

Public Administration Should Do Less Empiricism and More Arguing About Good Solutions Steeped in Good Explanations

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Rethinking the Administrative State

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It is my argument that as a result of the current breakneck pace of societal and cultural changes, throughout modern civilization, and the accompanying explosion of data and new technological tools, that we, as a field, should begin reducing our over reliance on empiricism (and null hypothesis testing in particular), leave this testing more often to be completed by those who do it better than us, and instead search for good solutions to public problems more directly, through argument about competing ideas and competing explanations. Our criteria for our work should be “have we found a good solution to public problem x.” Across all fields of study, we should be society’s authority on solving public problems and promoting good governance. Society should be able to rely on us to provide solutions that improve their lives. This call is even more immediate as evil administration is on the rise with its battles against human rights, human progress, good governance, and democracy. Two important thinkers, outside of our field, have made this point in interesting ways.

In his recent book, “Enlightenment Now,” Stephen Pinker documents the rapid progress civilization has made since the enlightenment. He repeatedly documents and describes how humans have objectively, hugely improved their wellbeing on a number of dimensions including life expectancy, child mortality, literacy rate, reduction in violence, etc. Pinker highlights that despite the current malaise associated with reason, progress, markets and liberalism, humanity has made great progress in the last 150 years, with huge growth in the last 50 years. He argues that we should double down on our commitments to reason, logic, and science. Values, as scholars and fellow academics, we should share with him.¹

Additionally, in his recent book, “The Beginning of Infinity” David Deutsch, lays out that societies, like those of the US and the West broadly, with a culture of progress, error correction, conjectures, and rational criticism put humans on a path of infinite progress as universal explainers. Deutsch lays out a compelling argument that if we create and maintain traditions of conjecture, rational criticism, and error correction that we are always at the beginning of infinity

¹ Pinker, S. (2018). *Enlightenment now: the case for reason, science, humanism, and progress*. Penguin.

on the path solving problems with knowledge. Deutsch lays these themes out in line with what he sees as the Karl Popper's general standard for the progress of knowledge.²

This leading psychologist and leading physicist argue that huge progress has been made, in large parts, due to reason and rational approaches to solving society's problems. And, that if humans have political systems that allow for creativity, criticism, and error correction, they will continue to gain more knowledge and solve more of the problems we face. This is also the task we have as a field of public administration.

Good solutions constructed of good explanations to important public problems are immensely important. We need to pull from all relevant literatures to develop deep understandings of how governance can work to minimize suffering while ensuring that we remain a civilization that is creative (engages in conjecture), seeks rational criticism, and corrects its errors. These are all important parameters for ensuring that good explanations, and thus good solutions, manifest themselves into our civilization.

So, if you will grant me that it is important for our field to be providing deep, full explanations (in the vein of Popper and Deutsch) of public problems that can lead directly to the implementation of policies or strategies to alleviate or lessen these public problems. How can we do our best to push our scholarly work, our collective intellectual ability, to clearly solve our public problems?

I put forth, for your criticism, that we apply the same criteria of knowledge creation to our own field, which will, ultimately, require a renewed conversation of values for public administration. We should encourage clashes of ideas, exposing them to criticism and thus improvement. We have conducted countless empirical studies in differing contexts of uninteresting or unuseful theories. I, too, have been guilty of this type of research. This obsession with empiricism has begun moving from the domain of survey and archival data to digital experiments. It could certainly be argued that we have wholeheartedly embraced empirical testing as the main mode of analysis. We have highly technical tools to examine patently uninteresting ideas. Empiricism is important, and the field of policy analysis has laid much of its own alms at its altar, but Public Administration should not continue to do the same. Let's argue about ideas until we develop some with deep explanations, that do not vary, and that have explanatory reach. Modern society needs us to carry this torch for solving public problems.

In a bit of irony, thanks, in part to empiricism, we are on a path to address Wilson's question of how to conduct government before we have an agreement on what government should do. What goals or values should be pursued? This, sadly, has kept us, as a field, from being able to generate deep explanations for much of anything. To move forward as a field, that can contribute to useful interesting knowledge, we must have an understanding about the goals we are trying to accomplish, otherwise, we are simply in the business of making governance tools for whatever purpose, any political actor, deems worthy. It would be as if the scientists involved in the Manhattan project walked away, patted themselves on the back, and said "well we know how to

² Deutsch, D. (2011). *The beginning of infinity: Explanations that transform the world*. Penguin UK.

implement nuclear fusion in a devastatingly effective manner, well done, let's turn this information over to any and all political leadership of all political persuasions." Which, would have been completely insane.

So, why has empiricism taken the forefront? Why are we empirically testing in an endless number of new contexts and new datasets?

While I certainly do not claim to know all the explanatory factors, let's be frank all the same: it's easier to run a regression in Stata (or R or SPSS or Python or Excel or *insert your favorite statistics software here*) than it is to develop a good explanation. I know it is. I've run many regressions and come up with few, if any, good explanations. Another contributing factor, as you all know, is that the standard for our home departments, in terms of publication records, is quantity. If it's easier to run a regression than it is to develop a good explanation, guess which way those tradeoffs fall under pressure for quantity? Of course, this is just a conjecture, one subject to criticism, as well.

So, my plea is this, let's do more arguing, more disagreeing, more conjecture, more creativity, more error correcting. Let's frame our arguments with good explanations that are hard to vary. Let's conduct less empirical tests. Let's encourage new explanations. Let's have public debates. Let's be relevant. Modern society could use a hand in its endeavor of human progress.

Finally, why is this so important at this moment in time? Because, the battle against evil administration and bad governance is waging, in the same modern civilization that is beginning to experience the beginnings of potential infinite growth in the direction of error correction and problem solving. If we fail to ensure this transition towards, enlightenment, growth and progress, we not only will have failed as a field, as a body of knowledge, but also on the promise future civilization has for unlimited progress. This is what is at risk. Society needs a strong, clear voice on topics of good governance and good public administration. We should be that voice.