

Introduction: Administration without Hierarchy? Bureaucracy without Authority?

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It cannot be said that we are self-satisfied. Perry and Kraemer tell us our research fails to cumulate into greater understanding, is poorly supported financially, and is little valued professionally. Rainey refers to “a widely perceived insufficiency in relevant research.” Studies of public administration, Caiden advises, are fragmented. Worse still, efforts to unify the discipline through public-choice theory could well lead to “environmental degradation and social disintegration.” Given to more gentle remonstrance, Fried patiently explains “why universal theory remains elusive.” For Nigro, public personnel administration is an impossible subject: Where performance criteria can be followed, they are rejected (the traditional model for managers); where they are accepted (the human relations approach by managers), they are too vague to be implemented. Although viable alternatives exist, Golembiewski promises, the “schizoid character” of opinion on administration, which results in contradictory recommendations, makes progress difficult. Kaufman worries that the fortuitous alliance of the movements for executive leadership and neutral competence, which bolstered the public service, has declined without a new alliance to take its place. And while Goodsell is prepared to advocate a new and imposing role of the public “administrator as teacher of governance to society,” he is concerned, as we all are, about the teacher’s credibility. I am concerned, as will become evident, about what we will teach.

The positive message is that we collectively know a good deal more about public administration than we used to know, without being able to say exactly what we know. Those who delimit the scope of their inquiry find it more manageable—the only indispensable quality of formal theory, Bendor assures us, is deduction—at the expense, possibly, of applicability. Those whose aspirations know few bounds risk replacing the discipline they have come to save. Intergovernmental Management (IGM), according to Marando and Florestano, claims new territory; networking by entrepreneurial managers joins private, public, and intrapublic policy. IGM is prescriptive, reformist, result oriented.

There are other optimists. And they have a message for the rest of us. The flaw, as Stewart sees it, is the disproportionate constraint on opportunity faced by women in public administration caused by an excess of paternalism. The remedy is to improve the status of women. Research fits in by continuous studies of the status of women. The metaphor of diminishing differences among people—men and women, black and white, experts and laypeople, superiors and subordinates—that suffuses these inquiries serves as a paradigm for the removal of other obstacles to opportunity that affect public administration as a whole.

The shifts in the subject matter of writing on public administration that Denhardt chronicles all move in the same direction. People who trust in authority do not write endlessly about the ethics of those who wield authority. If you trust your own motives as public managers, you do not need depth psychology. If you do not feel that contemporary discourse puts people down, or hides more than it reveals, there is less reason for you to explore rival epistemologies. The concern of formal theorists with “principal-agent” models suggests all is not well with agents, the bureaucracy, who do not necessarily represent their principals, the elected officials. Nor would one satisfied with the status quo blame the system of relationships that apparently constitutes public administration. Were bureaucracy human, there would be no need to humanize it any more than if managers managed appropriately there would be a need for talk about managing without managers. When Rainey speaks of the “growing skepticism over the efficiency and effectiveness of large public agencies,” and about candidates who “campaigns as aggressively against the governmental bureaucracy as against political opponents,” we know trouble is among us.*

Denhardt lays it on the line: Public administration, he feels, has been limited by business values (*read* efficiency) and by hierarchy (*read* bureaucracy). What is left for administration, we may ask, if its hierarchical form of organization and its search for efficiency are rejected? Why, indeed, would practitioners and scholars want to rid the field of exactly those features that have made them famous? What would a public administration without a hierarchical form of organization have to offer the nation? What appeal would a bureaucracy without authority have to its members? How, in sum, can we explain the lack of confidence in prevailing doctrine that is perhaps the most evident feature of public administration in our time?

When Max Weber provided the classical definition of bureaucracy, he em-

* Running for office against the bureaucracy is not new. Andrew Jackson was the prime exemplar. He dethroned “King Caucus” and increased mass participation through his political party. In office, he fought the “monster bank” of the United States. Like Ronald Reagan, Jackson used the presidential office to try to reduce the size and scope of central government. In a system within which hierarchy is disparaged, even the chief executive may oppose “his” government. See Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, 1989.

phasized two features: security of tenure and monopoly of expertise. In the United States, this monopoly, although it never existed entirely in a system of checks and balances,* has been shattered by the rise of policy analysis. All around the country, in think tanks, consultant firms, schools of policy analysis, state and local governments, congressional staffs, and elsewhere, there are rival teams of analysts who have recently been or expect soon to be in government. They know as much as those in the bureaucracy know or used to know. Virtually everything that officials can say based on their expertise can be contradicted with conviction by these analysts in (temporary) exile. Consequently, public officials can no longer say with confidence that their views should carry special weight because they know more than their critics.

Security of tenure has also been weakened. The legal rights of civil servants are now counterbalanced by the rights others have against them. When their units go, so may they. As the size of the public service comes under attack, so do its prerogatives, especially the salaries and travel of the upper echelons. Not a happy prospect. What accounts for the defensive position of the public service?

