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A State of "The Field": Increasing Relative Ignorance¹

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Enthusiasm for public management in administering the public's business has burgeoned over the past decade.² This emphasis has borne a burden of hope (and hype) as public agencies (tagged inaccurately with the political epithet of "bureaucracies") continued to come under assault from aggressive politicians and unremitting fiscal crises. "Public management" sub-species proliferate, techniques and catch words gain standing, suffer the embarrassment of application, and subside leaving a residue of puzzlement and analytical skepticism.

It is necessary from time to time to ask about the theoretical standing of these views -- not only for scholarly reasons though these are too seldom stressed. It seems also apparent that at least some of these views are taken seriously by reformers, eager politicians and congressional staff. Scholars studying public organizations and teachers of some who inhabit them have an obligation to attend to the kinds of "state of the field" issues raised by the Symposium. This obligation rests on the tacit claims we make to be the stewards of theory building, teachers of potential practitioners, and advisors vis-a-vis the critique and reform of on-going public organizations and the design of new ones. Given the state of public organizations in the U.S. and in many other

¹ Revision of a discussion paper for Public Management and Bureaucracy: The State of Theory -- A Panel Discussion, Berkeley Symposium on Public Management Research, University of California, Berkeley, California. July 19, 1993. I take the title of the panel as rhetorical and advisory; my referent will be theories of the behavior, dynamics and effects of public organizations and their leaders. My thanks to Chris Ansell and Craig Thomas for their comments.

² This is contrasted with a more mature Public Administration perspective, and the "impact" emphasis of public policy. Often used invidiously, the terminology setting off "public administration", "public policy", or "public administration" from one another, while similar to other territorial spotting behavior, serves at once to nourish a propensity to avoid analytical critique and the search for cumulative possibilities and to confuse students and practitioners.

countries, it is a particularly important duty. The Symposium organizers are to be commended for their efforts in catalyzing the event.

The invitation to consider "the state of theory" was intriguing, though time allowed quite brief. Accordingly, my views are overly compressed, a caricature. They have been intensified for me in recent years by: a) our work attempting to understand "High Reliability Organizations", i.e., public or regulated organizations that operate systems of great technical power so intrinsically hazardous that substantial portions of the organizations' energies are devoted to preventing significant failures; b) my current advisory responsibility considering matters of institutional trustworthiness or public trust and confidence in the context of managing the nation's radioactive wastes; and c) an attempt in graduate seminar to set out the dominate conditions that now confront U.S. public organizations.

In considering the "state of theory", I find the news both mildly positive and somewhat unsettling: the good news is that recent symposia like this bring together researchers from public management and administration with those in political science. These gatherings signal increased activity and possibilities. May their numbers and effectiveness increase. As Kettl's Symposium talk and forthcoming paper nicely summarize, there have been interesting theoretical developments; these provoke and add yeastiness to our struggles to understand phenomena in and of public organizations.

The unsettling news is that, in its current state, "theory", while perhaps improving absolutely, exhibits a growing relative ignorance. The balance of my comments addresses this situation and outlines its implications. First, a note on context. "Theory" as used in the public management/bureaucracy literature has at least three connotations -- often mixed or mixed-up in the ways theoretical work is conducted. What follows is familiar but bears brief repeating. "Theory" is used variously to typify or connote:

3 It also gives one permission to "sound off". I hope the outcome will not be a "pop off".

4 See La Porte and Consolini (1991); and Roberts (1989) for an overview of this research program.

5 See Department of Energy, Secretary of Energy Advisory Board (1993). Earning Public Trust and Confidence: Requisites for Managing Radioactive Wastes. Report of the Task Force on Radioactive Waste Management. Washington, D.C.

6 For example the several National Public Management Research Conferences, in 1991 and Oct. 1993.

9 Much of the writing on public management is tacitly from the view of an outsider, e.g., an aggrieved client, a distracted elected official, or a frustrated political appointee. It is a grumpy theory of bureaucratic dynamics much in the spirit of overburdened, naive parents bent on "controlling" a large, willful, sometimes recalcitrant adolescent.

