

***Symposium:  
Prelude to Public Administration: Essential Early  
German and Dutch Thinking on Administration***

**Introduction**

**The Value of Early Thinkers**

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The present symposium discusses European classics in public administration, with the aim of identifying core ideas, authors, and texts, and of making their work known to a wider audience. The symposium presents examples of what can best be described as the history of “administrative thought.” The contributions in this issue specifically focus on European “classics” in public administration (hereafter, PA) as a scientific discipline and on public administration as praxis from the era before the development of the study of PA in the United States. The study of PA is based on a long tradition of scholars taking a special interest in the organization and running of a state. In the early seventeenth century, a specific literature emerged dealing with what is now known as public administration or governance. Authors such as von Seckendorff (1626–1692), DelaMare (1639–1723), von Justi (1702–1771), Bonnin (1772–1830), and von Mohl (1799–1875) broached the issue of the importance of a specific study of public administration that would form the basis for ideas about what would nowadays be labeled as governance. Of course, these ideas did not evolve in a vacuum, and although the focus of this symposium is more on scholarly debate on the nature of public administration, these ideas developed in close relation to the administrative practice of the day. The aim of the symposium is to identify core authors and texts, and to discuss their meaning as well as their impact on the development of administrative thought.

Looking more closely at these preludes to the administrative thought of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can enhance our insights into contemporary debates. It provides us with responses to the following questions: To what extent are our concerns and solutions novel? Where did our apparently self-evident insights originate? And should we take them for granted, considering the reasons they were introduced? Why and when were some of

our core concepts actually developed, and did their meaning remain constant? While American classics from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century are well studied and known in the international PA community, the same is not necessarily true for some of the European authors and their ideas presented in this issue, because they belonged to different linguistic turfs. However, as is illustrated in this symposium, the well-known U.S. classics were building on a longer (European) tradition, and developed new ideas and practices on the bases it provided.

Delving into older intellectual history is not always straightforward, as the “ancient” history of our field has been hidden for a long time due to “disciplinary biases” in the history of the social sciences. Everyone knows August Comte’s (1798–1857) conception of positivism. But does the average scholar know Bonnin’s approach to create a positive administrative science as early as in 1812? The history of political philosophy, economics, and legal thought is well documented, and its classic texts are widespread. In contrast, ideas on public administration are generally still marginalized in the context of other fields of interest. For instance, the so frequent reduction of cameralism from the eighteenth century to being just a forerunner of economics ignores the majority of works in this field that deal with much broader issues regarding governance. This disciplinary bias can first be explained by the strong focus of PA on contemporary issues due to its close links to administrative practice. Second, social science historians study history from the perspective of the discipline in which they are interested. Thus they do not approach history neutrally (as if that were even possible), but focus on the development and origins of specific problems or concepts, and (re)construct the development of a specific discourse over time.

The history of PA goes back to Gladden’s *Introduction to Public Administration* from 1972. Raadschelders’s *Handbook of Administrative History* (1998 and later editions) provides an overview of the rich literature. The history of public administration is also a history of administrative thought. For instance, ideas about the civil service have been developed over the centuries, ranging from double-bookkeeping to pension schemes (see Raadschelders & Rutgers, 1999). Just as the development of sociological ideas and theories is a specific subject matter as compared to social history, the history of administrative thought is a proper subject in itself. It opens a new horizon for understanding and reevaluating contemporary administrative thought, and does so by calling attention to the underlying assumptions and inspirations for contemporary ideas. To illustrate this point, one should ask how many students of public administration are aware of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century arguments calling for theoretical guidance for administrative practice, and how many are familiar with Immanuel Kant’s rejection of the normative foundations of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century administrative argument. Yet these authors are arguably important to an understanding of the development of administrative thought on both sides of the Atlantic. An interesting example

also provides the more commonly known links between Prussian administrative practices and Georg Hegel's appropriation of these insights and use of them in his theories on the state, resulting in what Avineri called "a model of a bureaucracy almost identical with the Weberian ideal type" (1980, p. 160). Hegel did certainly have an impact on administrative authors such as Lorenz von Stein and Max Weber. von Stein, just like, Bluntschli, was in turn known by early American authors like Woodrow Wilson (Sager & Rosser, 2009).

Woodrow Wilson's famous essay provides a nice example of the twists and turns of the development of administrative thought. Wilson himself explicitly points at European forerunners and calls for their Americanization (Wilson, 1887), but the essay remained fairly obscure for several decades. This implies that it can hardly be regarded as the start of the study of public administration; however, the importance of the reception of Wilson's essay in the later discussion on, for instance, the politics and administration dichotomy can hardly be overestimated (Overeem, 2012, p. 53). It also indicates that a history of administrative thought should include "reception" histories, as well as the global exchange of ideas. Such global exchanges can be surprisingly old. For example, Lorenz von Stein (1815–1890) advised the Japanese government in the late nineteenth century, and Christian von Wolff (1679–1754) was severely attacked for his positive assessment of Chinese ideas in 1721.

