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Paradigm Lost: Public Administration at Johns Hopkins University, 1884-96

Between 1884 and 1896, Herbert Baxter Adams, James Bryce, Richard Ely, Albert Shaw, and Woodrow Wilson, participated in one of the first attempts to build a curriculum specifically aimed at educating American public servants. Their approach to curriculum development did not concentrate on government structure or management skills, but on politics, economics, history, law, and ethics. Their efforts reflected a need to justify local administration, public service, and active government in legal, moral, historical, philosophical, and practical terms. More than 100 years later, their efforts seem both awkwardly archaic and curiously relevant.

How broad should the curriculums of public administration programs be? Is there a place for normative values and public philosophy? Certainly, the era of ascendancy for narrowly focused management curriculums seems to have ended. The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA 1997) mandates that accredited MPA programs include components on political, legal, economic, and social institutions and processes. NASPAA further requires that programs enhance students' abilities to act ethically. Current introductory textbooks often include substantial material on ethics, law, political philosophy, or history (McKinney and Howard 1998; Shafritz and Russell 2000; Starling 1998; Rosenbloom 1998; Stillman 1996). In addition to this broad scope, many scholars are at least implying that a public administration curriculum should provide a normative grounding in some form of public-service philosophy (Frederickson 1997; King and Stivers 1998; Wamsley and Wolf 1996; Denhardt and Denhardt 2000). Through such content, students might come to appreciate the field in spite of their predisposition for being skeptical of government's potential, scared of bureaucratic power, and cynical about public-service motivations.

This expansion of scope and purpose may be a new stage in the discipline's academic evolution. However, it may also represent a return to the discipline's roots. Evidence for this is found in the very first curriculum specifically aimed at educating American public servants.¹ At Johns Hopkins University, from 1884 to 1896, Herbert Baxter Adams, James Bryce, Richard Ely, Albert Shaw, and

Woodrow Wilson, offered a curriculum aimed at building a justification for—and confidence in—American public administration. They taught a broad foundation that included politics, economics, history, law, and ethics.

This approach influenced a generation of public servants who, in turn, contributed immeasurably to the Progressive era changes in American government. Although it was a powerful intellectual force, the Johns Hopkins curriculum failed to become the discipline's exemplar, and soon it was eclipsed by an approach more focused on management, personnel, budgeting, and organization structure. For better or for worse, the current turn toward greater breadth and normative content restores the public administration curriculum to the scope first defined by these early public administration educators.

This article is an intellectual excavation of the foundation of public administration education as laid down by these five Johns Hopkins University instructors. Each of them inculcated in their students particular ideas about the form and function of local public administration. With an ambition to create a national civil service academy, Adams guided the development of the curriculum's public administration focus. Through his observations and criticisms of the American polity, Bryce inspired the tone of reform that pervaded Johns Hopkins. Building on his German educa-

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tion, Ely taught a political economy that legitimized the use of governmental power to check the power of private interests. He also advocated a Christian ethic that gave a purpose and direction to the public-service vocation. As a well-traveled witness to many foreign public works projects, Shaw imparted a European enthusiasm for the use of municipal powers to improve the urban condition. For his part, Wilson provided the legal and philosophical underpinnings for expanding public power. Because each of these men contributed a unique component to the overall curriculum, it is worth examining the ideas and values that each professed while teaching at Johns Hopkins.

At the time, Johns Hopkins University was a unique institution in America. Other American universities were providing classical education to highbred undergraduates. From its founding in 1876, Johns Hopkins's mission was to provide graduate education to a public-spirited middle class. President Daniel Coit Gilman cultivated a European reputation for the new university by emulating German academic practices and courting a German-trained faculty (Hawkins 1960). This environment supported the translation and reformulation of European professional and scientific knowledge in such nontraditional areas as economics and public administration. By the late 1880s, economic and political reform was the dominant tone at the university and it enjoyed a reputation as the "primary center of academic vitality in the nation" (Thorsen 1988). This intellectual atmosphere "anticipated by a few years the civic consciousness that soon swept over a vastly larger public" (Hofstadter [1955] 1968, 205).

Herbert Baxter Adams and the Spirit of Local Government

In 1887, Herbert Baxter Adams, professor of American and institutional history, head of the Department of History and Political Science, and secretary of the new American Historical Society, could claim that his university was the leading training school for administrators and public officials in the United States. Adams had what one colleague called "a genius for organization" (Ely 1938, 137). He hoped to establish a school of administration and public affairs at Johns Hopkins, as well as a related federal "civil academy" in Washington (Adams 1887a). He recruited scholars such as Woodrow Wilson and Albert Shaw as faculty-in-waiting by making them part-time lecturers at Johns Hopkins (Adams 1887b). Although his accomplishments fell short of his ambitions, he was successful in shaping the central message delivered to Johns Hopkins students: Local government matters.

Adams identified himself as a historian, although his primary interest was political institutions. His academic mentor was a political scientist at the University of Heidel-

berg, Johann Caspar Bluntschli. Building on Bluntschli's work, Adams (1883) traced the republican institutions of New England back to primitive Germanic tribes. He idealized the New England town meeting and thought it to be the spiritual foundation of the American Republic. Bluntschli, whose personal library would later be donated to Johns Hopkins, gave this encouragement to Adams: "The study of communal life in America, to which you are now devoting yourself, will certainly prove fruitful. The community is a preparatory school for the State. The structure of republics has its foundation in the independence of communities" (quoted in Ely 1902b, 40).

