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THE ECOLOGY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

By Youssef Abdel-Wahab *

The ecological approach to the study of administration puts emphasis on the relationships between administration and its environment. The word "ecology" is borrowed from biology, where it is used to denote the relations between living organisms and their environments. Living organisms are functional creations of the needs and values they serve, rather than legal-corporate entities. Theorists of public administration, who advocate this approach, assume that administration does not operate in a vacuum, and that it should respond to the changing conditions and needs of the environment that it purports to serve.

The ecological or environmental approach according to Dwight Waldo, emerged in the mid-Forties, "and if one wishes a symbolic beginning, it can be found in the preface to the Fritz Morstein-Marx textbook of 1946: "The principal aim of the book is to deepen the reader's understanding of the administrative process as an integral phase of contemporary civilization."¹

The environmental approach was also foreseen by Robert Dahl in 1947, when he examined the relationship between the old principles of administration and comparative administration:

- 1 Generalization derived from the operation of public administration in the environment of one nation-state cannot be universalized and applied to public administration in a different environment. A principle may be applicable in a different framework. But its applicability can be determined only after a study of that particular framework.
- 2 There can be no truly universal generalizations about public administration without a profound study of varying national and social characteristics impinging on public administration, to determine what aspects of public administration, if any, are truly independent of the national and social setting. Are there discoverable principles of universal validity, or are all principles valid only in terms of a special environment?

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1. Dwight Waldo, Public Administration, in Marian D. Irish (ed.), *Political Science: Advance of the Discipline* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. : Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp. 167-168.

- 3 It follows that the study of public administration inevitably must become a much more broadly based discipline, resting not on a narrowly defined knowledge of techniques and processes, but rather extending to the varying historical, sociological, economic, and other conditioning factors that give public administration its peculiar stamp in every country.²

J. M. Gaus, however, was the first to include the word “ecology” in the study of public administration. In his “Reflections on Public Administration,” he concluded with the following:

Hence the study of public administration must include its ecology. “Ecology,” states the Webster Dictionary, “is the mutual relations, collectively, between organisms and their environment.” J. W. Bews points out that “the word itself is derived from the Greek *oikos*, a house or home, the same root word as occurs in economy and economics. Economics is a subject with which ecology has much in common, but ecology is much wider. It deals with all the interrelationships of living organisms and their environment.” Some social scientists have been returning to the use of the term, chiefly employed by the biologist and botanist, especially under the stimulus of studies of anthropologists, sociologists, and pioneers who defy easy classification, such as the late Sir Patrick Geddes in Britain. In the lecture of Frankfurter’s . . . , the linkage between physical area, population, transport and government is concretely indicated. More recently, Charles A. Beard formulated some axioms of government in which environmental change is linked with resulting public administration.³

Also according to Gaus, the ecological approach to the study of public administration:

. . . builds, then, quite literally from the ground up; from the elements of a place — soils, climate, location, for example — to the people who live there — their numbers and ages and knowledge, and the ways of physical and social technology by which from the place and in relationships with one another, they get their living. . . Such an approach is of particular interest to us as students seeking to cooperate in our studies; for it invites — indeed is dependent upon — careful observation by many people in

2 Robert E. Dahl, “The Science of Public Administration: Three Problems,” *Public Administration Review*, Vol. VII (1947), p. 11.

3 J. M. Gaus, *Reflections on Public Administration* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1947), pp. 6-7.

different environments of the roots of government functions, civic attitudes, and operating problems.⁴

Fred Riggs, nevertheless, was the first contender of ecological approach to put it into a general theory. His model of "Prismatic Society" was a pioneering, impressive, and ideal effort in the field. Through a structural-functional approach, and by using all the tools available in the social sciences, in addition to deduction, he differentiated between three models of societies: the "Fused," the "Prismatic," and the "diffracted." He considered that a structure is "functionally diffuse," because of its large number of functions; prismatic, because it combines both fused and diffracted functions; and diffracted, because it performs highly specific functions. He visualized the three types of societies on a continuum wherein the prismatic type of society takes an intermediate situation between the fused and diffracted societies. These models were basically designed to help understand administrative behaviour in transitional societies, and they called for an ecology of public administration.⁵ However, these models, despite their values, were often criticized for their complexity, ambiguity, and lack of realism.

In summing up his ecological theory of administration, Riggs stated the following:

In short, the mere enumeration of environmental and cultural conditions as an explanation of development or administration in a particular country is not an ecological approach. What is required, and what makes a study ecological, is the identification of sensitive variables in the environment — whether they form a part of the culture or not — and the demonstration of at least plausible patterns of correlation between these variables and the administrative items which are the focus of analysis. In my view many, though not all, environmental factors — cultural, historical, geographical, and so on — are likely to be relatively insensitive to

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

5 Fred W. Riggs, *Administration in Developing Countries* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964), pp. 3-49.

