



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

STRUCTURATION OF PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

*Louis Demers, Professor
École nationale d'administration publique
louis.demers@enap.ca*

The structuration of public organizations can be defined as the constitution of their modes of organization over time. Here, the word “constitution” has three distinct meanings that need to be set off in relationship to one another in order to fully account for the structuration of public organizations.

The first meaning is that of the “action of [legally] constituting, making, establishing, etc.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989 (our paraphrase)). In effect, a public organization comes into being as the result of the decision of legislators to create it (Barrette, 1993). As a rule, the establishment of a public organization stems in response to a problem deemed as being of public concern by the leaders of a government. In contrast with a private organization, the mission and powers of a public organization are set out in its incorporating statute. In addition, a public organization is subject to laws that apply to the entire public sector. In particular, these laws govern the management of financial and material resources as well as the working conditions of those members of the organization who are not covered under agreements negotiated with a union or a professional association. Since it is sometimes necessary to revise one or more laws in order to modify the formal organization of the government or one of its sectors of action – health, education or employment, for example – such modifications occasionally entail carrying out major reforms as opposed to piecemeal adjustments. One illustration of this reality is to be found in Quebec and the adoption of the Public Administration Act in 2000 (Côté, 2006).

A second definition of “constitution” is “the way in which anything is constituted or made up” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). This dimension of structuration refers to the formal organization of a public organization (Barrette, 1993; Gélinas, 2003), and is the province of rules, task descriptions and organization charts. Formal rules serve to specify the actions to be taken or avoided in typical situations. Task descriptions identify the duties that the position-holders making up the organization are expected to fill. Organization charts specify the unit to which these different positions belong as well as the larger division that a particular unit comes under, and so on up to the apex of the organization, which is occupied by its senior managers (Gulick, 1937). Various lateral coordination mechanisms (whether formalized or not) – such as standing committees, task forces, project teams and other – contribute to the cohesion of the organization as a whole (Galbraith; 1994, Mintzberg, 1982).

The term “structure” is often used to refer to an organization as a whole while that of “structures” refers to the division of labour and the coordination mechanisms within an organization (Barrette, 1993; OCDE, 2005). However, the structuration of public organizations is

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not limited to merely adding, withdrawing, replacing or modifying structures according to the two meanings outlined above, as is clear from a third meaning of the term “constitution” – namely, “the action of constituting a system or body; the result of this action” (Le Petit Robert, 1993 (our translation)). This third, additional meaning brings into play the central and often minimized idea according to which an organization is a social system that is structured both temporally and spatially and that undergoes transformation in the course of the activities performed by its members (Éraly, 1988; Giddens, 1987). In other words, a public organization's prevailing ways of doing things are the outcome of not only its senior executives but also its managers and staff (Blau, 1963). Whereas an organization's formal constitution indicates the purpose it is intended to serve and the ways in which it will be organized in order to accomplish this mission, the actual structuration is necessarily framed by the autonomous workings of the staff (if only to deal with unforeseen situations), a particular spatiotemporal context, changes in the demands of the organization's “clients,” and the occasionally contradictory requirements of the rules in force at that time (Lipsky, 1980).

Thus the things that contribute to structuring a public organization are its mission, formal division of labour and its official rules, but only inasmuch as the organization's members refer to them in their day-to-day activities. There are, however, other bases for members' collective action, such as technologies (Barley, 1986; Dunleavy et al., 2005), norms developed and adhered to by members (Kaufman, 1960), power relationships within the organization (Crozier, 1963), or the need to co-opt local elites (Selznick, 1949).

Certain rules and regulations apply specifically to public organizations as the result of their falling within the government sector. The ideal-typical public organization stands out from the private organization owing to how its outputs are often difficult to measure (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004) and its survival does not depend so much on its capacity to attract and retain clients as on the willingness of the authorities to whom it answers to grant it funding. These authorities thus have the power to impose their conception of the legitimate way of organizing activities to all the organizations operating in a given field. The obligation to make public services available to the entire population of a territory also reinforces the standardization of the structures of public organizations. As a result, those public organizations constituting a sector of government action often present considerable formal uniformity (Meyer and Rowan, 1991). As witness to this fact, since 1970 a succession of reforms has been carried out in Quebec's health and social services sector, with the most recent reform leading to the establishment of 95 health and social service centres across the province.

Nevertheless, even when public organizations are hemmed in by a narrow set of obligations and institutional or regulatory constraints, their members continue to exercise a degree of autonomy when executing the tasks entrusted to them. One may speak of a local order (Friedberg, 1997) that makes it possible to adapt general prescriptions to local conditions and to innovate (Blau, 1963; Alter, 2000).

A historical perspective

The way in which public organizations are temporally and spatially structured is also rooted in the representation of the role of government promoted by a society and on those modes of organizing activity in the public sector that are deemed legitimate in a given period. Thus there is a

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link between the structuration of public organizations and the role falling to them in respect of delivering public services.

In the early 20th century, as part of efforts to carry out public sector reform, several Western nations established bureaucracies – that is, organizations which, in addition to having clearly defined areas of jurisdiction, were formed into a hierarchy of authority and made up of competent employees recruited through competitions, who pursued a career, and whose employment security was designed to enable them to apply universal rules impartially (Weber, 1922; Wilson, 1887).