Adams endeavored to reach a broad audience with his message about local government and institutions. Leaving the confines of Johns Hopkins, he lectured to women at Smith College in Massachusetts and to general audiences at the Chautauqua Institution in New York. Adams introduced one of the first university extension programs in America by arranging for recent Johns Hopkins graduates to lecture at Buffalo in the winter of 1887–88. His favorite form of publication was the monograph, which could easily be reprinted and distributed. He founded and edited two monograph series: *The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Studies* published studies of various local and state institutions; *The U.S. Bureau of Education's Contributions to American Education History* presented histories of American colleges and universities.

Most importantly, Adams translated his enthusiasm for local government into a curriculum for the study of public administration. Although ostensibly teaching history and political economy, Bryce, Ely, Shaw, and Wilson concentrated on city government, which was becoming the most important form of local government in an industrializing society. Adams's work allowed them to conceptualize reforming and empowering city government as a restoration of historical order, rather than a radical departure from tradition. In other words, Adams provided a legitimacy that otherwise would have been lacking. Because of Adams, Shaw (1882, 485) could claim that local governments were "neither novel or experimental," but "transplanted scions from older growths of Anglo-Saxon communal life."

Lord Bryce and American Commonwealth

While Adams provided the institutional brains, Lord James Bryce provided the program's heart. While only an occasional lecturer, Bryce had the influence of a latter-day de Tocqueville. In 1888, after three visits to the United States, Bryce published his *American Commonwealth*, which for some became a "work of Biblical authority" (Howe [1925] 1988, 3). Bryce's American audience took great pride in his eloquent endorsement of American democracy. However, Americans could only be embarrassed

by his disappointment with the maleficence he found in the administration of American cities: "There is no denying that the government of cities is the one conspicuous failure of the United States. The deficiencies of the National government tell but little for evil on the welfare of the people. The faults of the State governments are insignificant compared with the extravagance, corruption, and mismanagement which marks the administration of most great cities" (Bryce 1893-95, vol. 1, 637).

Only in its municipal administration did American democracy seem to fail when compared to the examples of European states. Bryce observed that the "consequent satisfaction of the people with their institutions, which contrasts so agreeably with the discontent of European nations, is wholly absent as regards municipal administration" (648).

Bryce outlined direct causes of poor municipal administration: incompetent and unfaithful governing boards; the introduction of state and national politics into municipal affairs; and the direct control of local affairs by the state legislatures (639-41). Furthermore, Bryce believed the nonideological nature of American political parties exacerbated these conditions. History antiquated the parties' original principles (states' rights and abolition of slavery), but they had not been replaced by new principles. The two parties merely "continue to exist, because they have existed" (vol. 2, 24). In this situation, the motivating force in administration was the advancement of the party organization rather than advancement of principles.

His disapproval of the performance of parties and of the administration of American cities did not lead Bryce to endorse reformist schemes to restructure city government. Instead, he saw the constant tinkering with city charters as a treatment of the symptoms rather than a real remedy. "What Dante said of his own city may be said of the cities of America: they are like the sick man who finds no rest upon his bed, but seeks to ease his pain by turning from side to side" (vol. 1, 649).

Bryce suggested that the American tendency to be excessively democratic diminished the capacity of administration. Europeans understood statecraft to be an art worthy of vocational commitment, but Americans were happier with statesmen who were "one of them" and "mere creatures of the popular vote" (vol. 2, 585).

The tone of public life is lower than one expects to find it in so great a nation.... We look to find those who conduct the affairs of a great state inspired by a sense of the magnitude of the interests entrusted to them. Their horizons ought to be expanded, their feeling of duty quickened, their dignity of attitude enhanced.... It is the principle of *noblesse oblige* with the sense of duty and trust substituted for that of mere hereditary rank. Such a sentiment is com-

paratively weak in America.... Although no people is more emotional, and even in a sense more poetical, in no country is the ideal side of public life, what one may venture to call the heroic element in a public career, so ignored by the masses and repudiated by the leaders. This affects not only the elevation but the independence and courage of the public men; and the country suffers from the want of what we call distinction in its conspicuous figures. (vol. 2, 584-85)

Bryce's role in the development of a public administration curriculum was to provide a mood of inspiration and a sense of urgency. From Bryce, Johns Hopkins students heard that American cities were failing when compared to their European counterparts. They heard that public service should be perceived as a respectable and specialized vocation for the honorable and the educated. In this situation, no rigorous scholarly research or eloquent logical argument could have been more influential than the simple assertions of a British aristocrat.

Richard Ely: The German Historical School Meets the Social Gospel

Herbert Baxter Adams earned his doctorate from Germany's University of Heidelberg, and he recruited another graduate of that university to teach political economy—Richard Ely. Ely combined a staid academic style with dissident economic theory. He is remembered as a pioneer in ethical economics and land economics. In his own day, Ely cultivated a special niche in the American intellectual landscape. As Everett (1946, 75) describes, "There was probably no other man of the period who had as much influence on the economic thinking of parsons and the general religious community." He extended his influence beyond Johns Hopkins through his frequent talks at Baltimore churches, his leadership of the American Economic Association, his nine years of lecturing at Chataqua, and his *Introduction to Political Economy* textbook.

