



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

GOVERNMENT MODERNIZATION

Fabiana Machiavelli, PhD candidate
École nationale de l'administration publique
fabiana.machiavelli@enap.ca
With the collaboration of Nicolas Charest

When it comes to defining the concept of modernization, there are no lack of sources, which can be found across a diversity of disciplines. Concerning “government modernization”¹ in particular, the notion became a staple of discourse shaped by the principles of New Public Management starting in the 1980s. Though the notion has been a topic of discussion for several years now, no consensus has yet been achieved as to its meaning.

As a prerequisite to defining modernization, it is first necessary to delimit the notion of modernity. The philosophers of the Enlightenment characterized modernity in terms of the pre-eminence of reason, whose authority supplanted that of God (as “confessed” by different denominations and faiths) or ancestors. The rules of society changed as a result. Modernity thus ushered in a new weltanschauung (Raulet, 1998). Henceforth, modernity is understood in relation to time: being modern means assuming a will to break with the preceding order of things or with tradition. Government modernization also entails a kind of break.

Modernization theory and government modernization

Modernization theory, which emerged in the 1950s, is rooted in the conception of modernity elaborated by the Enlightenment philosophers. According to this theory, development is a linear process in which societies proceed through similar steps or phases before reaching modernity. In fact, each step along the way constitutes an advance or gain (Kiely, 2005). All in all, modernization theory associates modernization with industrialization, associating progress with productivity. Furthermore, this underlying technical-instrumental approach continues to predominate among our institutions (Rivera and Jun, 1997).

Government modernization

According to Vargas Saboya (2006), modernizing an organization entails transforming its structure and form so as make it similar to other organizations that are considered “modern” for

¹ Translator’s note: A range of different terms is used to refer to the subject of the present definition – e.g., administrative modernization, modernization of the State, not to mention public management reform. As such, this diversity is also in keeping with multiplicity of perspectives informing analyses of the notion at hand. However, for simplicity’s sake, “government modernization” will be the preferred term throughout this text.

GOVERNMENT MODERNIZATION

that period. Thus, in order to adapt to developments in the world and society, public administrations have no choice but to modernize (Giauque and Emery, 2008).

Beginning in the 1980s, government modernization was discussed in terms of a fundamental aspiration and a goal to be attained (Arjomand, 2004). In the 1990s, the modernization movement accelerated, driven in particular by New Public Management, which broke new ground primarily by borrowing principles from the private sector (Giauque and Emery, 2008).

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the boundless literature on the subject is that government modernization is a polysemous notion that has evolved over time. Thus, reform, modernization and even reinvention have all been used to refer to the same realities (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000). From an empirical point of view, it is possible to discern several constant features among the principles and tools drawn on in modernization processes. However, the situation is considerably more complex where the implementation of these modernization processes is concerned (Giauque et al., 2009). Armstrong (1997) has asserted that it is possible to distinguish at least three levels:

- The adaptation and refinement of accepted practices;
- The adoption of new instruments and new techniques;
- Comprehensive or fundamental reform.

It should be noted that the adaptation of accepted practices (level 1) and the adoption of new instruments (level 2) can culminate in the implementation of a comprehensive reform (level 3). Thus, countries declaring a program government modernization may be referring to strategies of more or less greater scope – targeted, for example, at improving processes without causing upheaval (at least initially) in the traditional structure of public administration or the values specific to it.

This section would be incomplete without alluding to the contribution of Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000, p. 8), who provide a particularly valuable definition of government modernization and who, at the same time, offer a demonstration of the term's polysemy: "[...] Public management reform consists of deliberate changes to the structures and process of public sector organizations with the objective of getting them (in some sense) to run better."

As Pollitt and Bouckaert go on to point out, government modernization must be understood in relation to numerous dimensions, with one of the most important of these being the ideological character of the ideas underlying modernization (2000, p. 18). When taken as a whole, this set of ideas has prompted some authors to discern the emergence of a new approach and to speak of New Public Management as representing a new paradigm (on this subject, see Gow and Dufour, 2000). In particular, New Public Management is characterized by a focus on results, a "client" approach to public services, and a scaling back of rules and regulations. These elements can be found in varying degrees in the modernization processes implemented in many developed and developing countries² (Côté et al., 2006).

² Such elements are present in the great majority of modernization processes, as exemplified in particular by Quebec's "Plan de modernisation." In her foreword to this reform plan, Quebec's chair of the Conseil du Trésor (treasury board) emphasized the need to *modernize the Government of Quebec*: "The objectives of the 2004-2007 Modernization Plan are to improve the delivery of public services, to do so at less cost, achieve efficiencies in the operations of government, and increase collective prosperity" (2004, p. II, our translation).

GOVERNMENT MODERNIZATION

An assessment

In the last few years, New Public Management appears to have fallen as quickly into disuse as it rose to prominence in the 1990s. An assessment of modernization processes suggests that they have not measured up to the expectations they initially gave rise to. While a number of authors today speak of failure, on the whole appraisals have been rather diverse all the same. Though some modernization initiatives managed to achieve their goals, not all of them proved to be success stories. In some cases it is even difficult to describe modernization in positive terms (Krawatzek and Kefferpütz, 2010). In several countries, the adoption of these new principles triggered a “manifest decline of the public service ethos” (Giauque and Emery, 2008, p. 89).

