

Rethinking the Administrative State and Public Administration in an Era of Political and Economic Uncertainty

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If they can get you asking the wrong questions,
they never have to worry about the answers.

-Thomas Pynchon

Footfalls echo in the memory,
down the passages which one did not take,
Towards the door we never opened.

-T.S. Eliot

I have started with this quote and poem because they highlight, in many respects, the vexing challenges, dilemmas, and yes, even contradictions we are confronting in rethinking the administrative state and public administration at a time when public faith in certain democratic institutions has plummeted. These challenges will have long-term pedagogical, theoretical, and practical implications for public administration and public policy. That is, for all the copious research and Talmudic scrutiny written on the administrative state, both pro and con, I believe we are still not focusing enough of our attention, both theoretically and pragmatically, on those underlying cultural, political, historical, and economic forces that created some of our most pressing societal problems in the first place, and how the administrative state came to play such a critical role in ameliorating the rougher edges of a market-centered society. To wit: are we too fixated, albeit for understandable reasons, primarily on “procedural reforms” that rarely confront the infrastructure of economic power and how that power in varying ways can erode the civic capacity to contest such market and private power? And, in rethinking the administrative state, do we also have to rethink our own intellectual, academic, and professional role and limitations in public administration (and, I would also add public policy here)? Finally, and most vexingly: how, procedurally and substantively, can we realistically change the public perception of the administrative state and public administration in our deeply fractured political culture?

I think the best way to tease out some of the implications of these questions, primarily in regards to the U.S, is to wrap this discussion around the following thinkers: Dwight Waldo, Larry Bartels and Christopher Achen, Yascha Mounk and Roberto Foa, and finally, Arlie Russell Hochschild. While each of these scholars has their own specific theoretical perspective, they pose complementary questions to explore how we might proceed in rethinking the administrative state without necessarily mirroring the hauteur of a managerial mindset alone. That said, I will briefly explore the intellectual and practical geometry of their ideas-- and by inference, the questions they pose for a field like public administration--and how they intersect with a rethinking of the administrative state in this era of political and economic uncertainty.

In 1980, Dwight Waldo (1980) voiced something that has surprisingly not received the attention it deserves. He wrote: “for if public administration is not knowledgeable and honest about its limitations, it will inevitably suffer not just for its sins of waste and ineffectiveness, but from the bitterness of faith misplaced and hope unfulfilled.” I particularly like this quote because it is a prescient warning that perhaps such noble goals of trying to infuse citizens with a renewed sense of civic purpose or a litany of other similar endeavors could smack of mere elitism, and, more importantly, might be viewed by the public – again, to use Waldo’s words – as “impractical, presumptuous, humorous, and outrageous.” To push this point a little more: what are the actual limitations of public administration (and public policy) in changing those broader societal conditions shaping civic life—an endeavor, no doubt, that would take us out of our conventional managerial outlook? And, assuming we did find such a viable approach, who would be listening beyond the already converted? Specifically, is our discussion of the administrative state – and public administration’s role in any reform or rethinking of it – merely another insular debate that leaves most citizens as convenient props in a discussion that was not really meant for them at all? The conventional wisdom in public administration, I suspect, would contend that the best way to approach any rethinking of the administrative state is to focus mainly on well thought out procedural/managerial reforms predicated on the best evidence we can muster. But what about the substantive side of this discussion that deals with such issues of liberty, self-governance, a vibrant public sphere, and approaches to increase public trust (just to name a few) that would require something quite different from us? The nagging question I have is this: what different approach, or approaches, can work on such substantive issues without falling victim to Waldo’s warning?

This point leads me to Larry Bartels and Christopher Achen’s (2016) insights published in Democracy for Realists, who note that most members of the public simply cannot fulfill their roles as active and well-informed citizens. In fact, they argue, most citizens use information not to enlighten themselves on policy issues, but rather to rationalize their own preconceived ideas, driven by their deeply engrained partisan loyalties, and facilitated by a “duration neglect” whereby the importance of certain issues (and respective facts) fade from view in a relatively short period of time. This “folk concept of democracy”, as they call it, ignores the stark reality that citizens, for the most part, are guided more by their own social identities, group and partisan loyalties, and personal circumstances, thus, not surprisingly, can become vulnerable to the manipulation of powerful institutional actors and public leaders. Assuming the validity of their empirical analysis, a poignant question arises: can any successful rethinking of the administrative state (in the U.S.) also cope with a relatively disengaged public who is paying less and less attention to public affairs, while still hoping to gain its trust in producing just and defensible outcomes – outcomes that depend, in part, in understanding the relevant knowledge of the publics impacted by such administrative rules and regulations? The backdrop, of course, is that from a historical perspective in the U.S. there always has been a public ambivalence towards public administration and, in general, to the role of bureaucracy in public affairs. But also worth noting is what Bartels called “unequal democracy” especially when it is coupled with rising economic and wealth inequality. He concludes in Unequal Democracy (2016), the following: “Imperfect as they are, the processes and institutions of American democracy provide us with consequential choices. We can reinforce the levees; we can divert some of the fastest-running waters; and we can insist that the most vulnerable among us not be abandoned when the affluent flee to higher ground. We can make these choices. Whether we will make them remains to be seen.” How this observation, if accurate, fits into our discussion about the administrative state and public administration is a point meriting our attention. What remains to be seen for us is how we come to terms with a certain segment of the citizenry who believes that the elites (whatever sector they are part of) have largely forgotten their social and economic plight. How would we ever reach out to them in a meaningful manner? Do we even have a public language for such a discourse? And is it even worth our effort to do so, given our present academic and professional role in modern society?

