PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

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Public management consists in a set of processes and tools aimed at achieving optimal performance in an organization dedicated to public service.

While this brief description may appear straightforward, it nevertheless conceals more difficulties than first meets the eye. As is clear from an in-depth examination, historical and ideological roots continue to shape contemporary management-inspired practices and that this notion continues to be freighted with numerous issues.

From a historical point of view, public management took root in the 1970s and 1980s, an era marked by the expansion of neoliberal discourse and its disparagements of government action and the quality of management in public administrations. In particular, this discourse vaunted the superior management methods of the private sector in comparison with those of the public sector. There was thus a strong pull toward adopting private sector practices, viewed by many as a "miraculous elixir" for the problems experienced by public administrations (Rainey, 1990, p.166). This perception compelled redefining both public administration and traditional Weberian bureaucracy (Parenteau, 1994, pp. 5-8; Hood, 2005, p. 14; and Rainey, 1990, p. 157; Auby, 1996, p. 3). Inevitably, such redefinition generated tensions between two rationalities – namely, a managerial rationality versus a legal-administrative rationality. In turn, these tensions brought on a clash between the cult of performance and compliance with rules and procedures. Such mutual antagonism lessened as management shed some aspects of private sector rationality – including the notion of profit – and gained some aspects of public sector rationality – including equity, for example. Then, management became "public" (Payette, 1992, p. 8) and, from that point on, governments no longer administered but instead managed (Savoie, in Payette, 1992, pp. 5-6).

Among public administrations, the quest is now for performance – a core notion both in research and in practice. Performance comes accompanied by a number of other notions, including the delegation of authority and its corollaries, accountability and efficiency. From this point of view, public management philosophy is summed up rather aptly by the saying "let managers manage."

Also, while management was making inroads in public administrations, the term was also taking root in the field of research, with schools, journals and training programs adding management to their name (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000, pp. 9-10; Rainey, 1990, p. 163; Pitts and Fernandez, 2009, p. 400; Bartoli, 2009, p. 29).

Public management draws variably from several social sciences – political science, sociology, anthropology, etc. (Jones, 2005, p. 19; Bartoli, 2009, p. 27). All these disciplines have their own history, a particular theoretical path and a quasi-exclusive methodological basis. Public management is a young discipline, one that has not yet managed to completely integrate the respective contributions of the various social sciences. In contrast with other disciplines, it does not have a theoretical core that is subject to little if any challenge and that serves to frame all research performed in the field. Public management does not possess methodological underpinnings of its own that are shared by a majority of researchers. It would be more appropriate to speak of a juxtaposition of researchers sharing common interests concerning an object of research than of a genuine field of knowledge in which researchers work on a common object from a common perspective.

There is one advantage to this state of things – namely, the possibility of apprehending a situation according to several perspectives, such that a management problem can be approached through a political or an anthropological lens at the same time (Jones, 2005, p. 19). At the same time, however, it may create problems in terms of delimiting the "disciplinary" field and otherwise hamper the growth of the discipline as such. Indeed, this lack of unity also raises potential issues of identity.

State of the research

According to Hood (2005, p. 19), public management research can be pictured as a spectrum with, at one end, normative "guru theory" and, at the other end, a "conventional science" approach framed according to orthodox canons of scientific reasoning and evidence. Between both ends, a range of methods and approaches coexist. This body of research also embraces a broad diversity of topics. The question arises, however, as to how to assess public management research. Hood argues that science in the sense of a systematic analysis should strive to accomplish three main tasks: the cartographic work of describing and characterizing the phenomenon it embraces; the collection and analysis of hard data; and the identification of anomalies that compel revising received ways of looking at the world. In his view, public management has performed all three tasks, particularly in the area of government reform research. Recalling that mapping and categorization (cartography) are fundamental to any systematic field of study, he notes that public management research has stood out for the quality of its descriptive work. Hood (2005, pp. 20-22) also holds a favourable view of how public management research has brought out numerous paradoxes and anomalies in connection with the implementation of administrative reforms. Pitts and Fernandez argue that the next step in assessing public management research will be to evaluate the methodological quality of the work. They note, moreover, a fall-off in research focused on performance over the last few years (2009, p. 414).

Contributions and complementarity

One of the most salient characteristics of public management consists in how it has triggered a shift in focus. Public management has shed light on objects ignored by Weberian public administration, such as performance, efficiency, results, etc. With its emphasis on previously unexplored aspects of public administration, public management has obliged both researchers and practitioners to adopt new perspectives on ways of managing government, providing services to citizens and designing government strategies and tools.

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Public management has ushered in a new world-view of how public affairs are to be managed. Obviously, this movement carries considerable ideological freight; it also bears the seed of intolerance toward intellectual diversity (Hood, 2005, p. 23). However, when laying public management and the classic (or Weberian) approach to public administration side by side, it is important to recall that the two approaches, are not necessarily incompatible; indeed they stand as two complementary ways of looking at the same object of study (Gow and Dufour, 2000, p. 700).

Public management has created a stir in both the practice and study of public administration. In only a few years' time, it has spread throughout most public administrations, in developed and developing countries alike. Implementation has not proceeded uniformly, however, as the multiplicity of responses show that local forces still carry weight.

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