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The (Re)discovery of the Public in Public Administration

Part VII: The Future of Public Administration as a Scholarly Field

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In the 130-plus years since Woodrow Wilson's (1887) article launched the self-conscious study of public administration,[1] the field has made great strides. One area where less work has been done is in generating a robust understanding, let alone theory, of the public in public administration (for an exception, see Frederickson 1991). Although concern about "the public"[2] and "publicness"[3] has waxed and waned throughout the history of the discipline, our attention seems to have shifted away from this issue toward more managerialist (i.e., instrumental and technocratic) research. In 2020, as we approach 150 years of the study of public administration, the field will have taken significant and meaningful steps toward the rediscovery of the public in public administration—that is, attention to the political theory of administration, in which citizens are sovereigns. Such rediscovery will be aided by developments in theory and practice with regard to public value and public values theory and to public participation and deliberation.

Before examining these coming developments, it is useful to note that several scholars have articulated the problems that arise for public administration from our lack of understanding about the public and publicness (e.g., Bozeman 2007; Frederickson 1991; Ventriss 1989, 1997). Rather than recap their arguments, I prefer to draw attention to a different issue, namely, that even a cursory glance at the world around us would convince many that the problems facing humanity and the earth are profound and proliferating, so much so that some have concluded we are "living in dark times" (e.g., Isaac 1998; Nabatchi, Goerdel, and Peffer, forthcoming; Stivers 2008). For example, in the United States (and elsewhere), we see failure in numerous policy realms, from education, energy, and the environment, to housing and health care, to transportation, industry, and finance, among others. Internationally, nations suffer the plights of poverty, drought and famine, ethnic cleansing, war, and terrorism. At the global level, humanity is threatened by climate change, food and water shortages, infectious disease, and possibilities of biochemical and nuclear war. Regardless of whether one buys the "dark times" argument, the number, scale, magnitude, and possible consequences of these challenges arguably have never been more intense.

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Certainly, government is not the only institution responsible for addressing these challenges, and multisectoral partnerships will be needed. Nevertheless, over the next decade, public administration scholars will amplify their efforts to tackle these and other problems. Preceding this recognition will be broad acceptance of the argument that scholarship in our field must "grow out of actual social tensions, needs, 'troubles'" (Dewey 1938, 499).[4] Following this recognition, scholars will acknowledge that their ability to effectively address complex modern issues requires a robust understanding of publicness and rich interactions with the public. Such understanding and interaction will enable scholars, public managers, and other officials to better identify public preferences, goals, and values as they pertain to inherently complex choices and trade-offs. In turn, this will generate better public action, in both a governmental and a civic sense. To this end, the next 10 years will witness scholars of public administration undertaking vigorous research agendas, with the ultimate goal of identifying processes and mechanisms that maximize the likelihood for an organized, collective will capable of addressing and resolving these and other problems.

Progress will be made in at least two important areas. First, the field will begin to advance an understanding

of publicness and the public by focusing on work in the areas of public value (e.g., Moore 1995) and public values theory (e.g., Bozeman 2007). In general, the term *value* refers to the worth of something; in government, *public value* refers to an appraisal of what is created by government on behalf of the public. In contrast, *values* are emotio-cognitive assessments that are relatively stable and guide behavior; in government, *public values* are those that provide "normative consensus about (a) the rights, benefits, and prerogatives to which citizens should (and should not) be entitled; (b) the obligations of citizens to society, the state, and one another; and (c) the principles on which governments and policies should be based" (Bozeman 2007, 13).

Interesting and productive work on public value and public values theory is being done (see, e.g., the *International Journal of Public Administration,* vol. 32, nos. 3–4 and 6). Over the next 10 years, public administration scholars and practitioners will advance this burgeoning discussion into priority research. Among other research areas, scholars and practitioners will develop meaningful theoretical identification and classification systems for individual public values and constellations or groups of related public values into sets (for a recent example of such work, see Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007). Scholars will empirically examine when, where, why, and how certain public values and values sets compete with or complement one another in a given policy realm or administrative setting. They also will explain the consequences of such competition or complementarity. Scholars will seek to understand how we manage publicness, that is, how we identify the public value institutions that are necessary for generating a desired public outcome, or realized publicness (for a discussion, see Moulton 2009). Additional research will focus on translating espoused public values and values sets into practice. For example, scholars will study how public values are manifested or obscured in policy debates and decisions. Scholars and practitioners will also work together to study the competencies required by public mangers to make decisions based on the public values and values sets that are commensurate with the circumstances and conditions of a particular policy realm or administrative setting.

Such research on public values and public value theory is related to the second area of progress, namely, that public participation and deliberation will be seen as important supplements to representational democracy. Direct public participation can be defined as "the process[es] by which members of a society (those not holding office or administrative positions in government) share power with public officials in making substantive decisions related to the community" (Roberts 2008a, 5). The notion recognizes and captures the broadly accepted belief that people have the right to have a say in decisions affecting their lives. It also highlights how the field has, in many ways, become beholden to democratic participation theories centered around select, privileged political behaviors, primarily voting, at the expense of (or while ignoring) other pathways of representation and participation that can be exercised by sovereign citizens through public administration. As we move through the next decade, demands for direct citizen participation and more responsive government will grow, and public administration will be on the front lines. The reason for this is clear: "administration is the most permeable region of government, the one in closest proximity to citizens. Agencies are also the field upon which many of the issues that touch the lives of ordinary people are played out . . . [because] in reality people interact directly with administrative agencies in a way they rarely do with legislators or the courts" (Stivers 2008, 10–11).