Enter Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (2016) analysis of St. Charles, Louisiana, one of the poorest and most environmentally stricken areas in the state where citizens of this region blame the Environmental Protection Agency (at both the state and federal levels), rather than the corporations that polluted their land and water. This point raises the disconcerting issue that the odds of reforming the administrative state with any modicum of public trust are not encouraging. Hochschild is perplexed that the true onus of blame for environmental degradation—which should be self-evident—is somehow obscured and supplanted by what she has aptly called “deep stories.” These deep stories, for example, are manifested in residents overwhelming voting for Tea Party candidates, in the

belief that the “others” (read: minorities and immigrants) are cutting into line for benefits before them, and anger about “federal and state bureaucrats” whose excessive regulations are costing locals their jobs. St. Charles locals, moreover, are likewise resentful of those elites who are seen as continuously degrading their cultural and social values. Hochschild contends that the residents of St. Charles, to a large extent, do not always vote in their own economic self-interest; they also vote congruent to their “emotional interest”, often (but not always) cloaked in economic despair and racial resentment, and with their strong adherence to “loyalty, sacrifice, and endurance.”

These deep stories represent concomitantly a troubling paradox: how and why residents of a region with some of the worst economic, educational, and health indicators strongly support policies that actually call for cutting federal assistance to their region? Hochschild tells us that these citizens have become (in their own minds) economically vulnerable strangers in their own land – displaced, forgotten, and marginalized – victims deeply embedded in the prevailing political, social, and economic inequalities of society. Here, Hochschild is on to something that warrants some serious thought on our part: namely, that the possibility that procedural reforms of the administrative state - whether they involve a more robust notice and comment process, a revamping of certain federal regulations, a regulatory budget, citizen audits, a strengthening of the Congressional capacity, an emphasis on localism, or a focus on intermediation (to mention just a few possibilities) - will never in themselves be enough to ameliorate what some have called “rampant anti-administrativism” among many public officials and citizens like those residing in St. Charles. Dealing with this stark reality will require by definition the necessity of asking different kind of questions – frankly, ones we usually do not ask.

Here Yascha Mounk and Roberto Foa (2016) offer a sobering trend that goes to the *raison d’être* of any rethinking of the administrative state and public administration: that the increasing distrust of government and its institutions poses a fundamental challenge to liberal democracy – a troubling phenomenon that is growing in Europe and elsewhere. This concern is somewhat reminiscent of Crozier, Huntington, and Watanski (1975) report that the distrust of government leads inevitably to the “delegitimization of authority.” While, empirically, trust in public institutions is related to such factors as level of corruption, procedural fairness, economic performance, degree of inclusiveness, and socialization, what is especially disheartening is that the lack of trust is also being attributed to a troubling cynicism, which assumes the worst of public institutions as both incompetent and self-interested.

According to recent surveys, this cynicism by certain segments in society has become more acute since the Great Recession of 2008. For example, according to the World Values Survey (2010-2014) political trust, interestingly, is highest in illiberal countries as China, Qatar, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan. On the other hand, political trust has been fairly low in established democracies, with the exception of Sweden and Germany. Political trust, however, does tend to fluctuate in response to certain events that vary in length and, as such, is nation-specific.

