

Overcoming ethnocentrism in public administration: A plea for a truly global discipline

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Submission for the Minnowbrook 50th Anniversary Conference

“Of ourselves, so long as we only know ourselves, we know nothing” (Wilson, 1887: 220).

As populism is on the rise everywhere, so too are nationalism and xenophobia. Does this matter for public administration? Not if we narrowly conceptualize the goal of PA as apolitically “managing” public policy with maximum efficiency, and public administration research as the non-normative search for scientific “universal” truths. But this is exactly what the first Minnowbrook conference and many scholars since then have argued against. Ignoring values other than efficiency reinforces patterns of marginalization and oppression that have always been present in any “administrative state”, but that have been exacerbated lately by the rise of populism and global resurgence of authoritarianism.

What if anything can PA do in this context? At the very least, increased global engagement seems now more necessary than ever. Calls to make public administration more comparative and more internationally relevant are not new (e.g., Perry, 2016; Roberts, 2013; Riggs, 1991; Wilson, 1887). Yet articles with a comparative or international focus in top PA journals are still few and far in-between, and focused mostly on countries in North America and Western Europe, or, even more narrowly, on what Al Roberts has called “AUSCANZUKUS”.¹

What explains this ethnocentrism of PA? Old and new PA paradigms have the potential to be more comparative and international. Yet, so far, this potential is not fully realized. The “Simonian”, purportedly non-normative approach, currently quasi-reborn under the mantle of behavioral public administration, tends to focus on micro-level, individual behavior. By prioritizing rigor, it deemphasizes questions and places for which “hard” data is more difficult to obtain and analyze. By focusing on micro-level behavior, it ignores the political, institutional, social systems within which public administration is embedded, that is, the “large forces” that shape administrative development and behavior. To increase its international and comparative relevance, research in this tradition needs to engage with and theorize more the meso and macro “context” of individual behavior, preempting uncritical generalization of findings by explicitly assessing also the external validity of the studies.

The Waldonian approach explicitly emphasizes and embraces the democratic values on which PA is or should be built. Yet, overcoming ethnocentrism within this stream also remains challenging – not because such values are necessarily country-specific, but because the “demos” can easily be conceptualized as “our people”, and the values treated as de-

¹ Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States. <http://governancejournal.net/advice-to-authors/>

contextualized and independent of the larger systems in which they are embedded. A solely value-centered approach also risks sliding into naïve idealism and ignoring a main lesson of administrative history – that even if public administrative is (today) meant to serve the public, it has also always been an instrument to rule it. As Fukuyama (2011, 2014) argues, well-functioning (modern) states are those that succeed in balancing democracy, bureaucracy, and the rule of law. A truly global PA discipline will have to grapple with even more challenging normative questions about the role *and* the power of the administrative state in a “good” society. Again, understanding how values are realized or not in administrative law, administrative structure and administrative practice requires a more explicit and sustained engagement with said “context”. Such understanding can perhaps help us answer one of the most important questions for a globalized PA: how do we engage with and defend democratic values in non-democratic contexts and in an increasingly authoritarian world?

In both traditions, the neglect of “context” is also the result of shallow engagement of PA with other disciplines, and increasingly “closed” and self-referential PA scholarship. The behavioral movement has brought a welcome reevaluation of the importance of psychology for PA at the micro-level. Yet, as Roberts (2013) has argued, not only has the study of large forces in PA been ceded to other disciplines, such as political science, but the findings from these disciplines have not found their way back into PA scholarship. At the very least, if PA scholarship wants to go beyond the “West” or the “North” (read: rich countries), it needs to engage better and learn more from development studies – a truly interdisciplinary field that has been grappling with issues of “good governance” in developing countries for a long time.

What then is to be done to make PA more internationally aware and relevant?

- **Remember why we “care” about “other” places.** One argument for increased internationalization of PA is a desire to speak to “great problems” the world faces. While desirable, “great problem” thinking risks generating two fallacies: the “great powers” fallacy and the “conflict or poverty porn” fallacy. The “great powers fallacy” argues that only the administrative systems of those countries that pose a threat to US global supremacy are worthy of study. Conversely, the “conflict or poverty porn” fallacy implies that the focus should be on those places that face the biggest challenges, such as fragile or failed states. In combination, the argument would be that only those places are worthy of study that pose a security threat to the US. Such thinking remains highly ethnocentric, leaves out a large number of “in-between” developing or emerging countries, and ignores the main scientific reason why the study of different administrative systems is important: because it offers more variability in terms of institutional, political, and other country-level structural factors that shape public administration, and thus can help build and strengthen theory that allows “us” to also better understand our own administrative systems.
- **Don’t be afraid of globalization.** Globalization – broadly understood as increased global integration and internationalization (or supra-nationalization) of policy-making – has been much maligned in PA (Farazmand, 2012). This is in part due to the Washington Consensus “hangover” of the 1990s, including its “privatization, liberalization, and stabilization”

