

# Giambattista Vico and Public Administration in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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History is often thought of in the metaphorical terms of a pendulum, cycles, or when a general progress is accepted, of a spiral. With this imagery in mind, the invitation to the Minnowbrook 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference suggests the possibility that we may be at a point in our history at which the pendulum is beginning to swing back in the direction from which it came, and that would have important implications for the practice and study of public administration for the foreseeable future.

For some, the current state of affairs has led to the questioning of the general relevance of public administration research through higher education for both the practitioners of today and those of the future. For others, questions have been raised regarding the relevance in society of long held values regarding citizenship, democracy, bureaucracy, social equity and inclusion. While still others have chosen to focus less on the possible irrelevance of the past and more on a reinvigorated effort towards the future and the reconciliation of significant divisions within the field. Divisions such as those between Simonian and Waldonian visions for the study of public administration, or between the macro level insights regarding public administration across time, geography and culture and micro-level insights that may or may not be generalizable across these differences in contexts. Regardless of the particular focus, if we accept a cyclical (or spiral) view of history, perhaps a look back at the work of Giambattista Vico, a lesser known, anti-enlightenment philosopher from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century may be relevant and potentially useful for framing our discussions.

Scholars of history and philosophy have characterized Vico as a counter-enlightenment thinker due to his consistent critique of Cartesian thinking. However, many acknowledge that his critiques do not dismiss this form of thinking, but rather attempt to balance it with an equal attention to rhetoric, imagination, and an appreciation for the social sciences, which are less well regarded within the Cartesian framework of what qualifies as *true* science. In specific, five principles articulated by Vico are generally referred to by scholars as having particular relevance for today (1) the *verum factum* principle, (2) the *verum certum* principle, (3) the *art of topics*, (4) the *two conceits*: conceit of nations and conceit of scholars, and (5) the *ideal eternal history*. Together, these five ideas offer an important perspective on public administration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One of Vico's most well-known ideas, referred to as the *verum factum* principle, holds that one can know the truth in what one makes. This principle is seen as a support for the social sciences and a challenge to the Cartesian approach to science, which considers the natural world as the only thing *certain* and therefore worth studying. Vico's argument is that since man makes the social world, man can truly come to understand it. While the natural world, on the other hand, was not made by man and therefore the extent to which man can truly understand it is limited. While Vico does not dismiss the hard sciences, he does highlight the importance of a certain form of *knowing* that may be less based in observation and more experiential.

In a second closely related idea, the *verum certum* principle highlights the belief that every cultural system throughout history is a contextually specific expression of a single, eternal law and that by comparing and contrasting the specific (i.e. *certain*) systems, scholars can discover these eternal truths. Therefore, while the behaviors we observe across cultures may appear different, when

understood within their particular context, we may come to find a similar principle being applied and it is this common principle that should be the focus of study.

As a professor of rhetoric in Naples, and grounded in his belief in what can be known and how one might come to know it, Vico introduces the *art of topics*, which he describes as the art of making new arguments and new connections among ideas rather than focusing primarily on critiquing the work of others, as was taught through the Cartesian approach. Four reasons he gives for this are that (1) children have naturally strong imaginations which should be taken advantage of, (2) imagination and creativity are better suited for ethics than a logic based on geometric certainty (and the decisions of public servants are more often ethical in nature rather than grounded in certainties), (3) the art of topics focuses on making connections between ideas, which is a more persuasive form of communication than the geometric style of reasoning and communication. And the fourth reason, closely related to the next two principles, is that (4) the imagination, rather than geometric logic, is more conducive to understanding the early epochs of a culture's history and institutions.

The fourth of Vico's principles actually consists of two related ideas grounded in a single axiom first articulated by Tacitus— "Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, whenever it is lost in ignorance man makes himself the measure of all things (NS 120)." What Vico refers to as the *conceit of nations* refers to the idea that all nations think of themselves as being rooted in the original culture and the wisdom of all other nations as being derived from them. This then leads us to the false assumption that similarities across cultures are due to a common origin rather than evidence of a universal principle. Vico also refers to the *conceit of scholars* by which he refers to the tendency of scholars to interpret the actions of others through our own logic and mental frameworks, thus wrongly labeling behaviors as faulty rather than understanding them as legitimate within different mental frameworks aimed at solving different problems.

