new one. Indeed, only last year, the late Christopher Pollitt, writing in the *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, commented upon the increasing detachment of PA research from real world policy and administrative problems, especially for PA practitioners, over the course of the past four decades. Among other things, Pollitt pointed out that the discipline's journals were strangely silent in addressing the administrative and policy implications of such pressing contemporary topics as climate change, demographic change, technological change and inadequate governmental resources.

The very significant detachment of PA scholarship from the real world of policy and administrative problems, which, Pollitt suggested, characterizes almost all of contemporary research in the field, has not always been the norm. A quick review of the eighty years of *Public Administration Review* (PAR) readily demonstrates this. The initial issue of PAR featured prominent political scientist, Joseph Harris, and well known United States practitioner, Arthur Flemming, writing analytical descriptive articles regarding the impact of national emergencies upon the nation's civil service and defense organizations. The next issue of PAR included prominent practitioner, Louis Brownlow, and equally prominent political scientist, Charles Merriam, writing about governmental efforts to address the planning initiatives necessary to facilitate the country's mobilization for war. In 1967, the lead article of one issue of PAR had Rufus Miles laying out the need for the creation of a Federal Department of Education. A decade later, James Sundquist was assessing the effectiveness of Jimmy Carter as a public administrator and a decade after that, Charles Goodsell was writing about the impact of Charles Beard on public administration.

PA Scholarship: What drives it?

All of which leads to the fundamental question of why there has been this collective breakdown on the part of the PA scholarly research community when it comes to addressing what many would consider the most pressing and important issues facing the field – a breakdown that has been developing for some time, but has become especially problematic during the past decade. In his 2017 essay, Pollitt identifies several key factors, including the enhanced professionalization, and the resulting increasingly narrow specialization, of PA research. To this one might add university tenure and promotion systems that serve to re-enforce the worst of the tendencies towards ever narrower specialization, as well as the increasingly narrow focus of most journals in the field and their ever greater preoccupation with methodological technique. This, as Pollitt has suggested, has led to an unwillingness of journal editors to publish historically focused critical analyses of policies, programs and institutions.

Indeed, this ever greater emphasis upon methodological purity, often at the expense of focusing upon the substance of the research, is a reality that has almost come to define contemporary PA research and scholarship. While most assuredly, methodological rigor is an important element of high-quality scholarly research, it is not the principle purpose. All too often it increasingly seems that this is the case, however. To see this phenomenon at work, and experience it first hand, one needs only to sit in on panel sessions at most conferences, or seminar presentations at most universities, where the ratio of questions on the methodology of the research will likely exceed those on the actual substance of the research by ratios of six, eight and ten to one. Granted methodological issues are very much a part of the development of effective research, but the reality is, especially in terms of contemporary graduate education, that all too often research problems are defined more by their susceptibility to particular methodological analysis than by their substantive significance.

Nevertheless, in the end, while all of these factors do contribute to the defining of ever more narrow – a cynic might suggest, increasingly less consequential – research topics explored by PA scholars, perhaps the most important factors are the combination of a misguided desire for absolute certainty and a collective lack of imagination. Regarding the former, one sees a discipline increasingly less focused upon the “art” aspect of the craft which it seeks to define and ever more so on the “science” aspect. Regarding the latter, all too often there seems to be a collective resignation on the part of the field’s scholars, a willingness to be defined by and accept the dominant ethos imposed by forty years of political and ideological warfare, which has served to redefine the political landscape of many countries.

Taken together, these two developments have resulted in what has eventually been a narrowing of the discipline of public administration from one which

explored the nature of the modern public sector, the forces shaping it and, most importantly, what it should be doing, to one of how best to manage public programs. Despite this reality, and the implicit limits which it imposes on PA research and scholarship, the fact of the matter is that the public problems which countries all across the world face continue to grow in significance, and the task of addressing them becomes ever more difficult and complex. Now, more than ever, it is critical that PA scholars begin to address those matters which define and redefine the nature of the public sector, both within the United States and throughout the world. In many cases this involves returning to very basic concerns, many of which have been forgotten over the course of four decades of intense ideological conflict.

PA Scholarship: Where it ought to go

Obviously, simply refocusing one's research agenda, regardless of the relevance of the topics that one might address, will be a viable and effective strategy only if there is a reasonable possibility that what one is writing is likely to be published. Towards that end, perhaps the time has come for the major associations in the field of public administration to consider moving in the direction that a sister association, the American Political Science Association, took some years back when it introduced a new journal that was less focused on the more abstract and theoretical parts of the discipline and more directly addressed, still in a scholarly and rigorous manner, current political issues and controversies. Such a journal, which might, for example, be known as the *Journal of Policy, Politics and Public Administration*, could conceivably play a major role in bridging the academic-practitioner divide that the field has struggled greatly with over the past several decades; it might also provide an outlet for more nuanced historical and analytic scholarship.