The New Economics

Ely championed the ideas of the "historical school of economics" as taught by his Heidelberg mentor, Karl Knies. The historical school challenged both orthodox laws of laissez-faire economics and the individualist orientation inherent to that doctrine.² The historical school gained adherents both because of its association with the prestigious scholarship of German historians and because of its friendly predisposition toward the social reforms and activist government. The ideas of Knies and the historical school were echoed in American lecture halls by Ely (1886): "The avenues to wealth and preferment are continually blocked by the greed of combinations of men and by monopolists....

We hold that there are certain spheres of activity which do not belong to the individual, certain functions which the great co-operative society, called the state—must perform to keep the avenues open” (16, 66–67).

Other German-influenced academics shared these sentiments and were concerned with promoting and legitimizing their so-called “new economics.” In 1885, Ely organized them as the American Economic Association (AEA). According to its original statement of principles, the AEA regarded “the state as an agency whose positive assistance is one of the indispensable conditions of human progress” and believed that the “progressive development of economic conditions ... must be met by corresponding development of legislative policy” (Ely and Hess 1937, 1027).

Christian Ethics

Another large influence on Ely was the social gospel movement and its call for a nondenominational Christian ethic for the conduct of business and politics. From the social gospelers’ viewpoint, traditional Christianity was constructed too much around the first of Christ’s great commandment, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.” Christianity had developed a comprehensive set of personal morals to guide the faithful in their relationship with God. But Christianity had neglected the second great commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” and had developed few guidelines for ethical social interactions. Thus, Christianity had a dualism that encouraged compassion and virtue in personal behavior while permitting callous and sanguine public behavior.

Ely was sure that Christianity held the ethical principles upon which capitalism could flourish, and class conflicts, gross economic inequality, and political corruption could be evaded. Christianity contained both “the principles which should animate the entire labor movement” and the essence of humility that should be cultivated by manufacturers (1886, 321). Even more bluntly, Ely (1938, 47) said “that the beginning and end of all economics is man, and that economics must be subservient to the ethics of Christianity.”

Ely’s concern with Christian ethics was reflected in the AEA’s original statement of principles, which claimed that solutions to social problems required “the united efforts, each in its own sphere, of the church, of the state, and of science” (Ely and Hess 1937, 1027). Following his German mentors, Ely wished to emphasize the social aspects of economics (Ely 1889, 21–25). However, the Americans sought to demonstrate that the orthodox theories were “not only ‘unsafe in politics’ but ‘unsound in morals’” (Goldman 1966, 113). The AEA membership, which included 23 Protestant clergy, sought to Christianize economics, making their organization’s character as much religious and ministerial as it was scientific and historical.

The Public-Service Ethic

Ely’s economic and religious beliefs intersected in what he called the “public-service ethic.” Economics informed him that people make rational choices to further their happiness. However, religion informed him that happiness is achieved indirectly through personal sacrifice in the service of others. In Ely’s words, “We must sacrifice our life to receive it in fullness. ‘Surely, then, self-sacrifice is an end,’ we may be told. By no means. Self-sacrifice in itself is no virtue and may not be made an end in itself.... Sacrifice is not an end in itself, but sacrifice is the condition of service. The law of society is service. This is the supreme law of society from which no one can escape with impunity” (1896, 79–81). The public-service ethic applied to everyone. Ely was most concerned that it be accepted by the captains of industry. He also defined a special place for government employees who dedicated their lives to public service.

Ely took public employment, an object of derision and scorn, and transformed it into a noble vocation. Ely reasoned that the schismatic Christian churches could not take a lead in promoting the public-service ethic because most were content to focus on personal morality and none could be said to encompass a whole community. Only city halls represented whole communities. Public officials connected with the city halls had a ministerial obligation to serve and to educate their community in the same way a Christian pastor served and educated his congregation. Ely encouraged his students to enter a vocation of public service through both government administration and political activism.

Ely put the government and religion into a partnership that clearly bent the traditional American separation of church and state. In *Labor Movement in America* (1886), Ely wrote that “if there is anything divine on this earth, it is the state, the product of the same God-given instincts which led to the establishment of the church and family” (325–26), and only “in the harmonious action of state, church, and the individual, moving in the light of true science, will be found an escape from present and future social dangers” (332).³

City Housekeeping

Given his support for increasing the role of government in economic affairs, it is not surprising that Ely was interested in the administration of government. In 1884, he began a series of lectures on administration, in which he introduced his students to the efforts of German scholarship on this subject. Ely stressed that “the problem in our age is not one of legislation but fundamentally one of administration,” and that “in matters of administration the United States lags far behind other countries with which we would like to rank” (Ely 1938, 114).