One of the fundamental problems, writes Trosa (2010), concerns the instrumental character of modernization. In her view, modernization has become a method, and any method is bound to fail when it is made into an end in itself. Aside from the reification of method, there is the additional problem of the ideological discourse surrounding New Public Management, particularly claims that it constitutes a panacea for all public administration problems. Taken together, both elements help to explain the failures accompanying government modernization processes, or at least to shed light on the gap between expectations and results.

According to the OECD (2005), experiences have shown that the same instrument or technique functions differently in different national contexts and produces different results – a fact that accounts for failure in some cases. Local traditions have the strength to withstand global pressures and adapt tools that are imposed on them by external powers. As a result, a country’s administrative traditions, political institutions and sociopolitical culture all play a fundamental role in how government modernization is adopted and adapted.

The future

What does it mean to be “modern” today? How is modernization to be construed in our day and age? The discourse is currently considerably less “universal” than it was during the 1990s. Following Trosa’s argument, the time has come to move beyond a merely instrumental approach. Scholars now acknowledge that respect for a country’s administrative culture is key to the success of a modernization project. In some cases, respect for traditions appears to mean a return to a country’s roots, as noted by Kuhlmann, Bogumil and Grohs (2008). Such is the case of Germany, where the unforeseen consequences of modernization have contributed to the emergence of “neo-Weberian” administration. Other authors have argued that the legitimacy of central government is currently undergoing decline and that the focus of attention should now be on governance (Peters, 2009). Osborne (2010) also speaks of New Public Governance – a new paradigm for founding a new type of *modernization*?

Bibliography

- Arjomand, S. (2004). “Social Theory and the Changing World: Mass Democracy, Development, Modernization and Globalization,” *International Sociology*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 321-353.
- Armstrong, J. (1997). *Reason and Passion in Public Sector Reform*, Ottawa, Public Service Commission of Canada.
- Conseil du trésor (2004). *Moderniser l’État : pour des services de qualité aux citoyens*, www.tresor.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/PDF/publications/plan_modernisation.pdf (last retrieved in October 2011).

GOVERNMENT MODERNIZATION

- Côté, L. et al. (2006). "Les réformes des administrations publiques dans le monde," in R. Bernier (ed.), *Réalités nationales et mondialisation*, Québec City, Presses de l'Université du Québec, pp. 293-337.
- Giauque, D. and Y. Emery (2008). *Repenser la gestion publique : bilan et perspectives en Suisse*, Lausanne, Presses polytechniques et universitaires.
- Giauque, D. et al. (2009). "Modernization Routes and Relations Between Political and Administrative Spheres in Switzerland," *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, vol. 74, no. 4, pp. 687-713.
- Gow, J. I. and C. Dufour (2000). "Is the New Public Management a Paradigm? Does It Matter?," *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 573-597
- Kiely, R. (2005). "Globalization and Poverty, and the Poverty of Globalization Theory," *Current Sociology*, vol. 53, no. 6, pp. 895-914.
- Krawatzek, F. and R. Kefferpütz (2010). *The Same Old Modernisation Game? Russian Interpretations of Modernisation*, www.ceps.eu/book/same-old-modernisation-game-russian-interpretations-modernisation (last retrieved in October 2011).
- Kuhlmann, S., J. Bogumil and S. Grohs (2008). "Evaluating Administrative Modernization in German Local Governments: Success or Failure of the 'New Steering Model'?", *Public Administration Review*, vol. 68, no. 5, pp. 851-863.
- OCDE (2005). *Modernising Government: The Way Forward*, Paris, OECD Publishing
- Osborne, S. (2010). *The New Public Governance: Emerging Perspectives on the Theory and Practice of Public Governance*, New York, Routledge.
- Peters, B. G. (2009). "Le service public et la gouvernance: Retrouver le centre," *Télescope*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 13-25.
- Pollitt, C. and G. Bouckaert (2000). *Public Management Reform. A Comparative Analysis*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Raulet, G. (1998). "La tradition et la modernité?," in A. Jacob (ed.), *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle*, tome 4, Paris, Presses universitaires de France.
- Rivera, M. and J. Jun (1997). "The Paradox of Transforming Public Administration: Modernity Versus Postmodernity Arguments," *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 132-147.
- Trosa, S. (2010). "Donner sens aux méthodes de modernisation de l'administration," *Revue française d'administration publique*, no. 135, pp. 533-548.
- Vargas Saboya, F. (2006). "La modernización del Estado: concepto, contenido y aplicaciones posibles," *Revista Diálogos de saberes*, no. 25, pp. 357-376.

REPRODUCTION	Reproduction in whole or part of the definitions contained in the <i>Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration</i> is authorized, provided the source is acknowledged.
HOW TO CITE	Machiavelli, F. with the collaboration of N. Charest (2012). "Government Modernization," in L. Côté and J.-F. Savard (eds.), <i>Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration</i> , [online], www.dictionnaire.enap.ca
INFORMATION	For further information, please visit www.dictionnaire.enap.ca
LEGAL DEPOSIT	Library and Archives Canada, 2012 ISBN 978-2-923008-70-7 (Online)