Notwithstanding their flaws, real bureaucracies offered considerable gains in terms of reliability and performance in comparison with the nepotistic, maladministered organizations that had preceded them. These bureaucracies, in the eyes of the reformers who had campaigned for their establishment, represented a vector of progress for society (Shafritz and Hyde, 2007, pp. 3-15). In Quebec, it took until the early 1960s, with the advent of the “Quiet Revolution” before this reform movement genuinely took root (Gow, 1979).

The gradual expansion of the role of government during the 20th century, particularly in conjunction with World War II and the subsequent rise of the welfare state, triggered an increase in both the number and size of public organizations. Following a period of optimism concerning the capacity of government to change society, the legitimacy of state action became the object of growing criticism on account of its omnipresence and cost, while doubts also began to emerge concerning its real effectiveness (Crozier, 1970; Shafritz and Hyde, 2007, pp. 175-188). Once viewed as instruments of progress, public organizations came to be perceived, rightly or wrongly, as entities that were slow, meddlesome, inflexible, insensitive to the needs of their users, more mindful of rules than the goals they were supposed to achieve (Merton, 1940), locked into a “bureaucratic vicious circle” (Crozier, 1963), and led by executives intent on maximizing their budget (Niskanen, 1971).¹

It was, however, with the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States that the welfare state was truly thrown into question, while, at the same time, public bureaucracies became an object of vilification. Working from the assumption that private organizations, being constrained by market discipline, were necessarily more sensitive and responsive to the demands of their clients, entire sectors of the public sector were transferred to the private sector.

In the realm of ideas, this positive attitude toward the private sector fuelled the rise of New Public Management (NPM), a movement spearheaded in large part by the Osborne and Gaebler's book entitled Reinventing Government (1992). Influential primarily in the world's English-speaking countries, NPM served as a springboard for breaking with the predominant mode of public service delivery – namely, that of public bureaucracy placed under the direct authority of a minister. In the years since, myriad hybrid forms have come into being or grown and expanded, as may be witnessed in: agencies, public-private partnerships (Télescope, 2005), reliance on community organizations and social economy businesses, and the partial privatization (i.e., contractualization) or complete privatization (i.e., withdrawal of government) of services that had previously been

¹ The influence of these ideas does not prove that they have always had an empirical basis. When conducted rigorously, comparisons of the effectiveness of public and private organizations have failed to show a clear advantage for either form (Goodsell, 2004). Likewise, studies that have attempted to verify the hypothesis of the budget-maximizing bureaucrat have produced contradictory findings (Blais and Dion, 1991).

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offered by public organizations (Kernaghan, Marson and Borins, 2001; Newman, 2001; OECD, 2005).

The stepped-up delegation of government services in favour of private or public partners was accompanied by a sharp intensification of verifications of public service providers by the government or by regulatory bodies. This phenomenon has been characterized by some analysts as the “audit society” (Power, 1997). Results-based management, accountability, accreditation and certification mechanisms, as well as evidence-based practice in the healthcare sector all provide illustration of the partial replacement of hierarchical authority and administrative rules as the pre-eminent modes of public service regulation by a range of arrangements deemed as having greater effectiveness or legitimacy, particularly in professional organizations (Mintzberg, 1982 and 1989).

One of the NPM measures most often implemented has consisted in granting agencies missions of a limited nature which, for this reason, are easier to evaluate. Recourse to this kind of “structure” may prove effective when the objective is to offer specific, once-off services – e.g., the issuance of a card or permit. It is an entirely different matter, however, when the objective is to come up with solutions to the complex, often inextricable problems with which governments are confronted, such as: the integrated development of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, anti-terrorism efforts, improving the continuity of care provided to vulnerable elderly people, the integration of immigrants, anti-dropout campaigns, greenhouse gas emission reductions, etc.

Devising and implementing responses to these problems goes beyond the mission of any single organization and instead requires collective action drawing on the contributions of actors scattered throughout a broad range of public and private organizations, whether “for profit” or non-profit (Bardach, 1998; Chisholm, 1989; Dupuis and Farinas, 2009). Starting in the 1990s, the concept of network has grown in popularity as a way of describing and explaining these phenomena pertaining to the structuration of activities by interdependent parties (Powell, 1991; Thompson, 2003).

Thus, according to one view, a once predominant hierarchical model of the organization of public services was partially supplanted by a private sector-based model; now, in turn, it would behove us to adopt a network form of organization that draws on relationships of confidence and the sharing of norms among partners engaged in a common undertaking. This narrative of the evolution of the structuration of modes of public service delivery is, however, somewhat of an oversimplification. To begin with, the hierarchy-market-network sequence overlooks the fact that all three modes of structuration have always been relied on to varying degrees. Furthermore, it conceals the diversity of coordination mechanisms that can be used to structure the organization of services (Grandori, 2001; Grandori et Soda, 1995).

What does the future hold in store for us? According to some authors, public organizations will continue to display the bureaucratic traits depicted by Weber (Meier and Hill, 2005), as bureaucracy remains a dependable, effective way of offering public services (Goodsell, 2004). For others, the future of public organizations lies in “digital-era governance” (Dunleavy et al., 2005). In their view, information and communication technologies can be drawn on to facilitate access to public services and improve their coherence – a dimension that has been sorely strained by the multiplication of agencies and partnerships – without also entailing a return to counterproductive bureaucratization (Dunleavy et al., 2005).

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