A concern with ethical society infected Ely's thoughts on administration as much as it did his general political economy. Ely wanted to endow the state with an obligation to advance the public-service ethic. He rejected the American reformers' image of administration as "business" and adhered to the German image of "city house-keeping." Ely disliked the comparison to business, sensing that it brought "before us a wrong combination of ideals and sentiments" through overemphasis of government's fiduciary obligations, formal organization, and internal procedures (Ely 1902a, 57). In contrast, the good housekeeping metaphor suggested that the well-being of citizens should be enhanced by the functions of local government. Ely explained:

We think about clean streets; we think about a provision of ample school rooms for all children—something neglected by the low class of politicians in all cities. We think about improved sanitary conditions, about playgrounds and parks. We think about public baths and other agencies of cleanliness. We have something in our ideal with which to move every father of a family who wants his children to have a better career in the world than he himself had. All the best in our nature is called out by this ideal—the city a well-ordered household. (60)

While the scope of Ely's work was broad, his contribution to the study of public administration within the Johns Hopkins curriculum was rather specific. In simple terms, Ely taught that increasing city government functions could not be dismissed as unsound, despite the conventional wisdom of nineteenth-century laissez-faire economics. Ely argued that a study of economic history showed that government intervention in economic activity could benefit society. Furthermore, he argued that Christian religious principles sometimes made this intervention a moral imperative. Resting on German historical scholarship and social gospel theology, Ely's arguments must have sounded both attractive and authoritative to many reform-minded students.

Albert Shaw's "New and Wonderful Purposes" for Municipal Government

Ely's ideas about city administration influenced many students at Johns Hopkins, but none more than Albert Shaw. In 1889, Shaw was afforded the opportunity to return to the university as a lecturer on municipal government. A professional journalist, Shaw had just returned from Europe where he had spent a year studying the forms and functions of municipal government. Shaw aimed to establish himself as an authoritative scholar on this subject, and his former mentors at Johns Hopkins abetted his cause.

Shaw's stay in academia was brief. He soon returned to journalism as the editor of *Review of Reviews*, a post he held until 1937. However brief, his influence on municipal reformers was significant and, like Ely's, reached beyond the lecture halls of Johns Hopkins. He reprised his lectures for students at Cornell and Michigan. He published this material in *Political Science Quarterly*, *Century Magazine*, and *Atlantic Monthly*, and eventually in two substantial volumes, *Municipal Government in Continental Europe* (1895a) and *Municipal Government in Great Britain* (1895b). These books were generally well received, and the first went through three printings its first year. Andrew White, president of Cornell, called him "the most competent man in America" in the field of municipal administration (quoted in Graybar 1972, 432). Reviewing one of Shaw's books, Frank Goodnow (1896) remarked that "in no language is there an equally complete and exhaustive description of the workings of Continental municipal government" (158).

Control of City Conditions through Science

Shaw needed to legitimize his academic interest in municipal government. He argued that the environmental conditions of the city were controllable, and the study of this control was a useful application of social science.

The so-called problems of the modern city are but the various phases of the one main question, How can the environment be most perfectly adapted to the welfare of urban populations? And science can meet and answer every one of these problems. The science of the modern city—of the ordering of common concerns in dense populations-groups—draws upon many branches of theoretical and practical knowledge. It includes administrative science, statistical science, engineering and technological science, sanitary science, and educational, social, and moral science. (1895b, 3)

Despite the scientific pretensions, Shaw approached the study of municipal government as a journalist. He collected examples of municipal practices from around the world. When possible, he researched and reported the details, complete with colorful background material. He quoted the opinions of persons with practical experiences rather than those persons with general theories. He maintained a pretense of scientific neutrality while suggesting to his audience what lessons might be profitably extracted from his reports.

The unmistakable message of his work was that European city governments were improving the urban condition, and similar progress in American cities depended on adopting European municipal practices. These included professional administrators, sound planning, and municipal ownership of utilities. As Frank Goodnow (1895, 172) observed, "nothing is plainer than that Mr. Shaw has be-

come thoroughly convinced that the English method of municipal government is the ideal method.”

The Expansion of Government Purpose

Shaw admired European cities for their government structure and for the quality of their officials. Most of all, Shaw championed the “new and wonderful purposes” for which European municipal governments were expanding their functions (1895a, 35). He commented favorably on the use of regulatory power to improve health and safety conditions. Vienna’s stringent building codes, for example, produced “solid and durable” construction (1895a, 425–26); Hamburg’s regulation of the milk supply resulted in the “improved health of the Hamburg children” (1895a, 406); And the “very existence of so good an organization” as the British municipal food inspector was a “deterrent” against the sale of “unwholesome food” (1895b, 211).

As these examples suggest, Shaw was especially cordial to enterprises that influenced the state of public health. The municipal abattoirs of Paris were inspirations of “enlightened policy” (1895a, 99), and those of Munich were “magnificent” (343), while the one in Budapest was simply “great” (456). Glasgow, Birmingham, and Manchester had “splendid” public baths (1895b, 214). Dublin had “great success” with municipal tenements (216). And the municipal hospitals and disinfecting stations in Berlin were notable for their “readiness” (1895a, 362).