Finally, as the culmination of his career, in *The New Science*, Vico identifies what he calls the *ideal eternal history*. This principle asserts that there is a consistent pattern to be observed in the evolution of each culture's history. He colorfully describes the sequence of this "ideal eternal history" in this way: "Men first [feel] necessity, then look for utility, next attend to comfort, still later amuse themselves with pleasure, thence grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad and waste their substance (NS 241)." He goes on to categorize this evolution into three distinct phases of a culture's history (the Age of Gods, the Age of Heroes, and finally the Age of Humans), each with its own logic and its own set of human institutions. The first two ages he describes as grounded in what are termed *imaginative universals* or a *poetic wisdom*, in which the *Age of Gods* must be understood through an imaginative logic based on making the world intelligible through the use of gods; and the *Age of Heroes* must be understood through an imaginative logic which is refocused on creating types, characters and institutions to bring about order. It is in this age that Vico sees a shift from paternalism to class warfare as a dominant tension, and in the final age, *Age of Humans*, the lower classes are able to change the logic from poetic to conceptual. "Unfortunately, while this conceptual wisdom gives the plebeians their freedom, it undermines the cultural unity provided by poetic wisdom. While all in society become free and equal, the religious inspiration to work for the common good rather than the individual becomes lost. Society eventually splinters into a barbarism of reflection in which civil wars are fought solely for personal gain. This is the barbarism of reflection which returns society to its origin (Bertland, A)."

While Vico's insights do not necessarily provide all the answers to the dilemmas we are experiencing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they may offer an important, and a different lens through which to understand the questions being raised at this conference and by today's public administration scholars in general.

First, in some small way, the Minnowbrook conferences of the past 50 years are an illustration of Vico's ideal eternal history. Just as we are discussing the possibility of a revolution taking place in the field of Public Administration today, so too were those participating in the first Minnowbrook conference. But is it the same revolution? Vico offers us his thoughts about the cycles each culture passes through. He also argues that human, and therefore public, institutions exist differently in these three broad cycles or stages. If his insights are true, this raises a number of interesting questions. For example, rather than asking whether or not we are going through a revolution (by Vico's description, we are always going through a revolution, because that is the nature of history), a more interesting question could be—what part of the revolution are we currently going through? Are we, in the United States (or perhaps the nation state is the wrong unit of analysis), passing through an Age of God's on our way to an Age of Heroes? Are we moving from an Age of Heroes on our way to an Age of Humans? Or, have we possibly entered into the "barbarism of reflection" as we begin to cycle back from an Age of Humans to an Age of Gods? What implications do these cycles or stages have for the role of public administration in society today? Do cultures pass through these cycles at an increasing pace as they move forward? How do the cycles and stages of other cultures impact how a focal culture progresses through its own cycles and stages? Are there certain actions that can be taken to smooth out the cycle through the stages (similar to policies that help smooth economic cycles) so that feelings of necessity are limited and ideals of equality are maintained? Are certain aspects of public administration effective across cultures at similar stages or within a culture across stages?

If we are going to be able to answer these questions, it is clear that a strong understanding of context is needed, as well as a look beyond observations to their significance within the web of logic in which they are to be understood.

One other topic of current interest to which Vico's work speaks is the topic of education and the relevance of the academic field of public administration to practitioners. In previous Minnowbrook conferences, some participants have reflected on what makes a public administration program different from graduate programs in business administration, social work, or educational administration. They have discussed the relative importance of additional content related to ethics, law, finance, and collaborative problem solving and management. And other participants have focused on how to increase the relevance of public administration research to other social science disciplines, to practitioners, and to the general public. To these focuses and reflections, Vico would argue that a training of the imagination and the ability to form new connections between old ideas is a more useful training than one grounded in geometric rationality. Not only would his proposed form of thinking be more likely to facilitate the creative, out-of-the-box thinking needed to lead collaborative problem solving, Vico would also argue that that form of thinking would facilitate a communication style that would make connections with audiences and prove more persuasive than a geometric-type proof for even the best policy or impressive statistical method.

### ***Bibliography***

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