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## A Classic Work Revisited: Democracy and the Public Service Book Reviews

Frederick C. Mosher, *Democracy and the Public Service* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968; 2nd ed., 1982). 219 pp. \$28.95 (hardbound), ISBN: 9780195030181.

Frederick Camp "Fritz" Mosher passed away in 1990, but his writings on professionalism, public service, and democratic governance remain valuable guides to the field of public administration. Four decades after it was first published in 1968 and revised in 1982, Mosher's best-known and most accessible work, the monograph *Democracy and the Public Service*, remains one of the most widely cited books in the field. Mosher was a major figure in the remarkable second generation of scholars trained in the field of public administration. Along with such peers and friends as Dwight Waldo, Harold Seidman, Herbert Kaufman, Frank Sherwood, James Fesler, Don Price, Roscoe Martin, Emmette Redford, Lynton K. Caldwell, and Paul Van Riper, Mosher epitomized the faith—a term he himself often applied—of his generation in the ideals of democracy, constitutionalism, and public service, learned not just in the classroom but also in their experiences of war, economic depression, and growing public cynicism toward government.

It was this generation of scholars, polled by Frank Sherwood in 1990, that ranked *Democracy and the Public Service* as the fifth most influential book published between 1940 and 1990.<sup>1</sup> As Sherwood noted, it is a book "that many feel is essential for future public servants to read and understand. . . . Its major virtue, then, is that the priorities are right. Mosher addresses issues involved in forming and sustaining a body of public servants within the U.S. scheme of democracy" (1990, 258).

What was the key to success of this modestly sized (219 pages plus foreword by Roscoe C. Martin) and priced (\$4.95) monograph? First, it folded four major themes into its compact size: a discussion of the meaning of democracy in the context of the adminis-

trative state; thoughts on the role of higher education in producing public servants; a history of the staffing of the U.S. national government from its founding to the present; and, the heart of the book, an examination of the role of professionals and professionalism in transforming the public service in recent years. Second, as Sherwood noted more than 20 years after the book's publication, it came to be seen not just as a personnel text but also as a useful addition to an introductory course in public administration (1990, 258). Third, it was written in an elegant, economical and lucid style, typical of Mosher's wordsmithing skills and masterful knowledge of the field of public administration.

Unlike some of the other classics in the field that announced the arrival of a new and often iconoclastic scholar, such as Herbert Simon's *Administrative Behavior* or Dwight Waldo's *The Administrative State* (two of the four books ranked ahead of Mosher's in Sherwood's survey), Mosher's classic book was the product of a mature scholar with a long history of involvement with both the practical and scholarly aspects of public administration. *Democracy and the Public Service* came at roughly the midpoint of Frederick Mosher's long record of scholarship and, it brought together many themes and issues that he considered fundamental to the state of the field of public administration in the second half of the 20th century.

### Genesis of the Book

Mosher was a quintessential "scholar-practitioner" or "pracademic"—a term, it should be noted, that he, as an elegant writer and stylist, would have shuddered to use himself. Nonetheless, he never characterized himself as a theorist in his own right, and he drew many of his thoughts from discussions with others in the field whose insights he admired and trusted. He had the good fortune to work closely for many years with Dwight Waldo, and he drew heavily from others in his own generation, both in academia and in public service. His own background was first in economics, which he studied as an undergraduate at Dartmouth,

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then public administration at Syracuse and Harvard. His early career as a practitioner provided him with a lifelong respect for the practice as well as the study of public administration, and a feel for the work of frontline administrators. After finishing a doctorate in public administration at Harvard University in 1950, Mosher shifted gears and began a distinguished academic career, at Syracuse University, the University of California, Berkeley, and Bologna University. By the time he moved to the University of Virginia in 1968, he considered himself a political scientist, and he held his faculty appointment there in the Department of Government and Foreign Affairs.

*Democracy and the Public Service* was written at a time when Mosher was making significant changes in his scholarship. The move from Berkeley to Virginia coincided with the writing of *Democracy* and represented a decision by Mosher to move from his prior writings, which tended to be grounded in practice, to consider the history of public administration and the current manifestation of its most fundamental issue: how to reconcile the role of expert administrators in a democratic political system. The move to Charlottesville also signaled Mosher's intention to explore a new role for public administration education, working not simply as a discipline or subdiscipline with its own set of courses and degree programs but rather as a partner with professional schools of law, medicine, education, and business. The aim would be to produce a new type of public service professional, grounded in the professional fields that were forming the new public service but also sensitive to and knowledgeable about the workings of government—as he once put it, “to produce tax lawyers who know about fiscal policy as more than just problems of how to help your clients find loopholes.” Relocating to Charlottesville, he thought, would place him at a university noted more for its professional schools than its disciplinary doctoral programs, as well as position him close to Washington and the Federal Executive Institute, also located in Charlottesville. It also didn't hurt that Virginia's highly rated Department of History would provide him with colleagues who could assist him in bringing a greater awareness of history to his own work and to the field of public administration.