Justification of Municipal Ownership

A student of Ely’s economic views, Shaw rejected both laissez-faire and socialist attitudes toward the role of municipal government. He maintained that municipal ownership of utilities was a question that could be decided based on the merits of individual circumstances rather than on ideological presuppositions. Despite this claimed neutrality, Shaw never found a municipal enterprise he could not applaud. Glasgow’s municipal transit system would make “American cities blush for their own shortsightedness” (1895b, 127). Hamburg’s municipal filtration plant was the “greatest and most complete in the world” (1895a, 323). Budapest’s municipal electric street railway was a “model system” and an “unqualified success” (459). Stuttgart operated its municipal water works with “the characteristic thrift of a German city government” (328).

In differentiating his attitude toward municipal ownership from that of the socialist position, he stressed the practical over the ideological and, like Ely, evoked the metaphor of good housekeeping.

If any one chooses to call this sort of thing a plunge into socialism, it would probably be idle and profitless to quarrel with his use of a much abused word. The Germans would consider it nothing else than a

thrifty and progressive municipal housekeeping. It involves no new principles; for everything was already involved, potentially, in the German conception of the municipality’s full and unlimited responsibility for the general welfare of the community. If German experience showed that the various common services that we call natural monopolies of supply could be conducted by private persons in a manner more advantageous to the community, there would soon be an end of municipal management; but the municipal responsibility would be undiminished, and the municipality would remain what it now is—a great, positive, dominating factor in the life of the citizens—an organic entity. (1895a, 327–28)

Shaw concluded that municipalities might correctly choose not to own their own utilities, but they then needed to negotiate franchise rights with as much expertise and savvy as was customarily available to the private franchisees. He fervently opposed the ubiquitous state laws that then prohibited or severely restricted American municipal ownership of utilities.

Government Structure

Shaw believed that attention to the functions of municipal government was more important than concerns about forms of government. He echoed Bryce’s skepticism of the American structuralist reformers: “In the United States the reformers have doubtless at times lost sight of the aims and objects of government in striving after good government as an end in itself. Their attention has been devoted to the structures and mechanisms, and so far as the cities are concerned they keep changing it perpetually. They are forever overhauling, repairing, or reconstructing the house without seeming to have many attractive or inspiring uses for which they are eager to make the house ready” (1895a, 304).

When he did expound on forms, he was inclined to favor both legislative and executive powers centralized in the large municipal councils, with professional administrators hired by the councils.

European cities all the way from Scotland to Hungary would seem to have arrived by somewhat independent processes at similar conclusions as to the advantageous size of the popular municipal body. Thus the great capitals have found a body of a hundred members, more or less, a convenient size.... Large commercial towns, or minor capitals, find a body of from 40 to 60 men the most satisfactory.... In constituting our American State legislatures we have shown some grasp of the question how large to make the representative bodies; but in forming our American city governments we have been utterly at sea, and have produced results of the most whimsical and bewildering variety. (1895a, 311)

In Great Britain, Shaw found the English mayors and Scottish provosts to be honorary officers. Executive power was held by the municipal councils. The quality of top administrators was assured because they were hired professionals with experience in other cities. The British municipal councils also attracted persons of higher quality, by which Shaw meant successful businessmen as opposed to landed aristocrats or ambitious politicians. This he attributed to (1) the lack of the American-style overlay of state legislatures, county commissions, and public boards, leaving the British municipal councils second only to Parliament in legislative prestige; (2) the importance of the business conducted by the municipal councils; and (3) the lack of opportunity for great personal gain, which made the councils more inviting to retired businessmen than to young fortune seekers (1895b, 53–55).

Shaw argued that “central domination in purely local affairs is incompatible with a republican form of government” (1895a, 161–62). He cited the example of France, where municipal authority was stifled under the autocratic rule of Napoleon III but blossomed under the Third Republic.

Shaw’s contribution to the study of public administration at Johns Hopkins was not theoretical, but empirical. Any doubts a student might have held about the validity of Ely’s economic theories could be allayed by Shaw’s descriptions of successful municipal projects. Shaw’s investigations also suggested that societal benefits were obtained by cultivating a professional public administration and by decentralizing governmental authority to the local level. Thus, he provided empirical support to two more fundamental ideas that his Johns Hopkins colleagues were inculcating in their students of public administration.

Woodrow Wilson’s Other Dichotomy

Woodrow Wilson was Albert Shaw’s classmate at Johns Hopkins. Wilson had studied politics at Princeton, after which he had planned to earn a law degree and enter political life. However, boredom with legal scholarship caused him to withdraw from law school and to abort an Atlanta law practice. His decision to study political economy at Johns Hopkins transformed him into an academic and sidetracked his political ambitions for more than 25 years. While a Johns Hopkins graduate student, he attended Ely’s first lectures on administration in 1884. Although Wilson (1966–69, vol. 2, 586) expressed dissatisfaction with Ely’s dry delivery, Ely (1938, 114) believed these lectures “struck a spark and kindled a fire in Wilson.”⁴

In November 1886, Wilson gave a lecture at Cornell on “The Study of Administration,” and a slightly modified version of this lecture was published the following year in the second volume of *Political Science Quarterly*. Wilson

thought the Cornell lecture may have “killed” his chances for an appointment there (vol. 5, 407), and he published it only after much prodding from the new journal’s editor. This article represents the only Johns Hopkins–related text to enter the public administration canon, and it earned Wilson an honorary—if overstated (Martin 1988)—status as a founder of American public administration.