8 Recall Barnard's "efficiency" (Barnard 1938), ch. 6.

7 Perhaps due to the heterogeneous nature of this literature, the most intense, sharpest anti-bureaucracy critique levelled at the alleged suppression of the organizational member (not so much the client) was largely missing from the Symposium's agenda. See e.g., Bellone, ed. (1980), esp. Parts II and III; Harmon (1981); and Kass and Catron, eds. (1990), esp. White and McSwain, and Hummel. Cf. Denhardt (1993), esp. ch. 5, 7.

I limit my comments to "theories of the third kind." If used deductively it informs: what we expect from organizations, given their situation and missions; how we construct the meaning of organizational error; what we take as evidence of a vigorous, healthy, dysfunctional or pathological organization; and our views of the limits that constrain institutional performance and possibilities. Tacitly, I take the view of agency managers, though not necessarily the top political leadership. It has been argued that we lack a substantial, and cumulative base of knowledge; that we run off in a remarkable variety of analytical directions (e.g., T. Moe 1991). This is certainly the case when considering the status of strong tests of assertions, hypotheses or theoretical fragments. What we draw from sociology, social psychology and economics is fractured, and when joined with concerns

c. The basis for descriptive understanding, analytical insight and prediction.

b. The basis for designing new or attempting to reform institutions. Proposals are pressed as if we have good ideas about what is wrong, and sensible ideas about what is possible. The tone usually suggests that we not only are able to spot aberrations and dysfunctions to complain about, but that we also know what changes are quite likely to result in wished for outcomes without great off setting surprise.⁸

a. A guide to normative frameworks for managers and policy evaluators, for academics and pundits, and for political critiques of public organizations in democracies. This is a sizable literature. Much of Kettl's Symposium paper falls nearly in this category and this perspective was in evidence at the Symposium.

for problems of operations or political ideology spays out in a messy pattern with limited cumulative effect.¹⁰

This is a familiar state of affairs in numerous academic areas. Should it be a matter of concern for us? I think so. A growing range of public organizations operate or regulate systems whose failures can set in train grievous consequences, not just for policy proponents or budget political harmony, but directly for the safety and lives of citizens and consumers. Public organizations make a significant difference, and understanding them is imperative to avoid operational decline and public damage -- before such organizations inadvertently lose their internal coherence and productive capacities. The quality of theory about public Management, Bureaucracy and Organization is important not only for its academic purposes, but because designers and critics need to take it seriously.

We face a situation in which, even as there are greater and more provocative efforts in theory building about public organizations and management, the phenomena of interest are differentiating and changing even more rapidly than our advances. Our grasp of the dynamics and behavior of public organizations is slipping further and further away: we know less of what we need to know, even as we know more than we did -- and even as prescriptions for change and improvement proliferate.

How is it that as we work at greater intensity and higher rates (see the lists of topics at symposia like this), it could be argued that our ignorance grows? What are the conditions that produce this effect?

Public organizations face a striking array of conditions. Each presents demanding operational and theoretical challenges. In combination, they pose extraordinary descriptive and explanatory puzzles. Two important sources of analytical ignorance are the growing heterogeneity of public organizations and their embedding networks (see items A and B, Table I). These networks are more than the familiar relationships and tensions of federalism and involve skeins of interagency/contractor relationships that extend increasingly across national borders (cf. Kettl 1993). In effect, the types and variations of public organizations are growing and their missions "speciate". As a result, it is increasingly difficult to generalize from one or a small set of agency behaviors to the dynamics of other agencies.

¹⁰ There are only a few efforts to bring some integration to these views. See Rainey (1991); Gortner (1987); Hult and Walcott (1990); and perhaps Bozeman (1987) ch. 1-3. Cf. Scott (1992).

¹¹ See Bozeman (1987) for an intriguing way of conceptualizing these differences.

Table I.

Summary of Properties Of/Facing U.S. Public Organizations
Imposed by Socio-Economic Environment

Increasing:

A. Heterogeneity of goals and means.

B. Density of networks of relations among public organizations.

C. Technical character of task processes.

D. Demand for services w/less tolerance for error.

Decreasing:

E. Resources relative to operational/technical need.

F. Public confidence in capacity of public organizations.

Inflicted by Principals upon Agents

Continued:

G. Adversarial executive vs elected official relations.

H. Constraints/micro-management from courts and by legislatures.

Increasing:

I. National and agency policy volatility.

J. Proportion of regulatory to line responsibilities/

K. Dependence on third parties (contractors).

L. Centralization of budgetary/audit control with more

de-centralization of operations to heterogeneous experts.

