

Book Review: Public Administration in Search of a Theory of Change

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By Edoardo Ongaro

Philosophy and Public Administration: An Introduction.

Edward Elgar, 2017

ISBN-13: 978-1784718435

After decades of neoliberalism and state bashing, the state and public collective action are back. One can see different signs of this, from the re-emergence of industrial policy to the myriad of new organisations and partnerships with “public” in their title. On the one hand, this does not necessarily come as a surprise, such swings back and forth in how we envision and understand the state are seemingly in the very nature of capitalist development, as described by Carlota Perez (2002). On the other hand, as markets are not all evil, the state is not all good, either: Trump’s presidency can be described as a highly activist state, as well (particularly so in trade policy, women’s rights, environmental issues). Such large swings in political and policy moods create somewhat paradoxical challenges for civil servants: just a few years ago public administrations were tasked not to interfere with market mechanisms – and now these same organisations should take the initiative in shaping markets through activist policies, such as mission-oriented industrial policies. This poses perhaps the most difficult question for public administrations: what defines the purpose of public organisations? Is the purpose defined by legal and political frameworks, or are there more substantive issues at play, as well, such as social justice?

Over the last century, economics, and in particular variants of neoclassical economics, has become an increasingly important source of defining what public organisations should do. From welfare economics to public choice to cost-benefit analysis, economics has provided what can be called a substantive theory of change for public administrations. And this theory can be summed up as a “do no harm” principle: civil servants should strive to minimise the impact of the public action on private and social actors. Noticeably, public administration as a scholarly field has been unable to provide its own take on the theory of change, at least none has taken hold of practitioners’ imagination as economic theories have. Perhaps the most profound efforts stem from the late Christopher Pollitt, his two last books (2008 and 2012) mapping

space, technology and time as key drivers of change in public administrations. These were both accessible and bold books, written not so much to address topics of today in public administration, but instead written with the eye on more timeless questions for the field of public administration as a whole. In these footsteps now follows Edoardo Ongaro with his latest book on philosophy and public administration.

Like Pollitt, Ongaro is not overly bothered by the issues of the day, be it the digital transformation or something else. Instead, he seeks to open a new and enormous source of ideas for discussing theories of change in public organisations – philosophy. Indeed, philosophy as a whole, not “just” ethics or political philosophy. This bold approach alone makes this book worth a read, however fleeting, for all public administration scholars.

The reader should, however, take note of the second half of the title: this is an introduction, an attempt to map all the possible dialogues between a few thousand years of philosophical thinking and the much more junior discipline of public administration. Thus, it is not about, as one would perhaps expect, philosophical perspectives about various public administration issues. Rather, the book attempts to accomplish two things:

First, “it suggests the possibility and urges to engage in ‘big narratives’ about public governance and administration – that is, about the possibility of both understanding and knowing continuity and change in the fundamental characters of public governance and administration.”

Second, “it advocates the search for consistency across the findings of the research work done in the field.” (214)

In order to accomplish this ambitious task of defining public governance and administration through substantive issues, Ongaro starts in the first chapters with something of a compromise: chapters 2 and 3 are mostly a tour de force through the history of philosophy in order to create a proper background to discuss how philosophy could be used to address public governance and administration issues in the following chapters. This makes chapters 2 and 3 perhaps too introductory for those who know, more or less, the basic tenets of the history of philosophy. It might have been useful to tell the readers that if they feel secure enough in philosophy, they can easily skip these two chapters.

The book really comes into its own in chapters 4 and 5, which are on public administration doctrines discussed from philosophical perspectives and more specifically on political philosophy and public governance, respectively. These chapters offer fascinating discussions of existentialist public administration (can we see it as a challenge to Weberian administration?), of public value (does it blur the politics/administration divide?) and of Rawls (should public administrators pursue objectives of social justice?), to name but a few examples. These and other philosophical discussions in the book show why public administration needs to discuss its own theory of change – and why philosophy, next to social sciences, should be seen as a key source of inspiration and rigour for such discussions.

The book is prefaced by Geert Bouckaert, and its postscript comes from Wolfgang Drechsler, both probably the biggest influences on Ongaro in writing this book: in terms of ambition and in the quest for timeless topics (Bouckaert on utopia) and in terms of also bringing visual arts into the discussion in addition to philosophy

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(Drechsler on Lorenzetti). Particularly Drechsler's postscript shows Ongaro's courage again as an academic, since the postscript reads like a sympathetic yet critical book review. But this, of course, is very much in the spirit of philosophy: the eternal quest for questioning. Ongaro deserves a tremendous amount of credit for bringing this spirit to public administration.

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