The Dichotomy

In the second section of his article, Wilson discusses his now famous politics–administration dichotomy. Immediately after explaining this distinction, which Wilson thought to be “too obvious to need further discussion,” he introduces a second dichotomy. In Wilson’s words, “There is another distinction which must be worked into all our conclusions, which, though but another side of that between administration and politics, is not quite so easy to keep sight of: I mean the distinction between constitutional and administrative questions, between those governmental adjustments which are essential to constitutional principles and those which are merely instrumental to the possibly changing purposes of a wisely adapting convenience” (1887, 211).

The last four chapters of Wilson’s textbook on comparative government, *The State* (1889), and his detailed lecture notes published in his *Papers* (1966–69) reveals that this second dichotomy, rather than the first, was developed and inculcated in his Johns Hopkins students. In *The State*, Wilson refers to the constitutional functions of government as “constituent.” He explained to his students that constituent functions concerned the definition and protection of citizens’ rights and duties: “Under the Constituent I would place that usual category of governmental function, the protection of life, liberty, and property, together with all other functions that are necessary to the civic organization of society—functions which are not optional with government, even in the eyes of strictest laissez faire—which are indeed the very bonds of society” (vol. 5, 671).⁵

Wilson defined law giving as the action of a legislative body related to its constituent functions. Wilson believed that the principles by which law giving should best be conducted were well understood in America. They included the separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism. Wilson held that law making was the realm of Congress and state legislatures rather than local government “because legal principles must be universal and uniform” (vol. 5, 695).

The administrative functions to which Wilson referred came to be called “ministrant.” These functions were concerned with “social organization.” He explained, “Under the Ministrant, I would range those other functions (such as education and care, say, of forests) which are undertaken, not by way of advancing the general interests of

society—functions which are optional, being necessary only according to standards of convenience or expediency, and not according to standards of existence, which assist without constituting social organization” (671).

Legislative actions concerning the ministrant functions of government Wilson termed “ordinance-making,” which “lies closer to fact, to practical conditions and detail, than does a law. Its test must be feasibility [discovered through] administrative experiment” (vol. 6, 491). In contrast to the law giving, Wilson believed principles for good ordinance making were obscure. However, they could be observed in business and learned through scientific study. Furthermore, ordinance making was primarily a task for local government, not Congress or state legislatures.

Wilson’s law giving/ordinance making dichotomy placed public administration in the hands of local authorities that were not constrained by concerns about separation of powers or limited government. On this foundation, Wilson prescribed three major changes to American governance: (1) the centralization of law giving, but the decentralization of ordinance making; (2) the unity of all local government powers in a council with a cabinet-style structure; and (3) a statewide centralized system of administrative supervision and accountability.

Centralized Law Giving/Decentralized Ordinance Making

Wilson was very critical of the power that state legislatures frequently exercised over municipal administration. He complained that “an American city is the creature of the Legislature, to be made, altered, [and] unmade at [its] pleasure” (vol. 6, 502). Both in theory and in practice, governance of municipalities was the responsibility of the state legislatures. In many states, the legislatures created various boards to oversee local affairs in the state’s interest rather than according to local preferences. Local elected councils and officials had control over very limited government functions, and their authority could be expanded or reduced by the will of the legislature. Legislatures made use of their control over local affairs to advance whatever partisan, regional, or ideological interests dominated their agendas.

Wilson used the example of the French Second Empire to comment that “interference in local affairs, more and more systematized, more and more minute and inquisitive, results in the strangulation of local government” (vol. 6, 91). He argued that local government should have primary responsibility for the conduct of administration (that is, the ministrant functions of government). Thus, administration should become a decentralized function of government, recognized as distinct from the centralized law-giving function of the state and federal governments.

The Consolidation of Power in a Cabinet-Style Council

Freed of the constraints to separate government powers, local government could adopt a structure more suitable for administration. However, Wilson advocated neither strong mayors nor city managers. Wilson’s bias for strong legislatures, evident in his 1885 book *Congressional Government*, led him to conclude that the experience, knowledge, and creativity of administration could be integrated into the actions of city councils. He wrote, “Proper point of view [is] gotten only when the government of a city is regarded as a whole—not a thing administrative, a thing legislative, a thing judicial, but a single administrative whole—of which the Council ought to be the central administrative body” (vol. 6, 496).

Wilson recommended that city councils unite all local government powers through a cabinet-style structure. The council members would be the only elected representatives of the people, and they would select a mayor, aldermen, departmental executive committees, and other officials. These positions could be made up partly or fully by members of council. When outside experts were hired, most likely to be heads of administrative departments, they needed to have nonvoting seats in council, or at least seats on executive committees alongside council members.

Centralized Administrative Supervision

Because so much of the direct involvement of the state legislature in local affairs was to be abolished, Wilson saw a need for a new system of supervision for local government administration. He thought the administrative apparatus of the states should be reorganized, so that a hierarchical system of supervision and accountability would establish the limits of the autonomy of local administrative officials. Furthermore, because he recognized that public administration produced public law, there should be an appeal system for administrative decisions. Rather than the courts, the primary method of appeal should be through this new administrative hierarchy.