The immediate stimulus for the book project came not from the University of Virginia or Berkeley but from a third institution that formed an important part of Fritz Mosher's life and career, the Maxwell School at Syracuse University. Fritz Mosher's father, William E. Mosher (to whom he dedicated *Democracy and the Public Service*), had been the first dean at Maxwell, and the son received his master of public administration degree from Maxwell and taught there prior to moving to Berkeley. In the 1960s, Fritz Mosher lectured at the Maxwell School in a course titled “Public Administration and Democracy” and accepted the

invitation of Roscoe Martin to turn the lectures into the first volume of a planned series on public administration and democracy. It was an opportunity to pull together many of the themes he had been considering for years, centered around a central question: How can a public service so reliant on career professionals three steps away from popular selection, “personnel who are neither elected nor politically appointive and removable, but rather are chosen on bases of stated criteria . . . be made to operate in a manner compatible with democracy?” (Mosher 1968, 3).

### Organization of the Book

As befits a volume based on a series of lectures, the book's seven chapters tend to stand apart from one another, each based on a major theme or issue. A clue to Mosher's approach is provided at the very outset, on page one, with his statement that “the book undertakes no very exquisite or precise definition of democracy” but moves swiftly to his own set of premises, stated also on page one: Mosher assumes that governmental decisions have “tremendous influence” on society; that the “great bulk” of decisions and actions are directed by appointed and not elected administrative officials; that these decisions are based on “their capabilities, their orientations, and their values”; and that, in turn, “these attributes depend heavily upon their backgrounds, their training and education, and their current association” (1). In short, we are in the age of professional administration, and this poses questions that will be examined in the course of the following chapters: How are such officials educated? How does the professional represent a continuing evolution of the American civil service? What sort of state does professionalism create? How is merit redefined in the context of the professional state? How is the growth of public sector unionism and what Mosher termed “the collective services” raising additional questions about the tenuous relationship of democracy and personnel practices?

The secret of the book lies in Mosher's ability to weave together so many thoughts in a way that brings unity and clarity to the book. Two things stand out in this regard: First, there is the compelling breakdown of the development of the federal service into distinct phases, based on the reforms enacted by different generations who sought to find a balance or formula for reconciling the need for a public service that, on one hand, could be effective and, on the other, that fit with democratic values and processes. Second, there is Mosher's ability to define his terms and use them in a way that makes his analysis clear and unobscure (Stephenson and Plant 1991, 103). Mosher's breakdown of American administrative history into the familiar typology of “Government by Gentlemen,” “Government by the Common Man,” “Government by the Good,” “Government by the Efficient,” and “Government by Administrators” (with the implicit notion that the

current phase is "Government by Professionals") is well known now to almost anyone who has taken graduate courses in public administration. Mosher's definition of professions as "social mechanisms whereby knowledge, including particularly new knowledge, is translated into action and service" (102) remains the standard way we consider the concept in public administration.

The final chapter of the book, titled "Merit, Morality, and Democracy," not only tied together the various strands of history, educational philosophy, notions of democracy, and professionalism but pointed the field toward a new direction, that of concern for values, morality, and administrative ethics. Here Mosher drew on the slender branch of public administration scholarship directed toward morality and ethics, what he called the "Barnard-Appleby-Bailey construct of responsibility and morality in public decision-making" (214). His worry was that "technical and cognitive qualifications in the fields of specialization . . . will be too large a part of the criteria" (218). As he put it,

Truly meritorious performance in public administration will depend at least equally upon the values, the objectives, and the moral standards which the administrator brings to his decisions, and upon his ability to weigh the relevant premises judiciously in his approach to the problems at hand. His code can hardly be as simple as the Ten Commandments, the Boy Scout Code, or the code of ethics of any of the professions; his decisions usually will require some kind of interpretation of *public* and *public interest*—explicit, implicit, even unconscious. (218)

### Why Is the Book a Classic?

Some 40 years after it first appeared in print, *Democracy and the Public Service* remains in print (in a second edition but fundamentally the same book that appeared in 1968) and in use in public administration classrooms. By all measures, it is one of a handful of books that deserve the title of "classic." What has made the book so relevant to generations of public administration scholars, students, and instructors?