Among the types of issues and problems with which such a journal would possibly deal, in addition to the topics mentioned above, are the following:

1. Research regarding the essential role of a capable and effective government, and a vigorous public sector, in solving society's problems

One significant consequence of the past half century of attacking government has been the declining recognition that strong and effective government – which public administrators manage and lead – is the single most important, indeed, the one indispensable, institution of any modern society. This is especially the case in the more highly economically developed countries of Asia, Europe and North America. There are at least three reasons why this has been so and will undoubtedly continue to be the case.

First, it is government, and only government, run and managed by public administrators, that is given the authority to legitimately utilize force to maintain

the rules of order that a modern society requires if it is to function effectively. It is government, and again only government, that possesses the legitimate right to take away one's property, one's liberty and, in some countries, one's life. These are awesome powers which are not legitimately the province of any other societal institution but the one managed by public administrators. This, alone, sets government, and those who manage it, apart from all other societal institutions and also is why, despite its centrality to the creation of a good society, holding government and those who manage it, fully accountable at all times is also a critical condition for societal well-being.

Second, it is government that sets the rules for virtually every other institution of society, and, thus, it plays an absolutely essential role as the necessary pre-condition and/or facilitator/enabler of all other institutions of a modern society – whether they are commercial, non-profit, religious or social. When government plays this role effectively, then society is likely to prosper and to develop in very positive ways. When it does not play this role effectively, as we have seen in terms of the failure of financial sector regulation in many Western democracies over the course of the past dozen years, the possibilities for personal and institutional corruption, greed, and taking great risks with society's resources can lead to economic and social disaster.

Finally, in almost all cases, it is the public sector, the government, run by public administrators, which is the source of much of the most important innovation in modern society. Most of the new inventions that have transformed all of the developed and, perhaps even more significantly, the less developed, world have been the product of research and development either carried out by government employees or directed and guided through government-initiated contractual relationships with nonprofit or private sector entities (Mazzucato 2015).

The computer and radar were pioneered by the British government during World War Two. The internet, geographic information systems, hydraulic fracturing (which has almost overnight changed the worldwide balance of power in terms of energy resources), the medicines which have played a major role in combating AIDS and other epidemic-like health concerns have all been significantly shaped by, or are the direct result of, important government research initiatives. Similarly, much of the technology that has made the owners of Apple and Google multi-billionaires is the product of US government research.

Taken together these three realities – the awesome authority granted to government; its crucial role in enabling the functioning of the other major institutions of society; and its ability to produce or facilitate major innovation in society – serve to ensure that effective government is the one irreplaceable and indispensable institution of modern society. Consequently, the role of those responsible for operating, managing and sustaining government, namely public administrators, is in fact as important a role as there is in modern society.

Unfortunately, the prevailing anti-government attitudes of the past half century have obscured these fundamental realities and, in so doing, have helped to undermine the actual effectiveness of government by both discouraging talented individuals from pursuing the profession of public administration and disillusioning those who currently are public administrators. Thus, the very first task of public administration research, not to mention relevant education and training, is to demonstrate both to those entering the field, and those already involved in it, as well as the public more generally, that an effective public sector is absolutely central to the future well-being of all societies.

2. Research on effectively addressing the vast complexity of the problems facing the public sector

No doubt, every generation, and especially its public administrators, have felt that the problems with which they are forced to deal are the most complex and threatening that have ever faced society. However, despite the world's extraordinary social and economic progress during the twentieth century, it is hard to find any time since the conclusion of World War II in which the problems facing countries on both sides of the Atlantic, and throughout the world, have been more difficult – occasionally, to the point of seeming intractable. This array of contemporary, highly vexing problems runs from complex issues of science and technology to those reflecting many dimensions of human tragedy.

At one end of the continuum is the highly politicized debate over climate change and global warming. Even before the precipitous withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Climate Accords, the reality was that, while there was general agreement on the need to address global warming and climate change, there was not widespread agreement on how to do so and, in particular, who should bear what degree of responsibility for solving this problem.

On both sides of the Atlantic, issues of human migration, driven in many cases by some combination of desperate poverty and legitimate fear for the personal safety of oneself and one's family, have produced the massive dislocation of millions of people. This, in turn, has created unrelenting problems of unresolved social and financial costs, not to mention ultimately leading to very complex issues of how to manage societal assimilation of migrants coming from very different cultures. Perhaps, even more significant, in both America and in the European context, the political controversy created appears to threaten the very fabric of society.

Adding to this ever-growing array of societal problems is the disarray into which long established international relationships seem to be falling. Relationships both among regions within countries, and among countries themselves, are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Issues that once commanded a high degree of consensus now seem problematic at best and, increasingly, the source of growing

confrontation. Whether the issue is foreign policy, defense spending, agricultural policy or energy consumption, old conflicts remain and new ones are emerging.

