

Advanced Introduction to Public Management and Administration

By Christopher Pollitt

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With this book Pollitt has provided an excellent – and agile – introduction to the inter-disciplinary field of public administration (PA) and public management (PM). This is an important book, a powerful introduction to what still is in a number of respects an amorphous – or indeed polymorphous – field.

The first chapter deals with defining questions and makes an attempt to draw the borders of the field; it tackles the issue of ‘the nature of the beast’: what is PM? Hardly an easy question if we consider that PA is generally regarded as a field defined by its subject rather than by its concepts and methods, and that it is inter-disciplinary – some prefer to say multi-disciplinary –, hence it borrows concepts, notions and methods from a range of disciplines in ways that are not always so easy to bring to consistency.

Chapter 2 discusses the use of theories in PA and PM, noticing how the field is generally a borrower from other disciplines, rather than a lender, of “big theories”: nothing wrong, Pollitt argues, given its “applied” focus. Those passionate for theorising will still find a host of middle- and low-level theories which are specific to the governmental subject matter of PM (27).

A relatively longer third chapter provides the reader, especially the novice, with a useful overview and review of the variety of research methods employed in the field.

Chapter 4 is, at least for the author of this book review, probably the most succulent. The chapter aims at profiling the PA and PM community and vets the “location” of the discipline into the broader academic world and the articulated and highly varied (from country to country) organisation of the intellectual labour that is embodied into different national academic systems. The chapter is tremendously insightful, and I am sure most scholars in the field will recognise in the depiction of the PM community provided by Pollitt so many familiar traits that they have experienced first-hand in their own professional journey. A magisterial representation of the field, enriched with fresh data and narrated with the proverbial wit and clarity of Christopher Pollitt.

Chapter 5 engages with another key issue: the relationship of PM with practice – an issue to which Pollitt, himself a practitioner in the early stages of his professional life, has significantly contributed through his long-standing scientific production.

Chapter 6 sets the analysis of the state of the field of PA and PM against the backdrop of a number of “mega-trends”: from demographic transformations to environmental changes and to enduring austerity. The main message here takes the form of a warning, to policy-makers and scholars alike: do not underestimate the impact these trends may have – are very likely to have – on the future of government and public administration.

Chapter 7 concludes the journey going back to the main topic of chapter 4, that is, the state of the art of the PM community, adopting a forward-looking view. Four

scenarios are depicted for the future of academic PM (PM as a practice will endure anyway, as public administration is simply an unescapable component of government and society). These four scenarios are extinction, expansion, endurance or extension. Academic PM might disappear, or it might expand (unlikely), or continue more or less as it is ('more of the same'), or it could interpenetrate (much more than in the past) with other academic fields; this last scenario is characterised by PM scholars migrating more and more into interdisciplinary settings, mainly concentrating on the formidable challenges posed by the external megatrends like those briefly mentioned above (150). Though refraining from making any prediction about the likelihood of either scenario, and indeed adding the important qualification that these four scenarios are far from exhausting all possibilities, it seems to transpire from the pages that Pollitt warns us, the academic PM community, to proactively engage with the fluid future of the discipline – as the future might come to us much quicker than we may think.

Before concluding, I think it proper to highlight what seem to me a couple of limitations of the book. First, in profiling the PA/PM community, the role of learned societies and scientific and professional associations, and notably their identity-building function, is at least partly underestimated. Notably for a multi-/inter-disciplinary field like PA, they may instead be extremely important. In fact, if PA/PM is a subject field rather than a discipline with its un-problematically stated problems, un-controversially standardised concepts and consensus over accepted methods, then the role that learned societies perform in the shaping of consensus over subject, problems, concepts and methods may – at least potentially – be more significant than the depiction that seems to emerge from the account provided in the book. On this point, however, the reader should be alerted that the author of this review may be biased by his current "secondary occupation" as the pro tempore president of one of such learned societies, alongside his primary one as an academic (at least if the saying is truthful: "where you stand depends on where you sit"). However, I would have liked a wider, critical discussion of the roles and functions that learned societies and professional associations across the world perform in shaping the identity of the PA and PM community.

A second limitation, in the view of this author, lies in the way "ontology" is treated in the introduction to the theory chapter (see section 2.1: "Foreword: ontologies and epistemologies"). The working definition of ontology adopted by the book is in itself totally agreeable (ontology is defined as "assumptions about the nature of reality or, more precisely, about the nature of the phenomena the researchers wish to study", 26), albeit a bit thin (but this is fully understandable given the nature of the book as an introductory work). However, in my view, there is little in the remainder of the chapter that shows, or at least hints at, how different ontological premises may inform and shape the inner nature of the research work carried out in the field (for a tentative discussion, see Ongaro 2017, chapter 4 in particular).

Summing up, the book is an agile and effective introduction to the state of the art of the field and is destined to become standard reading for students of PA and PM. Alongside and beyond its value as an advanced introductory text, the book is an insightful, thought-provoking, critical review of the field of PA/PM, provided by one of its world-wide leading authors. The decades of research work in the field carried

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out by Pollitt percolate through the pages. The work displays both wide knowledge and in-depth understanding of the field of PA and PM. This book is another highly valuable, very useful, most welcome contribution by Pollitt. It is a work which will nourish the academic debate, as well as usher in innumerable students of the field and accompany them along the road.

REFERENCE

Ongaro, E. 2017. *Philosophy and Public Administration: An Introduction*. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

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