Decreasing:

M. Technical competence of agency contract overseers.

N. Incentives for professional achievement or career.

O. Effectiveness/autonomy of senior management.

Stem
from
admin.
control
process

Stem
from
econ
doctrine

Developed Spring 1992, near the end of the Reagan/Bush
administrations, with students in my graduate seminar (see note
12 for partial list of sources). By 1993, the political rhetoric
had softened, though little has changed in the significant
properties imposed and inflicted upon U.S. agencies.

¹² These "conditions" were derived in part from reviewing Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) (1989); Bozeman and Slusher (1979); Goodsell (1983); Kettl (1991); Levine (1986); R. Moe (1987); T. Moe (1989); Hargrove and Glidewell (1990); Rainey (1991); Rourke (1991); Ventriss (1991); Waldo (1987); and Wildavsky (1988). See also Kettl (1993).

¹³ With apologies to "principal-agent" devotees.

Set **. (++) = increasing; -- = decreasing)

++ Density of networks of relations among public organizations (B),
 -- Resources relative to operational/technical need (E),
 ++ Dependence on third parties (contractors) (K), and
 ++ Demand for services w/less tolerance for error (D).

In terms of our discussion, they present a remarkably tough analytical challenge as well. For example, take any four conditions, holding the rest constant (though they would not be in "real life"). On what analytical basis could we predict confidently an organization's response? I set out three quarters below and invite your speculation. In considering these simplified (and artificial) situations, what degree of precision can be achieved -- on the basis of current theory -- in predicting the capacity of a public organization to operate coherently so that it: a) avoids serious operating failure; b) maintains this capacity for a work generation; and c) manages to keep the public's trust and confidence in the process? How closely can speculations be derived from administrative, management, or organization theory?

>>Table 1 about here.<<

In addition, public organizations face a daunting array of "environmental" conditions.¹² (See Table I.) Some are "imposed" by the socio-economic environment, with little possibility that they could be changed rapidly through the efforts of ruling parties or executive action. Others are "inflicted by principals upon agents"; i.e., "inflicted" on public organizations by political regimes and stem from economic and/or administrative ideology. Each condition individually is more or less familiar; in combination they confound and confuse. It is a sobering ensemble within which to attempt flexible and effective operations. These conditions are especially daunting when the functions of public organizations are crucial for the political and social health of our communities.

Set ... (++) = increasing; (--) = decreasing)

++ Centralization of budgetary/audit control with more de-centralization of operations to heterogeneous experts (L),

-- Incentives for professional achievement (N),

-- Technical competence of agency contract overseers (M), and

++ Technical character of task processes (C).

Set <>. (++) = increasing; (--) = decreasing)

++ Heterogeneity of goals and means (A),

++ National and agency policy volatility (I),

-- Public confidence in capacity of public organizations. (F)

-- Effectiveness/autonomy of senior management (O).

To gain some purchase on these analytical (and design) problems, we could and mostly do retreat to conventional administrative and political wisdom. While this might be tempting, it should not be an early option for seekers after rigorous analysis. As an alternative, we could turn to an increasingly familiar set of middle range theories to nourish deductive speculations. They are:

* Resource dependence and contingency theory;

* (New) Institutionalism;

* Economic theories of organization and choice;

* Network theories of social/organizational relations;

* Management and "bureaucratic" theories.

When the conditions listed above intensify, turning to these theories for inference and deduction give small comfort. None of them furnish firm grounds for predictions about expected public organizational dynamics. And they provide only limited insight into the complex situations in which most public organizations (managers and evaluators) find themselves. In short, we confront a theoretical shortfall, and uncertainty about the utility of our "concepts of choice" (and I do not mean "public choice").