See also Riggs in the following:

Fred W. Riggs, "Agraria and Industria — Toward a Typology of Comparative Administration," in William J. Siffin (ed.), *Toward the Comparative Study of Public Administration* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1959).

_____. *The Ecology of Public Administration* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1961).

_____. Report prepared originally for a panel at annual meeting of the A.S.P.A.S. in F. Heady, "Papers in Comparative Public Administration," Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1962.

_____. "Trends in the Comparative Study of Public Administration," *International Review of Administrative Science*, XXVII (1962), pp. 9-15.

Fred W. Riggs & Edward W. Weidner, *Models and Priorities in the Comparative Study of Public Administration*, Papers in comparative public administration, Special Series No. 1, American Society for Public Administration, Chicago, 1963.

Fred W. Riggs, "Administrative Development: An Elusive Concept," in John D. Montgomery and William J. Siffin (eds.), *Approaches to Development: Politics, Administration, and Change* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966).

_____. *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (East-West Center Press, 1966).

development and to the explanation of administrative behaviour. However, important it may be to learn about these environmental conditions if one wishes to work among and communicate with a particular people, it is not necessary to include them in ecological explanations of change or of politics or of administration.⁶

The writing of Riggs had, in effect, generated a host of new models, ideas, and comments by public administrationists about the ecological approach. No attempt will be made in this study to cover them all. However, some of them are worth mentioning for their significance.

Ferrel Heady thinks that bureaucracies and other political and administrative institutions can be better understood " . . . if the surrounding conditions, influences and forces that shape and modify them are identified and ranked to the extent possible in the order of relative importance."⁷ He visualizes the environment of bureaucracy, "as a series of concentric circles, with bureaucracy at the center. The smallest circle generally has the most decisive influence, and the larger circles represent a descending order of importance as far as bureaucracy is concerned."⁸ The largest circle in his view represents, ". . . all of society or the general social system. The next circle represents the economic system of the economic aspects of the social system. The inner circle is the political system; it encloses the administrative sub system and the bureaucracy as one of its elements."⁹

Ira Sharkansky sees the administrative system in the United States as composed of:

(a) an environment that both stimulates administrators and receives the products of their work; (b) the inputs that carry stimuli from the environment to administrators; (c) the outputs that carry the results of administrative action to the environment; (d) a conversion process that transforms (converts) inputs into outputs; and (e) feedback that transmits the outputs of one period — as they interact with features in the environment — back to the conversion process as the inputs of a later time. All of these features interact with one another. Together, they form the administrative system. . .¹⁰

A bureaucratic organization, according to Eisenstadt, is a social system which should

6 *Ibid.*, p. 428.

Riggs also stated, "But an ecological approach is not deterministic. It does not suggest that environmental conditions shape administrative behaviour to such an extent that no choice is possible, that whatever appears is inevitable, hence unchangeable. Rather, ecological forces set boundaries; they give the ranges within which choice is possible (*Ibid.*).

7 Ferrel Heady, *Public Administration: A Comparative Perspective* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 24.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 Ira Sharkansky, *Public Administration: Policy-Making in Government Agencies* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1970), p. 4.

maintain a certain type of equilibrium in its environment. From its inception, he says:

... a bureaucratic organisation is in a state of constant interaction with its environment and has to develop different ways of maintaining a dynamic equilibrium in this environment. The equilibrium results from adjustment of its own goals, structure, and interests in relation to the major forces in its social environment and to the power processes generated by each of them.¹¹

In examining three current studies which followed the ecological approach, Esman concluded with the following:

The ecological style to date has demonstrated the useful capacity to help goal-oriented students and practitioners appreciate some of the limitations on action. It has yet to demonstrate the capacity to help solve action problems.¹²

The ecological studies, however, are not easy to make. They require thorough knowledge of the surrounding elements of public administration in a given situation which would certainly relate to all the tools available in the social sciences. As better phrased by Raphaeli:

Studies of the mutual influence of administrative systems and their environments are still in the embryo state. They are difficult by their very nature, since they require an understanding not only of public administration but of the wider aspects of political, economic, sociological, and physical processes as well. Nevertheless, one cannot really comprehend public administration in certain countries in the Middle East, for example, without understanding Islamic heritage, social culture, and even the geophysical conditions of the area.¹³

The Middle-Range Theory

In his study of "Prismatic Society," Riggs emphasized the need for nomothetic-idiographic research in comparative public administration. By nomothetic, he meant, "any approach primarily concerned with the formulation of laws and general