Because Wilson saw the centralized administrative apparatus as a far less intrusive substitute for the customary direct control by state legislatures, he did not view his proposal as a “centralizing” of power, although this characterization is sometimes used to describe his position (Ostrom 1974). Instead, he believed his proposal represented “giving new life to local organisms, of reorganizing decentralization” (vol. 5, 359). He believed a statewide system of administrative hierarchy was an appropriate way to balance the advantages of local autonomy with the legitimate concerns of the state.⁶

The State must be accorded the right to see its local organs are (a) healthy; (b) observe certain accepted

lines of (e.g., financial) policy. Here arises the question, How may City Councils properly and safely be left to independent origination? Just as far as city problems are local and peculiar. The peculiar and self-centered character of city life must never be lost sight of for a moment. Very great independence of action and a very absolute dependence on its own social, political, and pecuniary resources [are] indispensable to health and vigor in the complex and perplexed Industrial City. (vol. 6, 504)

Public Administration as Law

Wilson's 1887 article seems to suggest that the study of public administration was either a subfield of business or a branch of science. However, he held neither of these views (Burt-Way 1990, 59). For Wilson, administration was ordinance-making, and this made it a branch of public law. Because administration rested on "customary as well as upon positive law, upon the habits of the community as well as upon the deliberate expression of its will" (vol. 7, 121), there was an element of the common law in administration. In some instances, this gave the public administrator the legitimacy to act independently of an explicit legislative mandate. He wrote, "Administration cannot wait upon legislation, but must be given leave, or take it, to proceed without specific warrant in giving effect to the characteristic life of the State" (vol. 7, 121).

Thus, although he did not totally shed the association with the practicality of business and the spirit of science, Wilson settled on a definition of administration as a branch of public law. Administrative law needed to be recognized and studied because it had discoverable principles that were different from the lessons of constitutional law and limited government. In particular, Wilson believed that "the idea of checks and balances [was] wholly out of place in administration" (vol. 6, 496). Only on issues involving the scope of government activity did "constitutional and administrative theory meet, and enjoy possession in common" (vol. 7, 121).

When Adams delegated to Wilson the responsibility for developing a plan for a Johns Hopkins's school of public affairs and administration, Wilson transformed it into a plan for a "School of Public Law." Wilson's proposal envisioned four faculty positions to cover public law, constitutional history, Roman law and jurisprudence, and administration and finance (vol. 5, 729).

Creating Duties

Wilson believed that structural reforms were necessary, but not sufficient to improve administration. If local government structure could be reformed according to his recommendations, Wilson believed there would be an opportunity for persons with moral leadership to create the kind

of civic spirit that would improve governance. He believed that an active government would create duties for the citizens, and this would demand their attention to public affairs. He said: "The problem is not to create checks and balances but communal feeling and energy. Not delegation and machinery, but duty.... Self-government must not remain a mere privilege, but must become a duty. On no other terms can we attain the object set before us, viz. to get and hold the attention of the community for the task of government" (vol. 6, 496, 502).

Wilson provided an important component to the study of public administration at Johns Hopkins. Essentially, he argued that expanding municipal political power and the scope of services were compatible with the American constitutional order. He told his students that neither political philosophy nor constitutional logic mandated that state legislatures be endowed with management responsibilities for local affairs. Centralized administrations were a convenient way to administer governmental functions in a rural society, but the future of America was urban. Continued reliance on state legislatures would surely increase the dysfunction of politics and administration in American cities.

The Legacy of Johns Hopkins

Together, the ideas of Adams, Bryce, Ely, Shaw, and Wilson were consistent enough to provide mutual reinforcement and to create for Johns Hopkins students an intellectual direction that was amenable to the development of local public administration. From Adams, students discovered that history pointed to local government as legitimate and central to American democracy. Through Bryce, they heard that public service should be considered a respectable and specialized vocation for the honorable and the educated. Because of Ely, they believed that economic rationale and ethical considerations permitted government interventions in commerce and industry. From Shaw, they learned that European cities were able to efficiently and effectively administer a broad array of public activities. Because of Wilson, they understood that the American constitutional framework and democratic political philosophy allowed for the expansion of municipal power and administrative organization.

With each graduating class, the ideas of Adams, Bryce, Ely, Shaw, and Wilson flowed from the lecture halls of Johns Hopkins and were added to the intellectual currents of the day. Together, they helped to initiate a unique era of social optimism based on the efficacy and desirability of an active government. Their approach was distinct among the reform ideas of the era. They were not concerned with mechanisms to protect the America polity from the decadence, corruption, and sloth of urban life. Business models and structural reforms were irrelevant. They recognized

local government as the root of American self-government and yet the primary point of failure in American government practice. So they targeted local government for administrative reform and expansion and desired to make cities the building blocks of an urbanized American republic. They believed that more active local government could improve the conditions of urban life and create a strong public interest in good government.

While making notable intellectual contributions to what would become known as the Progressive era, their specific ideas about public administration were largely eclipsed by structuralist reforms and scientific management. Likewise, their broad approach to educating public administrators was replaced by coursework in management, personnel, budgeting, and organization theory. Why did their intellectual reputation not translate into a greater impact on the discipline they helped create? Three answers may be postulated.