Four examples highlight the point. A dominant feature of High Reliability Organizations, i.e., organizations that seek and attain very high levels of operating reliability, is the sense that the costs of some types of incremental, trial and error learning exceed the value of the lessons learned. In the extreme and continuous possibility, the next error may be your last trial. In such organizations, we found theoretically unexpected behavioral

¹⁴ See Scott (1992) for a cogent overview.

responses in decision-making, in patterns of authority, processes of discovery (La Porte and Consolini (1991); Roberts (1989); Schulman (1993), and responses to regulation (La Porte and Thomas (1933). We could derive only modest assistance from the empirical or theoretical literatures in providing plausible hypotheses or explanations.

Other related work raised the problem of conditions in a public organization that are associated with sustaining, or more dramatically recovering, public trust and confidence in advanced democracies. The initiating context was U.S. radioactive waste management policy and operations, an area in which the salient public and private organizations have for sometime been distrusted by most of the relevant stakeholders. From an analytical perspective, we found a startling lack of systematic theoretical or empirical work ventilating these conditions, say, as the properties of an agency's work processes vary, or its political environment changes (Thomas 1993a).¹⁵ This was particularly true when considering situations, again extreme but increasingly apparent, where the agency operates systems where there is intrinsically a long lag in the time needed to discover failure or determine success and the magnitude of consequences is high but the victims uncertain. Such an agency risks losing trust and confidence due in part to the weak applicability of current accountability processes (DOE 1993, and La Porte forthcoming).

In another important, perhaps more prosaic, vein, proposals for re-organization come fast (and loose) when operational problems and/or policy frustration mount -- "what we can think up has to be better than what we have got".¹⁶ Often such proposals are actually offered for reasons other than enhancing the power of their proponents, as if they had good reason to suppose that other desired outcomes, e.g., equity, efficiency, improved quality of personnel, speed of technical development, or enhanced safety, would predictably result. But there is little systematic evidence to support good hearted enthusiasm or vindictive hopes in promoting one type of structural reform over others in public reorganizations. The relationship of particular organizational forms and the outcome values they are asserted to enhance is simply indeterminate. There is, of course, a good deal of organizational folk wisdom, but no systematic knowledge of the types of effects particular structural changes have in securing the values that are subsequently enhanced (Thomas 1993b).

¹⁵ There is, of course, a substantial literature providing evidence of widespread and intense distrust of government in general, e.g., Citrin (1993); cf. Hill (1992).
¹⁶ This example also comes out of our experience in the radioactive waste management arena. The depth of frustration among stakeholders has been great and proposals for radical reorganizations have been floated for at least fifteen years (DOE 1993).

18 Cf. Trends in social work which have pursued a theoretical agenda emphasizing social networks.

17 I thank Chris Ansell for development of this point.

There are a great many qualitative (and quantitative) differences among public organizations. I am struck by the extraordinary differences, for example, between managing social security or welfare agencies contrasted to public health service or terrestrial space development bureaus; between managing overcrowded state prisons contrasted with a large program in the support and conduct of performing arts, a tax collection agency or a state lottery program. And I have not included judicial, legislative, or military examples, though they should be taken into account. Are these differences so great -- and their political environments so particular -- that a broad theory of Public Management or Administration is premature? I think it is, but I do not believe that these differences are so great that attempts to develop "theories of the middle range" should be denigrated or abandoned. The question could be put: What are the conceptual categories which

What implications does this argument have for scholarly agendas? First, it certainly calls for continued work on integrating theories, and rendering what we know in rigorous form with strenuous attempts to put them to the test. It also suggests that these "tests" should be conducted across a wider range of public organizational types than is usually the case now. If more representative tests were done we could move with greater confidence toward more broadly applicable theoretical understanding. While most of us hold to this notion, I wonder how rapidly this could happen, or rather, what conceptual (contrasted to methodological) requirements must be met for broadly representative, credible public management and organizational studies?

Implications for Theoretical Work on Public Management (and Reform).