mantra, and the presumed – but not entirely borne out – spread of New Public Management (NPM) around the world. But while the Washington Consensus might have been global in spread, its origin is not – as the name suggests. The same can be said of the NPM approach, which arose and diffused mostly among Anglo-Saxon countries (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). Yet, the Washington Consensus and NPM are not the only byproducts of globalization. Global policy and practice diffusion has included political and administrative innovations that are arguably (normatively) “good”, such as the spread of the right to information around the world. Globalization has also facilitated diffusion of “good practices” from the “South” to the “North” – the most famous example being the spread of participatory budgeting from Brazil to many countries, including developed ones. Thus, global integration is neither inherently good nor inherently bad by itself – it depends on how it is managed. PA has had remarkably little to say on the potential for good of globalization.

- **Be humble.** Leveraging the good of globalization requires humility and self-reflection among those who have the greatest influence in the field – i.e., North American and Western European scholars and practitioners. The implicit assumption that “the West knows best”, the lack of reflection about the “larger forces” that shape PA, the lack of attention to administrative history, and the lack of a truly comparative framework have all contributed to a rather uncritical advocacy for NPM-type practices in contexts where they are not suitable. While patterns of (subnational) policy diffusion have been amply studied in PA, there is currently less research not only on how policies and practices diffuse beyond the developed world, but also on how they can be adapted to local contexts so that they strengthen the quality and responsiveness of public administration rather than weaken it. In development studies there is currently a revolution of sorts underway, where academics, and, to a lesser degree, practitioners, are moving away from “one-size-fits-all”, “best-practice”, “solution-driven” approaches to public sector reform, towards “problem” and “process driven” approaches that seek to help local practitioners identify local reform needs and find local solutions to address these needs (Andrews, 2013). Yet, a purely process-oriented approach risks falling in a different trap: that of overplaying the uniqueness of places and problems, underplaying the lessons that can be learned from comparative research, and “forgetting” the importance of administrative systems and broader, macro-structural factors that shape reform processes and outcomes. In other words, a process-based, localized approach to public sector reform should not detract from efforts to develop better and more portable theories of public administration. At the same time, “we” – scholars and practitioners from the “North” or “West” – should also admit that our knowledge about what is translatable across contexts and what not is still quite limited, and we also have a lot to learn by studying administrative systems and practices of a larger varieties of countries.
- **Build bridges** in terms of both scholars and scholarship. The number of foreign-born or “international” students has been steadily increasing in PA programs. Yet, only a minority of PA schools have an explicit international focus, or offer courses on comparative or international public administration (Manoharan, Mirbel & Carrizales, 2018). Many

international PA PhD graduates remain and go on to become faculty in US PA schools. They represent a potentially rich source of international expertise that can be leveraged to internationalize PA scholarship and increase its comparative focus. Yet, even for these scholars, the incentives to focus on domestic PA issues – from data availability to ease of publishing to implicit biases – are very strong. More explicit commitment and encouragement of international and comparative scholarship from leading journals and editors could go a long way in encouraging these, often young, scholars to veer off the beaten path a bit.

- **Listen and speak to a broader range of practitioners.** Understandably, most PA communities target their own national and local policy-makers. Since the US, UK, and a few Northern European countries dominate the academic PA community both in terms of schools and in terms of journals and research, the literature is geared towards (domestic) decision-makers in these countries. “Development administration” is a somewhat neglected sub-field of public administration in the US. Much of it is targeted towards or linked to US – and to a lesser degree IOs and a few other donor countries – foreign aid goals and practices (Brinkerhoff, 2008; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2010). Little PA research takes the perspective or speaks directly to decision-makers, administrators, and citizens of developing countries, without the “donor gaze”.

In conclusion, if we, as a community of scholars, follow the suggestions above - manage to expand our geographic and theoretical horizons, be humbler about what we know but more ambitious about what we want to know, and encourage the potential “bridge-builders” and “boundary-spanners” in our midst - we might stand a chance to enrich not only administrative practice everywhere, but also administrative theory here, at “home”.

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