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- 11 S. N. Eisenstadt, *Bureaucracy, Bureaucratization, and Debureaucratization*, in Nimrod Raphaeli, *Readings in Comparative Public Administration* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1967), p. 360.
 - 12 Milton J. Esman, "The Ecological Style in Comparative Administration," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. XXVII (September, 1967), p. 278. Esman examined the following books: Fred W. Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (East-West Center Press, 1966); William J. Siffin, *The Thai Bureaucracy: Institutional Change and Development* (East-West Center Press, 1966); and Nghiem Dang, *Viet-Nam: Politics and Public Administration* (East-West Center Press, 1966).
 - 13 Nimrod Raphaeli, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

propositions.”¹⁴ The term idiographic, on the other hand, is, “primarily concerned with unique instances, such as a particular government, case, or organization.”¹⁵ The idiographic studies, in his judgement, have been greatly developed, while the nomothetic ones have been greatly neglected in comparison. Priority should, in his opinion, be given to the latter, in order to achieve a balance toward an ultimate goal of nomothetic-idiographic synthesis.¹⁶

The two trends that prevailed in the study of public administration during the last two decades have been toward behavioralism and toward environmentalism. These trends can be easily evidenced by reviewing the literature in the field during this period. In relating these trends to the terms nomothetic and idiographic, coined by Riggs, Waldo reached the following conclusions:

To the extent that behavioral implies nomothetic and environmental implies idiographic they are of course opposed. That is, by definition nomothetic and idiographic represent opposing views of reality, or at least of how it is to be mastered or understood: certainly the wish and intent of the strict behaviorist is to find “lawful regularities” and certainly the idiographically inclined seek “understanding” in relation to context. But (. . .) as time passes and studies proceed, behavioralism and environmentalism intertwine and more or less blend together. In certain ways, in fact, they are not opposed but complementary and reconcilable approaches. The behaviorist perspective and objectives can be broadened to include the environment, in the large or in part. “In the large” is ambiguous, and necessarily so. If too much is accepted or defined as relevant environment, then well-known problems arise. Too many and even unknown variables are presented; and one risks System Building or even (heaven forbid) Philosophy. On the other hand, consideration of a reasonable number of environmental variables may be deemed desirable, or even necessary to understanding a particular prob-

14 Riggs, *op. cit.* p. 403.

* Riggs also states the following: “It is difficult to find more familiar terms which express this distinction so clearly. ‘Scientific,’ for example, is not equivalent to nomothetic, since idiographic studies can also be objective and scholarly, hence ‘scientific,’ in at least one sense. Indeed, a combination of idiographic and nomothetic analysis is essential for the development of any science. The word ‘theory’ is no better; it carries heavy overtones which are irrelevant — as in the theory — practice dichotomy. Moreover, it is useful to distinguish ‘theory’ from hypothesis, and ‘theory’ from models, yet all are equally nomothetic. Thus a ‘theory’ is one type of nomothetic statement, but not the only type. (*Ibid.*, p. 403).

* Alternative expressions for idiographic are equally unsatisfactory. A “case study,” for example, is idiographic, but we normally use this term for an analysis of a particular decision or problem, as in a legal or public administration “case,” or a social worker’s or psycho-analyst’s “case.” Biographical and historical works are quite idiographic, yet it would obviously be misleading to use either “biography” or “history” as synonyms for “idiographic.” Moreover, any country report typically contains many nomothetic elements as well. Hence, even though area studies are largely idiographic, the terms cannot be used synonymously. (*Ibid.*, p. 404).

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, p. 404.

lem. This leads one, if judicious and restrained, into the very respectable area of Middle-Range Theory.¹⁷

Based on the interpretations of Waldo, therefore, much of the studies in public administration which took place in the fifties and the sixties displayed the combined interests in behavioral-environmental approaches, and thus fell in the Middle-Range Theory. This is, in fact, characteristic of the studies made by sociologists in administration and by others who borrowed heavily from the basic theory of sociology. The works of Alvin Gouldner, Peter Blau, Philip Selznick, and Robert Merton as well as much of the recent work in comparative public administration fell into this category.¹⁸

Future of Ecological Approach

The future of ecological approach lies with the future of comparative public administration as a whole. According to Riggs, the trend is rising toward empirical, nomothetic, and ecological analysis instead of toward normative, idiographic, and non-ecological analysis.¹⁹ A great number of the writers in the field is in agreement with Riggs' perception of trends. However, they also foresee great difficulties in the definition of terms and in methodology.²⁰

17 Dwight Waldo, *Public Administration*, in Marian D. Irish, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-169.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

19 Riggs, *op. cit.*, pp. 426-429.

20 After reviewing the literature of public administration in the past two decades, the writer came to the conclusion that there is no agreement among the public administrationists as to what the above indicated terms, and others, mean or as to what constitutes a scientific methodological approach or approaches to the study of discipline. For further discussion, see in particular:

Dwight Waldo, *Comparative Public Administration: Prologue, Problems, and Promise* (Chicago: Comparative Administration Group, American Society for Public Administration, 1964).

James Heaphey, "Comparative Public Administration: Comments on Current Characteristics," *Public Administration Review* (May-June, 1968).

Ferrel Heady and Sybil L. Stokes, (eds.) *Papers in Comparative Public Administration* (An Arbor: Institute of Public Administration, The University of Michigan, 1962).

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