Theorists have long suggested that through public participation, and particularly deliberative participation, elected officials and public administrators can better understand the public values at play for a given issue, and thus coproduce better policy decisions with citizens, which in turn result in better action and outcomes (see, generally, Roberts 2008b). Of course, participatory processes vary widely in design and goals as a result of the wealth of tools, techniques, and procedures available, as well as the exponential variety of possible contexts, settings, timing, and policy areas. In the next 10 years, scholars and practitioners will develop theory and research that elucidates connections among participatory design and functional outcomes. We will begin to identify where, when, why, and how various public participation designs are most likely to produce an understanding of public values and yield instrumental benefits for governance. Some interesting theoretical work is already being done in this area (e.g., Fung 2003, 2006); however, practice is leading theory. By 2020, the field will see substantive progress in this area as a result of academics and practitioners working in concert. Moreover, work in both areas will enable the field to look at the politics–administration interface, and stop thinking of administration as something only technical and instrumental that is different and separate from politics.

As we move forward, the field is likely to encounter several potential roadblocks and obstacles. In the academic arena, the structures of promotion and tenure generally reinforce the tendency to look at narrow, empirical research questions that offer a greater likelihood of "quick" publication. Thus, scholars, and especially junior scholars, are reluctant to engage "big questions," which, by and large, are more conceptual and require more time for analytic thought. Similarly, scholars will be challenged with questions of operationalization, that is, how to conceptualize and specify vague and complex terms such as the public, publicness, and public values. More broadly, the field of public administration, in both its academic and professional pursuits will be challenged by the pervasive influence of economic individualism (for a discussion, see Bozeman 2007), as well as the bureaucratic pathologies that reinforce managerialism and a reliance on market strategies for addressing public problems (Nabatchi, Goerdel, and Peffer, forthcoming).

Nevertheless, the prospects for overcoming these problems will grow as the field embraces the not so radical but oft forgotten notion that public administration has a responsibility

Beyond helping to address modern social problems, developing theory and understanding of the public will also help reinvigorate notions and perceptions of citizenship, reengage citizens in their communities, cultivate a more active role for public administration in the development of society, and enable the field to think about policy in terms of substantive rationality, civitas, citizenship, and community.

to help solve problems, and that the solutions to these problems can only be developed with better understanding and direct participation of the public. Beyond helping to address modern social problems, developing theory and understanding of the public will also help reinvigorate notions and perceptions of citizenship, reengage citizens in their communities, cultivate a more active role for public administration in the development of society, and enable the field to think about policy in terms of substantive rationality, civitas, citizenship, and community. Moreover, as the field discusses the importance of the public and public values, we will not only enhance disciplinary knowledge and understanding, but also advance the field's intellectual role in relation to the state, and, at the same time, the purpose and role of the citizenry in maintaining a public sphere in which ethical deliberation and responsible public action can take place.

To that end, over the next decade, public administration will actively work toward (re)discovering the public in both its academic and professional pursuits. Public administration can be credited with both the triumphs and the tragedies of civilization (Waldo 1980). Today, the world suffers much tragedy; by 2020, public administration, in both its scholarly and professional pursuits, will have stepped forward to offer hope.

Notes

1. Van Riper (1983) notes that Wilson was not said to be a founding father of public administration until the 1940s, and Waldo considered Frank J. Goodnow to be the "father of public administration" (1948, 79) "before Woodrow Wilson was belatedly and mistakenly awarded that eminence" (Lynn 2009, 805).

2. Of course, most scholars and practitioners recognize that the public does not exist as a monolith, that there are, in fact, multiple publics. However, the term *public* is used in this essay for purposes of simplicity and clarity.

3. In general, "publicness" refers to the degree to which an organization emanates and is constrained by political influence, authority, or control (e.g., Bozeman 1987). Moulton distinguishes among three types of publicness: (1) *descriptive publicness,* operationalized with "indicators identified a priori as being "public," typically functions of government, such as the percentage of resources from government, the frequency of communications with government, or the importance of government to organizational growth and survival"; (2) *normative publicness,* operationalized by assessing "the extent to which organizations express attachment to public values and/or provide for public values"; and (3) *realized publicness,* operationalized by measuring "the extent to which [organizational] outcomes or objectives achieve public values" (2009, 890–91).

4. Dewey also asserted that "any problem of scientific inquiry that does not grow out of actual (or "practical") social conditions is factitious" (1938, 499). Scholars will come to agree with this sentiment and, as a result, will move beyond narrow research questions and begin addressing real-world problems. In doing so, public administration scholars will become (finally!) the "go-to guys and gals"—the experts called upon to assist elected and administrative officials working to

remediate problems. After all, we have much to offer in way of solutions. This argument, however, I leave for another time.

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