One reason is the acceptance by the field of public administration, due in no small measure to Mosher's compelling typology of administrative reform, of the need to account for historical change and development in the field of public administration. Like Max Weber, Mosher eschewed historicism in favor of historical analysis; that is, he found no grand logic or determinism in U.S. administrative history. But he did find a number of contextual forces that seemed to explain why and how American administrative practice had changed over the years in an effort to find the elusive formula for balancing democracy and efficacy in administration, and like Weber, he found the

grounds for individual action still open to those who balanced technical expertise with an understanding of the moral and ethical demands of public service.

A second reason may be the groundbreaking nature of his emphasis on the role of professions and professionals in governance. Only a few writers before him had examined this issue, and Mosher's book was the first to popularize the concept and apply it to the field of public administration. Just as Weber is still known as the definer and popularizer of the concept of bureaucracy, so is Mosher, in a more modest way, still considered the originator of the concept of public service professionalism.

A third reason may be tone of the book and its view of the significance of public administration and public service in society. Mosher was, through his life and work, an exemplar in the field, by his pedigree as the son of a founding father of the discipline, by his wide-ranging and highly regarded corpus of work, and by the close connection he maintained between the scholarly, pedagogical, and professional sides of the field. Mosher was not a faddist, a contentious advocate of any one approach or theory. He was a connector and a synthesizer at heart, and *Democracy and the Public Service* epitomized his passion for public service for the public interest.

Although Mosher continued to be an active scholar and writer up to his death in 1990, *Democracy and the Public Service* remained his masterpiece. In the years after its publication, Mosher was cognizant of a number of changes in the governance process that had implications for the future of public administration and the public service. One of these was the growing importance of third sector intermediaries doing much of the work formerly done by public agencies (Mosher 1980). A second concern was the institutional role played by governmental organizations charged with overseeing public management activities, the subject of his studies of the General Accounting Office and the Office of Management and Budget (Mosher 1984). However, none of these works addressed issues as central to the field, or as likely to be used in general courses on public administration, as *Democracy and the Public Service*.

If the rise of professionalism in government and the power of professionals to influence policy decisions was the key problem of public administration seen by Mosher in the period after 1955, the final years of his life seemed to augur a new period of politicization of administration and a discrediting of the idea of public service and public interest. In this regard, it is interesting to speculate on what a final edition of *Democracy and the Public Service* crafted toward the end of the Ronald Reagan years would have covered. Other gifted scholars have attempted to bring some sense to

the history of public administration after 1980, but no one has produced a book that promises to displace Mosher's book as the classic work on public sector professionalism in the context of American administrative development.

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### Note

1. The books ranked ahead of *Democracy and the Public Service* were Herbert Simon's *Administrative Behavior*, Chester Barnard's *The Functions of the Executive*, Dwight Waldo's *The Administrative State*,

and Aaron Wildavsky's *The Politics of the Budgetary Process*.

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## Whither the Common Good?

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*Barry O'Toole, The Ideal of Public Service: Reflections on the Higher Civil Service in Britain (New York: Routledge, 2006). 212 pp. \$120 (hardbound), ISBN: 9780714654829.*

Since the administrative reform period of the 1880s, American reformers have periodically drawn on the British civil service for ideas. With the 1883 Civil Service Reform Act that created the modern civil service, reformers adapted, to use a phrase from Paul Van Riper, "a British political invention to American needs" (1978, 309). Later, some of the elements of the British administrative class informed the early discussions of a Senior Executive Service and ultimately found their way into the provisions of the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act.

Like good neighbors, the borrowing has not been all one-sided. The Fulton Committee examining the British civil service looked to the United States for ideas to "modernize" the civil service and, in its 1968

report, called for greater specialization, increased accountability, and the application of business methods in the senior civil service. More recently, organizational changes throughout the British civil service during the Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair years owe some debt to American management theory and practice.

This mutual indebtedness between American and British public administration is by no means explicit in the story that Barry O'Toole tells about the higher civil service in Britain. Indeed, *The Ideal of Public Service* is an account of the rise and fall of the ideal of public service in the British higher civil service. However, the issues that O'Toole raises and the questions that he asks in *The Ideal of Public Service* are relevant to the current state of both the British and American civil services.

O'Toole's central argument is that the idea of public service and the concept of the common good have