In days gone by, the divisions among and within the two major political parties were more supportive of public servants. Republicans wanted a smaller domestic government and Democrats wanted a larger one. At least under the Democrats, then, public servants could expect support, perhaps even sympathy, for they were the ones who carried out the programs. Even under the Republicans there was respect for their authority, if not agreement on their size and scope. No longer. Now both parties contain elements antithetical to the bureaucracy.†

The Republican party is an alliance between social conservatives and economic libertarians. Social conservatives are prepared to support government on their own terms—intervention abroad and in private life in defense of patriarchal values. But such intervention leaves the public service queasy; for them, hierarchy has its limited rationale in public, not private, life. Sensing resistance, social conservatives do not view the public service as an ally whose authority deserves support; to these conservatives, government exerts both too little authority in support of patriarchy and too much against it, as when it opposes prayer in schools. Economic liber-

* In the 1930s, and even the 1950s, it seems to me, the federal government had a much larger share of the available expertise about social security, defense, housing, health, and down the list of major programs than it does today.

† I do not wish to exaggerate. Hierarchical forces, as the demise of the Federalist and Whig parties should show us, have been weak from the beginning. Why, in America, should one trust a person who has not “met a payroll” or “carried a district,” i.e., met the tests of economic or political competition? This has always been true. My sense is that it is even “truer” now.

tarians, who want a much smaller and less intrusive domestic government, view public servants as opponents. For these supporters of competitive individualism now have doctrines that tell them bureaucrats are expansionists. Thus the support for existing authority that conservative parties bring to government elsewhere is not found in America.

Well, there are always the Democrats, the party of government, as they once happily called themselves. No more. For one thing, they think the defense budget is too large and often buys the wrong weapons. For another, by far the largest programs are entitlements, mostly payments to individuals, which involve check-writing more than detailed administration. Hence there is less dependence on large numbers of public servants. More important than either of these factors, however, is the increasing ambivalence on the part of Democratic party liberals, its largest faction, about the role of government.

Liberals would like government to do more to help classes of people they deem disadvantaged. These liberals do have a positive view of government as redressing existing inequalities. But precisely because of their desire to move from formal to substantive equality of opportunity (they believe that the government in which the federal bureaucracy is embedded is unfair to disadvantaged groups), they question bureaucratic authority. After all, authority—the expectation that people who occupy positions should be followed because their power is legitimate—is a *prima facie* case of inequality. Thus there arises the by now familiar category of bureaucracy without authority, namely a desire for policies that increase the need for bureaucracy on the part of people who are reluctant to cede to its members the necessary authority.

An important consequence of the desire for egalitarian policies is that more and more groups are included: minorities, women, the poor, the elderly, children, on and on. This speaks well of social conscience. But it also speaks poorly of priorities. Because there are now so many categories of the deprived and their numbers have grown so large, it becomes difficult to choose among them or to find the resources to aid them all. The bottom line is that the seemingly bloodless category—nondefense discretionary expenditure—amounts to some 11 percent of the budget. And this, outside of defense, is where almost the entire public service is found.

Belonging to the nonentitled, the bureaucracy finds itself under attack from numerous directions. Conservative Democrats and Republicans want to get the deficit down. Gramm-Rudman-Hollings tells the story: General government and defense bear the brunt because they are what is left after entitlements, veterans, and interest on the debt. Looked at another way, the symbols of government, the national defense and the public service, are required to sacrifice. Moderate Democrats and Republicans, the informal party of stability and balance, are caught between saving essential services and despairing over deficits and budget deadlocks. Reluctantly but inevitably, for want of agreed-on alternatives, moderates agree to

savage nondefense discretionary spending, that is, the general government of the United States.

Civil servants do not have to be told these are hard times. Whichever way they turn, however political fortunes change, they will get the short end of a hard stick. At one end, told to do more with less, they get clobbered by spending cuts; at the other end, their lives are made difficult by requirements for open meetings, so it is harder to get agreement, restrictions on hiring, so it is more difficult to find the right people or to fire the wrong ones, and controls designed to make sure no wrongful act occurs by making it difficult to do anything at all.

Learning how to live amid opposing demands will not be easy. What, in the spirit of this volume, can students of public administration do by way of research that will help practitioner and theorist alike understand why life in public service is bound to be difficult and what, if anything, can be done about it?*

Know thine enemy. We will never understand the problems of public service, I am persuaded, so long as we suffer from a poverty of organizational forms. In addition to hierarchy cum bureaucracy, to which I shall return, we should study at least two other types—competitive individualism and egalitarian collectivism. Individualists wish to substitute self-regulation for authority, yet they are dependent on an external source of authority for sufficient stability to maintain market relationships and adjudicate differences. What has been the experience of political regimes that value self-organization over central authority? How do individualists behave within organizations? Will they stand for the accouterments of hierarchy—rules, forms, decorum, a belief in procedures as essential for orderly administration? Can accommodation be made with them?