3. Research addressing the dramatic growth of inequality throughout the world

Underlying more than a few of the problems noted above is the reality of the dramatic and potentially catastrophic growth during the course of the past four decades of income inequality, both within countries and among them. Even in Europe, where issues of income inequality are much less severe than in any other major part of the world, income inequality is becoming ever more significant. In 1980, the top 10 % of all European income earners received approximately 33 % of all earned income. 2016 data, compiled by the World Inequality Laboratory, indicated that the top 10 % of the European population now receive 37 % of all income. The 2016 figures were 41 % of all income for the top ten percent of income earners in China, 46 % in Russia, 47 % in the US and Canada, 54 % in sub-Saharan Africa, 55 % in Brazil and India and 61 % in the Middle East.

Not surprisingly, given the disparity in income distribution among national populations, the disparity in wealth distribution is even greater. In countries as diverse as the United States and Russia, the top 1 % of the population controls close to 50 % of the country's wealth. The reasons for the worldwide growth in inequality are undoubtedly complicated and involve many factors, ranging from the decline of unions to the rise of automation and, perhaps, even the frequently blamed impact of globalization on international trade and migration. However, perhaps the most significant reason is, in fact, the most overlooked one and one that is especially relevant for public administration research and scholarship – specifically, the dramatic decline in the resources of the public sector throughout the world.

As the World Inequality Laboratory, which arguably brings together the most outstanding collection of experts on this topic to be found anywhere, has indicated in its 2018 report, “Economic inequality is largely driven by the unequal ownership of capital, which can be either privately or publicly owned” (Alvaredo et al. 2018, 14). During the course of the past 50 years, public sector capital has remained relatively constant while privately held income and wealth resources have doubled and tripled in size. This reflects the increasing decline in government revenue resulting from declining tax rates, growing deregulation of the private sector, increasing privatization of societal resources and the like. All of which not only lessens the capacity of government to address many fundamental societal issues, including inequality, but also has serious consequences for the future of the middle class and middle-class economic consumption which in turn is the most important driver of a successful economy and long term economic productivity.

4. Research on sustaining democratic institutions

The twentieth century has witnessed major movements towards democratization. For example, between 1950 and 2000, the number of governments around the world that could be characterized as reasonably democratic doubled from about 50 to 100. However, the process of democratization is neither a simple nor a very straightforward one. Nor is it adequately assessed by tallying up institutional rearrangements at two different points in time and doing a mechanistic assessment of changes in them. The reality is that democracy is inevitably and will always be a “work in progress.” Moreover, as the past decade seems to have demonstrated, liberal democracy is not the inevitable outcome of society’s march forward. At least, it is evident that there will be both steps forward and backward in both democratic and non-democratic countries.

In fact, democracy is not only a work in progress, but it is a far more fragile reality than is frequently recognized. This fragility is significantly enhanced by the fact that democratic governance is never simple, and often not very pretty, and sometimes not very effective. As Winston Churchill is supposed to have once commented about democracy in the United States, the US government will always come up with an appropriate solution to any problem, but only after it has tried all other alternatives and they have failed miserably. Whether this statement is true or apocryphal, it is nevertheless all too often a rather accurate one. This reality seems to be increasingly encouraging the growth of anti-democratic attitudes, both in the US and in many other countries throughout Europe and the rest of the world.

Public administrators, and PA research scholars, as individuals committed to promoting good governance, have a very great responsibility to be both the protectors of, and, perhaps even more importantly, explainers of and advocates for, sustaining and enhancing the democratic character of the countries in which they work. As individuals who are committed to the highest standards of governmental integrity and administration, PA researchers and practitioners bear a very large burden in terms of providing society with information and guidance as regards the public services that individual citizens seek and need from their government. In so doing, they can support and significantly enhance democratic governance.

Conclusion

It has been suggested by historians and political scientists alike that various regions of the world, and sometimes the entire world itself, goes through periods when a particular ideology or approach to governing tends to be dominant, and then major events, often unanticipated, bring about significant changes in prevailing attitudes and philosophies. Beginning in the 1980s, societies all over the world witnessed an era in which the dominant ethos in many countries began to focus upon minimizing government and encouraging various forms of “governance”

which delegated important responsibilities to the private and non-profit sectors. Under such arrangements, government assumed the role of a mere partner which joined with the private sector and civil society to guide the development of the broader community. The financial crisis that came to a head ten years ago seemed to be ushering in a new era of government activism. However, the 2016 election in the United States, and elections with similar outcomes in other parts of the world, have seemed to suggest otherwise.

Inevitably, new eras, when they arise, present new challenges, and, most assuredly, these new challenges place new demands upon the institutions preparing people to manage the governments that will shape the changing times. However, often, it seems that scholarship in the field of public administration has ignored many of these new challenges. This is so in spite of the fact that many of the issues involved are quite familiar to those who are concerned with the building of an effective and vibrant public sector and involved in educating the next generation of public administrators. Whether new or old, however, these challenges do require a renewed attention to the focus of their research by the PA scholarly community.

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