A similar situation obtains in understanding the webs of relationships that bind and facilitate the work of public organizations. Clearly, agencies are enmeshed within spreading skeins of exchange relationships among a wide variety of private contractors and political groups and, of course, political executives and legislatures. This trend, so to say, is likely to continue, perhaps accelerate, in an era of "re-invention" and other earnest efforts to "fix government" (e.g., Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Some emphasis on complex interorganizational relationships, networks, might be drawn upon to explicate these developments. Organization theorists have stressed the importance of informal relations and the personal networks through which they operate, and studies of implementation and policy networks have employed the language of interorganizational networks. But this work remains far less developed than the networks they seek to describe. And there has been little systematic work casting current network thinking in terms of public administrative or management phenomena.¹⁸

would become catalysts or organizing principles for systematic theories about various "clumps" of the phenomena?¹⁹

Second, the substantial list of "stressor" conditions presently "imposed" and "inflicted" on public organizations (Table 1), seem on their face to confront public organizations and their evaluators with a much more rigorous, daunting and endangering environment than has been the case for agencies and programs in the last half of this century. But these conditions do not confront public organizations equally. Some have to deal with only a few, others with almost the whole set. The more numerous and intensive these conditions, the more the agency and its services to citizens are endangered and the less likely the agency is to perform or adapt effectively. This suggests, at once, work that calibrates the degree to which imposed and inflicted conditions actually are thrust upon agencies; and studies that examine the limits of potential organizational capabilities when an agency or program faces particular clusters of these imposed and inflicted conditions.

How effective can an agency be or become, given environmental conditions over which it has little control? We now lack theoretically well founded bases for estimating the degree to which an agency/program could actually achieve politically demanded levels of effectiveness in the face of intensely imposed and inflicted conditions. We are challenged to provide analysis for reasonable expectations about the evolution and dynamics of public organizations else we should expect a growing number of managers facing an increasing proportion of "impossible jobs" (Hargrove and Glidewell 1990). This would be a more credible basis for estimating the degree to improvement that depends on changes of the agency's environmental conditions, contrasted with those that are controlled by political executives and legislatures.

A third implication of this argument is the need to examine the utility (and error proneness) of formulations of policy, management, and leadership theory (or rhetorical arguments that are presented or taken as if they were theory) as a basis for the design or reform of new or existing institutions. This is particularly important when such theory or rhetoric is drawn upon in political debate, i.e., in those instances where they are taken seriously by executive and legislative policy makers -- either as means actually to redress problems or, more seriously, when they are taken up in the hope of demonstrating earnestness without much expectation for actual change. One rarely exercised aspect of this would explore more rigorously the full range of effects, especially the negative "surprises of success" or deferred regrets, were designs and changes based on such theories actually to be implemented at full scale.

¹⁹ Add a note re: the debate on case studies, etc. cite Barzelay (1993).

I end with a first order hunch and a discouraging word: the first about the most fruitful next stages in our theoretical development; the second about resources. A next important theoretical stage would be the development of network theory in combination with resource dependence notions tempered by jousts with the organizational economists and used in the study of organizations in the public sector quite broadly understood. One underlying expectation is that the more extensive and dense the networks, the larger the error term in theories derived from economic paradigms. This expectation stems from the mismatch of economic paradigms assumptions of relatively high levels of unorganized complexity (i.e., quite high division of labor or differentiation with low levels of system interdependencies), while increasingly dense networks result in high levels of organized complexity (i.e., high degrees of differentiation and interdependence of components.)²⁰

Notably these comments, by implication exhorting the public organization studies communities to do more complex and generalizable work, skipped over the matter of resources needed to conduct such relatively costly studies. Overcoming relative ignorance will not "come cheap". At this time, I do not see the resources available to provide much opportunity (or even enough to seriously warrant efforts to compete for them.)²¹ Nor do I see much focussed emphasis within our communities to reach beyond constrained and derivative theoretical or empirical study.

²⁰ For the classic discussion of these forms of complexity see Weaver (1948). Cf. La Porte (1975), esp. chs. 1 and 10, and Metlay (1975).

²¹ This point was raised during the Symposium panel discussion by Harvey Averch, who noted, "During my 18 years at NSF, I never heard anyone come to us calling for a Public Administration grants program." Could it be that the reticence of some of us Public Administration/Management/Organization researchers to be separated from Political Science has overly inhibited us from seeking relief from the tender ministrations of the NSF Political Science program as a source for public organization studies?

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