Egalitarians reject authority as coercive and unfair. Group decisions, they believe, should be binding on members, but only if they participate fully and give

* An excellent beginning would be to read and ponder Herbert Kaufman (1981, 4). Especially relevant is his identification of bureaucrats from their point of view: "From where they [senior bureaucrats] stand, the proposition that they are becoming the dominant power in the political system seems not only incomprehensible but downright ludicrous. What impresses them is their own comparative weakness. In part, this may be attributed to what I call the Law of Perceptions of Power, which holds that the power an observer believes another person or a group wields is directly proportional to the square of the distance of the observer from the observed. Thus, the closer the observer comes to the observed, the more limited the power of the observed seems. And when the distance is zero—that is, when the situation is seen through the eyes of the holder of power—what stand out are the fragility and limits of power, not its greatness. That is why presidents and the people close to them tend to bewail their inability to get things done, while people far removed frequently talk of the presidency as the strongest office on earth. The law also applies to bureaucrats."

their consent freely. Each individual is her or his own (and only) authority. Yet egalitarians need organizational authority to redistribute resources. What has been the experience of egalitarian organizations? Do their members stay together without authority? If people are born good but corrupted by evil institutions, as egalitarians believe, how do they explain internal conflict? Beset by individualists and egalitarians, bureaucrats need to know what they are up against.

Know thyself. There are different types of hierarchies, and hence bureaucracies, that matter. Hierarchical collectivism (or hierarchy, for short), with its strong group boundaries and its numerous and detailed prescriptions binding on members, is a system that supports central leadership. Authority inheres in position. Where egalitarians blame misfortune (say, poverty) on the system, and individualists fault the unsuccessful, hierarchies blame the deviant for not following the rules. How hierarchies behave, however, depends on how they are structured, and on the context within which they operate. Inclusive hierarchies (my father's house has many mansions and there is room for all—rich and poor, gay and straight, black and white) differ from exclusive hierarchies (there is no room at the inn for anyone who does not conform). Hierarchies that compete with others differ from those that have a monopoly of power. Caste hierarchies that exert power by moving away from lesser people differ from class hierarchies that stand over them. *If there is a single research priority for public administration, it is to study the organizational forms on which bureaucracies are based.*

The question must be faced: *Can we denigrate hierarchy (from which bureaucracy derives) while still honoring public service?* Can there be an effective bureaucracy without respect for authority? Coming at the question the back way—is hierarchy the only or the best form of organization for most tasks?—while better than neglect, is ultimately an evasion. For if we give the self-evident answer (“No, it isn’t”), we have still not asked whether hierarchy can and should be done away with. Yet much recent writing implies just that. Shall we say, then, that public officials are just folks, on an equal plane with others, who should count for just one person, one voice? If they are persuasive, so be it, but if not, that’s just too bad. Or shall we say that the bureaucracy deserves the benefit of the doubt because it is so constituted as to be considered authoritative until proven otherwise?

Kicking around a strawman, or so I expect to be told, is easy work. No one, presumably, wants or proposes to abandon hierarchy cum bureaucracy, only to modify its more oppressive features. True, but false. No one quite says so, but many believe bureaucracy is an unadulterated bad. How else can we explain why there is virtually no defense of hierarchical principles? If defending hierarchy would be to belabor the obvious, students of public administration are working hard to avoid it.

If hierarchy is necessary, why won't we say so? If it is in part desirable, why don't we teach so? Why does one hear so little now about the virtues (as well as the vices) of hierarchy—stability, continuity, predictability—with enthusiasm and with

pride? My guess is that validating hierarchy would mean approving of inequality, that is, saying that some people deserve more deference than others.

If all inequalities are bad, why should there be (and why should we support) bureaucracy? Of course, there is some support for individual bureaucrats. But that is not the same as supporting principles of hierarchy—specialization, division of labor, expertise, authority, the view that different people are fitted for different tasks—that alone make bureaucracy defensible.

The message society gives to public servants is ambivalent. On the one hand, public service is the highest aspiration a citizen can have; on the other hand, bureaucracy is the problem, not the solution. When society is basically agreed, that is, when disagreements are limited, then bureaucrats become public servants; they are honored as implementors of an agreed-upon creed. There is criticism, too, as is appropriate, but it largely concerns how well they perform the agreed-upon task, not that they are doing the wrong thing. When relative consensus is replaced by relative dissensus, however, public servants revert to being bureaucrats. They become the scapegoats for other people's quarrels. Anyone can do the possible. Public service is the highest service because it is the hardest service there is. Public service is also the most necessary service, for without respect for community, there can be none for individuals.

References

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