What Mounk and Foa lament is worth pondering: that the distrust of public institutions, at its worst, comes when skepticism (which is often a healthy attribute) elapses into a numbing cynicism that can tear at the very fabric of democratic discourse and decision-making – “a deep disillusionment with democracy itself.” They conclude somberly that “citizens over the last three decades have become less likely to endorse the importance of democracy; less likely to express trust in democratic institutions; and, less likely to reject nondemocratic alternatives.” To be sure, other scholars have disputed this conclusion by arguing that the lack of trust in political authorities and institutions is not necessarily detrimental to democracy. The irony, according to Justin Wolfers, is that in the U.S., while trust in all types of institutions, from banks to the media, has declined since the 1950s, our institutions since that time have become more transparent, ironically contributing to this declining trust. Putting aside for the moment what is specifically causing the civic lack of trust in public institutions and what it means for democratic processes, I think Richard Edelman, who has surveyed for the last 17 years the lack of trust in 28 countries, correctly describes the implications for us today: the lack of faith in governmental processes, coupled with economic and societal fears, and the loss of trust in institutions adds up to the rise of a new (and troubling) form of pseudo-democratic populism.

So what connects all these varying perspectives in rethinking the administrative state and the role of public administration itself? First, each in their own way, they point to increasing political and economic

uncertainty and unease in the body politic. Amongst certain segments of the public, this uncertainty and unease manifests itself in economic insecurity and dislocation, in unequal democracy that is part and parcel of increasing income (and wealth) inequality, and a growing distrust of anything that smacks of elitism. Heightened uncertainty under these circumstances can easily become politically clothed in anxiety, fear, and status resentment. The backdrop to these insights is the danger that Arendt identified when the potent societal forces of gullibility and cynicism become linked: they become a dangerous parasite that works itself into the very cracks and crevices of the modern polity.

But a central question remains: how is it possible to explain to the general public that the administrative state and its growth, in large part, emerged in direct response to the inequalities and economic dislocations of the industrialization process? There is, no doubt, much room for procedural reforms to the administration state. Yet, I think, notwithstanding Waldo's earlier point, the most important questions facing us will be largely substantive in nature, i.e., a revitalized civil society, the fostering of trust in democratic institutions, and by addressing the deeper systemic economic and political inequalities in society and their consequential impact on democratic life.

It was de Tocqueville who warned prophetically that in democratic societies citizens can become consumed by insecurity and anxiety (status and materialism), by discontent and rampant frustration (lack of time to achieve economic desires), and by envy and constant restlessness (Schleifer, 2012). But what worries me most is that when, increasingly, many citizens cannot--and do not--differentiate between factual evidence and fiction, opinions from facts, and leadership from celebrity and entertainment, we are testing the fragile nature of public institutions, or at least putting them under undue strain whereby certain parties feel confident they can sell their particular definition of reality to an already confused and bewildered public.

So where do we go from here? Notwithstanding the inherent tension between unelected policy experts and democratic accountability, there will always be a certain part of the public who believes its liberty is being usurped with the rise of what it perceives as administrative despotism. Given this reality, successfully linking the demands of administrative effectiveness and accountability will require, to large degree, coming to terms with a daunting challenge for public administration (and public policy), both pedagogically and intellectually: the fundamental rethinking of the substantive meaning and purpose of "publicness" in an era of political and economic uncertainty. A rethinking of publicness will compel us, in one way or the other, to uncover and examine with our students, colleagues, and those still willing to listen, the "societal play of forces that operates beneath the surface of political forms" (Adorno, 1967) that harbor political silence, uncritical compliance, and a political culture that may be losing its understanding of the critical interplay between morality and power. That challenge alone—and where that debate ultimately takes us—will change the face and meaning of public administration for many years to come.

I believe we have to face the reality that a rethinking of both the administrative state and public administration in this age of distrust and political anguish will require different kinds of questions than we are accustomed of asking ourselves. Questions that most likely go beyond our discussions of collaborative networks, deliberative participation, evidence-based policy, managerial efficacy, and empirical analysis (as important as all these approaches are), to a substantive inquiry that addresses those forces of politics that are primarily cultural and symbolic in nature. Forces that have had a role in shaping racial antagonism, caustic identity politics, and white middle class resentment in an era of rampant political and economic inequality. That said, while Waldo was correct in alerting us to our limitations (and potential for hubris), he was not asking us ever to be timid or parochial in the questions we ask—as controversial as they may seem. On that point alone, we owe him a great (and enduring) intellectual debt.

A final note: David Foster Wallace (2005), in a commencement speech at Kenyon College, opened his talk with a story of two young fish swimming along, who came upon an older fish. The older fish swimming in the other direction nodded and asked the two young fish, "Morning Boys, how's the water?" The two young fish continued to swim along for a while, and eventually one asked the other, "What the hell is water?" I don't know if we are going to open new doors with the kind of questions I have raised here, but at least we may begin, hopefully, asking more questions in line with and the spirit of "What the hell is water?" Such questions are long overdue.