First, they failed to sustain and promote their academic endeavor over a longer period of time. Adams's civil academy never materialized. Shaw returned to journalism. Wilson never published another comprehensive work on administration. The intellectual foundation of the program, Ely's "new economics," became identified with a radicalism that was objectionable to many university academics, administrators, and benefactors. Criticisms by other faculty members forced Ely's exit from Johns Hopkins and later spurred a hearing for academic heresy at the University of Wisconsin.

Second, their insistence on the importance of local public administration may have limited the long-term appeal of their ideas. The attention of America's intellectuals gradually turned to expanding and refining the role of the federal government. This was understandable, given the rural conservatism entrenched in many state legislatures, the failure of the home rule movement to substantively empower city governments, the development of suburbs that resisted annexation, and, later, the appeal of the New Deal's social welfare programs.

Third, Adams, Ely, Wilson, Shaw, and Bryce focused their public administration curriculum on the practical need and theoretical justification for expanded municipal services. In their day, urban reformers were active minorities in both major parties, so party affiliation was not an impediment to the propagation of their message. However, when the Democratic Party came to permanently dominate the electoral politics of most large eastern and midwestern cities, the motivation for expanding municipal power could be challenged as partisan. Any appearance of favoring the agenda of one party was unsuitable as the field adopted a mantra of nonpartisanship. Thus, establishing the need for public administration became a perfunctory task, and teaching the best management skills became the discipline's main mission.

Why, after a century in obscurity, does the public administration curriculum developed by Adams, Bryce, Ely, Shaw, and Wilson suddenly seem relevant? First, it demonstrates that politics, economics, history, law, and ethics are not alien to the public administration curriculum. Rather, they formed part of the discipline's original framework. Second, Johns Hopkins offers an exemplar program that is built around the practical and theoretical importance of local administration. This is inspirational in a time when federal decentralizing policies are turning interest back to local communities. Third, today's students have grown up in a new gilded age, and government activities engender suspicion. Faced with similar students, Adams, Bryce, Ely, Shaw, and Wilson, developed a broad curriculum emphasizing intellectual development over professional training.

Toward the end of a long public-service career, alumnus Frederic Howe recalled the impact of his Johns Hopkins education: "Under the influence of Richard T. Ely, Woodrow Wilson, Albert Shaw, James Bryce, I came alive. I felt a sense of responsibility to the world. I wanted to change things. It was not very clear what I wanted to change or how I should go about it. It had to do with politics. Also with economics. My mind found new authorities. They were intellectual rather than moral, social rather than personal . . . I was initiated into a new order; the order of scholars whose teachings had changed me, would change the world" (Howe 1925/1988, 1, 8).

Notes

1. According to Blunt (1988), the University of Philadelphia's Wharton School was probably the first institution to offer formal courses in public administration starting in 1881, although offerings were mostly limited to public finance. Using the distinction now common in the field, the Wharton School, building from a base in finance and accounting, may be said to have offered the first academic program for American public managers, while Johns Hopkins, starting with a foundation in political economy, pioneered the training of American public administrators.
2. As Dugger (1992) describes, "The historical school asked evolutionary questions, rejected the independent individual as a basic theoretical building block, and approached received economic doctrine with the requisite degree of skepticism. But they did not construct a 'tight-knit body of theory.' The Germans essentially sought to construct simple empirical generalizations from the mass of historical facts" (23).
3. Vidich and Lyman (1985) describe Ely's position as follows: "Ely's conception of the state as an instrument for achieving Christian brotherhood based on altruism and cooperation endowed government itself with a spiritual quality. In so doing it reconceptualized civil authority as 'a delegated responsibility from the Almighty' and looked forward to the day 'when men come to look upon their duty to the State as something holy (as) their duty to the church,' regarding the State as one of God's chief agencies for good. Then, Ely prophesied, 'it will be easy for government to perform all its functions'" (155).
4. Other than Ely, important influences on Wilson may have included Johns Hopkins philosophy professor George Sylvester Moris (Thorsen 1988, 75), Cornell University president Andrew D. White (Van Riper 1990, 14-15), Oxford idealist T.H. Green (Burt-Way 1990, 53), Prussian political scientist Lorenz von Stein (Van Riper 1990, 3), and British political philosophers Edmund Burke and Walter Bagehot (Thorsen 1988, 37-38, 55).
5. The editors of the *Papers of Woodrow Wilson* transcribed Wilson's notes in as genuine a form as possible. They included Wilson's misspellings, highlights, abbreviations, and marginal notes. For the purpose of quoting, these are distracting as is, and the annotation necessary to properly mark every change from the original would be equally distracting. Thus, the quotations taken from these published notes are cleaned up (spelling corrected, abbreviations expanded, highlights omitted, appropriate punctuation added) without special note.
6. Wilson was not alone in this opinion. Almost 20 years later, Goodnow (1904) suggested that "the administrative control offers to the cities opportunities for self-development as organs for the satisfaction of local needs, of which they are deprived under a system of legislative control, and at the same time provides, for matters of interest to the state as a whole, a means of control far more effective than the legislative control" (102).

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