Envisioning Public Administration as a Scholarly Field in 2020: Toward Global and Comparative Administrative Theorizing

Let’s be frank: public administration as a scholarly field is not facing a crisis, whether existential or mundane. It is too comfortable for that. Career paths and status symbols for its academic practitioners are quite predictable, and there are no signs (department closings, research funding drying up) of an impending institutional apocalypse. Given what some other parts of the academy profess to know about human nature and institutional change, the best prediction for the state of the field in 2020 might be, very roughly, what it is today.

But the story is more interesting than this. The environment surrounding the field is changing substantially enough, across a sufficient range of dimensions, and in a common enough direction to predict that the field is about to enter a period of greater than typical ferment and (one hopes) innovation. If forced to summarize the changes in a banner headline, I would say that the field is “going global” in its concerns and sites of production, and “going comparative” in its methods and ethos. Let’s consider some of those changes and how they influence this assessment.

First, the practice and sites of public administration as a professional field continue to shift. One useful way of visualizing this is through a matrix of levels of governance, from supranational to local (on the vertical), and public, private, and people sectors (on the horizontal). It is probably as fair as a generalization can be that 20 years ago, most theorizing about public administration was concentrated in the “national–public sector” cell. The past 20 years have seen a proliferation of both rhetoric and actual reforms in every other direction: upward (global governance), downward (decentralization), and across (public–private partnerships in various shades).

Second, the academic contexts and sites within which public administration research is produced are changing complexion to an even greater extent than administrative practice itself. The past 10 years in particular have seen a proliferation of schools of public policy, governance, and administration outside North America (Geva-May et al. 2008); one thinks of the Hertie School of Governance (Berlin), the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (Singapore), and the University of Tokyo’s Graduate School of Public Policy, to name but three. Such schools clearly come in a range of sizes and shapes (Fritzen 2008). The point is that some of them are successfully positioning themselves as nodes for global partnerships with the longer-established schools, and as magnets for research-productive faculty. Professional associations such as the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management and the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs are, in turn, actively considering how to respond to the trend, and the danger of losing relevance if they do not.

Two factors driving the growth in these schools will also have important consequences for the type of research they produce. One is the rise in the number of students crossing international boundaries to study policy and governance. Some of the newer “global” schools must have the most diverse classrooms of policy schools anywhere in the world. For example, less than a quarter of the Lee Kuan Yew School’s 400 postgraduate students from 53 countries come from Singapore. A quite different factor shaping the rise of these schools has been the intensification of the university ratings game. The attempts by a wide range of ambitious universities to rise in the global rankings such as the Times Higher Education Supplement and the Shanghai Jiao Tong index are producing strong pressures for universities...
to benchmark faculty research productivity. Partly as a result, we are seeing proliferation of journals catering to a more global and comparative set of issues, as well as an opening of the more established Western journals to those same issues.

The shifts noted here will shape the substantive content of public administration research in the coming 10 years. In broad order or confidence (from greater to lesser), I would predict the following:

First, while the syllabi of contemporary public administration courses may continue to give the impression that the private sector hardly exists at all (Straussman 2008), much research energy will be moving “outward.” Public–private partnerships, networks, and the challenge of integrating and steering administrative systems will continue to be very strong themes over the next decade.

Second, public administration textbooks will become diversified. In particular, we can expect many more texts—some of which are likely to be the “best-sellers” of the genre in 10 years—that move away from a primarily American set of default institutional examples (think of pictures of the U.S. Capitol Building on covers and you get the picture) toward those that are more comparative and global in their approach. Such texts will both reflect and promote the further internationalization of the sites of public administration education.

A third example of the shift in scholarly perspectives will be the strategic management literature. It is likely to move toward more comparative work addressing the importance of governance and institutional context. The “public value” paradigm (Moore 1997; Smith 2004) is a prime example of a current “dead end” in the literature that may be resuscitated and developed into something more meaningful with this new focus. Situating “agency” alongside “structure” and “context,” and putting all three in the dynamic context of often transitional systems in developing countries is a meaningful direction for this subfield to move.

Finally, the study of development administration and, more generally, administrative systems in stress and conflict is likely to gain in prominence. This trend will be fueled by concerns over global warming and its consequences, and by consequential examples of state failure writ large or small (subnationally, for instance, or in flailing sectors such as water governance in some countries).

I believe the increasingly global and comparative focus in public administration is not to be understood as the emergence of a new paradigm. Rather, it reflects the interplay between changing administrative practices and concerns, and the diversification of sites for the production of research.

References