Research on the history of administrative thought is confronted with all the issues and difficulties of historical research, and in particular the "history of ideas." It concerns such issues as the possibility of understanding the past, of correctly representing and tracing original thought, as well as problems of translation, not just from past to present, but also from local language to scholarly English. As such, this is nothing special, and it is beyond the scope of this introduction to elaborate on these issues. What seems needed is the development of a broader context for the issues that are specific to our concern—the comparison of practices in relation to (transfer of) ideas on public administration (Rutgers, 2001; Sager, Rosser, Hurni, & Mavrot, 2012).

This symposium can be regarded as part of the endeavor to build such a discourse on the history of administrative thought. The contributions are based on papers originally developed in the context of the panel "Prelude to Public Administration: Essential Early European Authors on Administration" at the Fourteenth Annual Conference of the International Research Society for Public Management (IRSPM), Bern, April 7–9, 2010.

For the sake of parsimony, we restrict the symposium linguistically to the German and Dutch traditions of thought. This does not mean that other parts of Europe did not produce classics and original thought. However, Europe is so heterogeneous in culture that even in a much larger effort, we would only be able to come somewhat closer to representing it in its full richness. The two linguistic regions were not chosen arbitrarily. First, both German and Dutch are rooted in the West Germanic language family and thus share closer

common cultural roots than is typical of other European linguistic regions. Second, and more important, this has led to the formation of what Painter and Peters call the “Germanic tradition of public administration”:

The German *Rechtsstaat* is often held up as the prime example of a statist view of governance with a very strong and all-encompassing body of public law governing every administrative sphere. Members of this group along with Germany are Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Civil servants (and judges) tend to be trained to think that they alone possess the capacity and the right to define what constitutes the public interest. (2010, p. 22)

Third, both cases produced important thinkers within and beyond administrative thought, and thus are clearly worth a close look. Finally, the two regions were also formative for the historical development of modern administrative practice, and hence it is justified to investigate the thinking that took place in this specific context. The contributions illustrate a number of different ways of approaching the intellectual history of our field—discussing big ideas, important authors.

In the first contribution, Patrick Overeem offers an exploration of Johannes Althusius’s (1557–1638) discussion of administration and its relation to other important concepts in his work, such as politics and communication. In particular, Overeem discusses what Althusius actually means by (public) administration, who is to exercise it, and how it should be performed. Overeem convinces us that Althusius is worth listening to, not only for political theorists, but also for students of public administration, even though his Calvinist approach seems a bit anachronistic. Althusius reminds us that public administration is a mandate from the people and needs to be exercised with prudence. Overeem argues that Althusius’s understanding of public administration is remarkably constitutionalist—that is, legitimated and limited by law. Entrusted to “public servants” by the people in order to serve the people, it has to be moderate and accountable.

Susan Richter analyzes the reception of the two German authors Karl von Moser and Johann Heinrich Gottlob Justi. A political journalist, Friedrich Karl von Moser (1723–1798) yearned for a reasonable and orderly political system, headed by a prince with “a pure and unfeigned love of God” and a “heart full of the true love of mankind.” The ideal state as described by Moser has the clear countenance of the Prussia of Frederick II, known to him in his youth. In his work, Moser comprehensively describes the ideal state of enlightened absolutism, also pointing out the weaknesses and dangers of this system. The same is true of Johann Heinrich Gottlob Justi (1717–1771). The influence of his cameralistic ideas on German political science was considerable. Justi postulated the maintenance of state assets as the most important part of the acts of authority, hoping to make *Polizeiwissenschaft* (lit., the science of

policing) a scientific subject at universities that could impart the technique of governance. It was precisely in the context of the cameralistic training of elites that his work was highly regarded as a textbook in Spain, and was consulted in the Russian Empire to aid in reforming the administration. Richter studies the perceptions of the two authors, both of whom worked at new approaches to administration in the German territories of the mid-eighteenth century and, therefore, consciously published their works in German. She deals not only with the evaluations of Moser's and Justi's writings in the various European review journals, but also the question of accessibility in the form of translations, as well as their purpose, in England, France, or Russia.

Toon Kerkhoff then shows how in the Netherlands, between roughly the 1770s and 1813, a new political vocabulary emerged amidst processes of democratization, bureaucratization, and politicization. Kerkhoff provides an overview of thinking on ethical reform as proposed by several exponents of these three currents of thought on reform. This intellectual process included new public values, or at least reemphasized old ones, and by extension helped frame the new normative foundations underlying Dutch administration. As Kerkhoff argues, the Dutch Republic is often ignored in discussions of the history of public management reform, which tend to focus on Prussia, France, or England. It is, however, exactly the somewhat atypical nature of the Dutch Republic that makes it relevant for research. Kerkhoff shows how historic administrative and ethical reforms were influenced by a variety of important but neglected early modern Dutch writers.

Finally, Christian Rosser offers insights into the Swiss-born and German-trained Johann C. Bluntschli's organic theory of the state, his concept of public administration, and his understanding of the politics-administration dichotomy. Considering the intellectual influence Bluntschli exerted on classic American authors like Woodrow Wilson and Frank J. Goodnow, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the normative foundation of early American public administration. The article concludes with a discussion of organic state philosophy as a source of inspiration for contemporary administrative research and theory. In this vein, Rosser argues, with Bluntschli, that public administration plays an important role in establishing and supporting social relations, and in providing citizens with an encompassing structure.

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