

International public administration and management: Towards the third phase?

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Edoardo Ongaro

The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

Alessandro Sancino 

The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

University of Milan-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

There seem to have been two main phases in the international discourse and debate in the field of public administration and public management over the recent decades, when considering the overarching intellectual frames, cognitive maps, and sources of evidence. The first phase has been western-centric: meaning both the scholars studying them, their intellectual frameworks and cognitive maps, and the factual public administration and management experiences being studied and debated were mostly drawn from the Global West.

More specifically, with only just a bit of a stretch, it may be said that in decades like the 1980s and 1990s whatever experience with “reforming” public management or experimenting with a (more or less allegedly) “new” way of running the business of the state which came out of western and, especially, anglophone countries, almost by default became the focus of debate and discussion internationally (at least in the English-language literature, which anyway was and still is the dominant literature in the field, due to English being the main vehicle language for the international debate and discussion). Discussions and debates have practical consequences: new doctrines and practices of managing public services travel internationally, and processes of policy transfer, across the gamut from harshly coercive to (almost) entirely voluntary, led to a state of affairs whereby western practices have been transplanted to jurisdictions all over the world, albeit to highly differentiated levels and degrees. (Coercive forms of policy transfer occurred, e.g., via conditionality-based loans by western-orientated international donors, while more hybrid forms occurred, e.g., via discursive processes foisting certain public management approaches as “the” way forward in the public discourse, with naming and blaming as laggards those jurisdictions which were more reluctant to follow). This process, which occurred on top of centuries of western dominance - economic, technological, cultural – which has epitomised in the 19th century colonialism and the 20th century Washington

consensus international order, led to western public administration becoming the global reference: the dominance of Western-Global PA (Drechsler, 2020). This period, very simply, has nowadays come to an end, as it has been authoritatively argued (Pollitt, 2015), and it is no longer sufficient for an experience about novel public management or governance arrangements to originate in a western, preferably anglophone, jurisdiction to draw all the attention and become centre-stage in the scholarly and public discourse.

The second phase has been somewhat of a reaction to the first one: non-western experiences became, by their very nature of being non-western, attractive. There are multiple drivers of this process: a reaction to the excesses of the previous phase; a re-configuration of the academic community in public administration now featuring larger and larger cohorts of very active and very well published in the English language literature scholars belonging to the non-western world; a self-critique occurred within the western world towards previous approaches considered too western-centric and an emphasis on the so-called “de-colonisation” of university curricula; and of course the sheer significance and saliency of ancient experiences and novel experimentations with public management and administrative practices taking place in jurisdictions across Asia, Africa or Latin America that had for too long been overlooked; and of course the broader tilt towards the Indo-Pacific area taking place at all levels (economic, political, demographic) in this epoch of humankind – amongst others.

There is a risk in the current state of affairs, however. This is a risk of incommunicability: that research going on within more “western” (if not necessarily western-centric) intellectual frameworks and cognitive maps simply co-exists alongside research upholding “non-western” (again: if not necessarily “anti-western) intellectual frameworks and cognitive maps– up to the point that the two become simply juxtaposed and not intercommunicating, and end up inhabiting parallel, non-communicating universes. Non-communication in turn may elicit suspicion, if not (in very rare cases, luckily) outright hostility. Tip of the iceberg manifestations of these forms of incomprehension and incommunicability may include: adopting attitudes dismissive of experiences of public administration reforms and experimentation with innovations in public services improvement only because of their origin, that is, on ground that they are “western-centric”; at the intellectual-theoretical level, adopting dismissive attitudes towards western thinkers and theorists, again, only because of their origins and not on a critical-rational ground, and along the same line of reasoning upholding uncritically certain doctrines or theoretical perspective only on the ground of their being indigenous to non-western societies; and conversely and yet equally inappropriately: treating as “normal and acceptable” only theories and practices which are framed and presented within allegedly global but which are in effect only western intellectual frameworks and cognitive maps, and de facto being dismissive of other theoretical framings, dismissed as “less scientific” and not recognising their different axiological and analytical intellectual premises. Such instances may be very sporadic or just extreme manifestations (luckily), but they may reveal a deeper problem, which should be tackled and not be allowed to grow further.

Our argument is that nowadays the international discourse and debate in public administration and public management research and practice could and should integrate the two perspectives and emphases (which we have schematically delineated here as western

and non-western, in itself a reductive classification), rather than counterposing them, or juxtaposing them and accepting that they can ignore each other and inhabit their own parallel, non-communicating universes. International public administration and management can only progress if it encompasses – at both the intellectual level of the theoretical frameworks and the cognitive maps and at the factual level of the empirical cases and evidence - contexts from both western and non-western jurisdictions (values systems, political-legal settings, cultural ambiances, administrative configurations – see e.g., [Painter and Peters, 2010](#); [Peters, 2021](#)). Our field can progress only if both are systematically included in public administration and management studies ([Ongaro, 2021](#)). In simpler words: knowledge of how contextual differences (and similarities) affect the functioning of public administrative systems can only be based on an integrated research agenda. A truly international dialogical perspective is here advocated.

The recipe to advance such research agenda requires two key ingredients: first is criticality, second is an integrative thrust. By criticality we refer to the systematic application of the power of the reason and of critical reasoning ([Ongaro, 2020](#), chapter 1) – that is, an approach and a way of doing research which entails that no concept, no practice/praxis, no values system is to be considered beyond the reach of critical reasoning, at least when it comes to discussing its implications for society and human life, and specifically as regards the purpose of our studies, the functioning of public administration and public services. By an integrative thrust we refer to an overarching approach and way of doing research whereby propositions and hypotheses – no matter where they originate - must be formulated, tested and critically discussed in such a way that the thrust is to make them to contribute to building one broader edifice: the edifice of our knowledge of public administration and public management systems. This edifice is composite and diverse, differentiated and articulate because there are different answers about “what works” to make a “better” public administrative system depending on the specific context ([Ongaro, 2018](#); [Virtanen, 2013](#)), yet the very knowledge about how diversity in context affects the functioning of PA could and should be accrued through the integrative thrust we here suggest, to build one edifice (to continue with our architecture metaphor).

Advancing this research agenda based on criticality and an integrative thrust has practical implications. One main implication is that comparative research designs in public administration and public management should be based on encompassing a variety of jurisdictions – ideally both western and non-western. We appreciate that this may not always, or very seldom, be feasible for lack of resources and other practicalities, yet at least theoretically the comparator must be there: empirical evidence collated from a western jurisdiction or setting should be vetted also by adopting non-western theoretical lenses and cognitive frames, and vice versa empirical evidence collated from a non-western setting be analysed also by means of western-originated theoretical frames and cognitive maps. Advancing this research agenda has positive implications also for research in the intimately interconnected area of research in public policy.

Let us usher in the third phase of international public administration and management studies!

ORCID iD

Alessandro Sancino  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1892-9622>

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