

Writing the History of Public Administration The Challenge of Change

Key-note lecture at the workshop “Was ist Verwaltungsgeschichte?”
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Introduction

Five years ago, in 2008, the last edition appeared of the *Jahrbuch für Europäische Verwaltungsgeschichte* (JEV). This yearbook had been published for exactly 20 years and contained articles in German, French, Italian, and English. It covered very diverse themes, ranging from the most central to the most quaint, but always addressed from a comparative perspective. The Yearbook was the initiative of Erk Volkmar Heyen, a professor from peripheral Greifswald, who thus almost singlehandedly put administrative history in Europe on its feet. With his retirement, the Yearbook also came to an end – a genuine loss.

Of course, the fate of the Yearbook need not be the fate of administrative history as a whole. In fact, the field seems to be in relatively good shape – even without it. Handbooks and textbooks are coming out and special issues appear in academic journals; there are recognized experts, panels at conferences, and research projects with international exposure. Another piece of evidence is that here today, in the midst of summer, we have gathered for this workshop. Although not recognizable as a subfield until about three decades ago, administrative history now seems to be doing pretty well.

Two challenges

And yet, there are two massive developments that, I think, pose serious challenges to administrative historians.

1. First of all, there is what I will simply call the ‘information revolution,’ by which I mean the growth of the internet and the digitalization of sources, including historical documents and government papers. In the time of ‘Big Data’ and WikiLeaks, avalanches of information about governments past and present have become easily accessible at our fingertips – and those

of the general public. Moreover, governments themselves feel increasingly urged to make information publicly available in order to be 'transparent'. Now it may seem paradoxical to see this development as a challenge: is not the easy and low-cost access to information an opportunity rather than a threat? How can the availability of data ever be a problem to the researcher? This question is not so difficult, as we all, every day, experience the problems of getting too many hits on our searches, of finding too many books and articles to read. We are overwhelmed with information and have difficulty to select what is most relevant. More apt than ever is the famous saying of T.S. Eliot:

[quote] *"Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"* [unquote]

2. The second big challenge that I see is the difficulty that, as administrative history is finally getting off the ground, at the very same time our very concept and practices of public administration are becoming elusive again. This is mainly due to the rise of the idea of 'governance,' which states, briefly, that the state is no longer the dominant authority, but only one player among others: companies, NGOs, supranational institutions, media, and so on. 'Governance' thus refers to the emergence of public-private partnerships, the dispersion of authority to supranational and extra-governmental networks, and the rise of multi-level policy-making arenas. In one formula, the idea is that we are moving from government to governance, from hierarchical systems to fluid networks. The extent to which this development actually takes place is still an open empirical question (especially as states recapture their roles in the current financial crisis), but it is certainly true that this view has enormous influence on our thinking and theorizing about public administration. This 'governance revolution,' as one could call it, is obviously a challenge to administrative history because blurs the boundaries of its subject matter (what to include and where to stop?) and it reduces its rationale (why pay so much attention to one actor in the network in particular?). So if the future would be to governance instead of government, this seems to imply that the 'history of public administration' must always remain the history of a past phenomenon, like the history of knighthood or the guild system. Interesting, to be sure, but no longer extant.

So these are two challenges to administrative history: the information revolution and the governance revolution. Together, they make our theme vast and vague. Hence, the question I want to address is this: if this is the case (if an overload of information becomes available and if, at the same time, our object of study becomes increasingly blurred), what should we do to carry on the history of public administration?

To address this question, I want to do three things. First, I will state one important thing about public administration itself. Next, I will discuss the role of administrative history and the character it should have, in my view, to cope best with the challenges described. Finally, I will briefly say something about the role of archives in this conception of administrative history.

Public administration is secondary

The single point I want to make about public administration is that it is inherently *secondary*. It is secondary, most directly, to politics and occasionally also to the courts. Less directly, but no less importantly, PA is also secondary to society. In well-ordered regimes, politics has primacy and administration is subordinate. But administrators have to serve not only politicians, but citizens, too. Here, evidently, tensions arise that we cannot go into now, but that shape our object of study tremendously. At its best, public administration is always *public service*.

Emphasizing that public administration is inherently secondary may seem like laboring the obvious, but this basic fact is routinely forgotten by students of public administration. Many of them identify closely, often too closely, with their object of study. The civil service is their favorite part of government and the administrative state their preferred form of government. Critics of both can be found among political scientists and economists, but hardly among students of public administration. This is nothing new: Waldo showed so much for pre-war American public administration already. But it is a deplorable prejudice, because it hampers critical distance and lively debate. We students of public administration should be much more detached from our object of study, somewhat like students in medicine: diseases are extremely interesting but one should try to keep clear of them.

Now the study of administrative history, properly conducted, can help to overcome this prejudice. It can unmask what we could call the 'Whig interpretation of administration history' by showing (as Baldwin argues well in his piece) that the Scandinavian welfare state is not the inevitable standard to which all other states must hold up, let alone the only possible form of government to address collective problems. In short, administrative history can show us the secondary character of public administration and the contingent background and relative worth of the modern administrative state.

The role of administrative history

This brings us to the role of administrative history more generally – my second point. To be very prompt, I see four understandings of the role of administrative history:

1. First, there is the view that administrative history offers merely historical background knowledge to students of public administration. Thus understood, it is merely supportive, useful only in so far as it helps to understand present-day government.

2. In the second view, it is the role of administrative history to offer correctives. It shows exceptions to generalizations, it highlights the uniqueness of phenomena. It is a source of falsifications and thus a help to the critic. In this role, administrative history does not come up with much of its own: it yields negative rather than positive results.

In both these views, administrative history is just a handmaiden to the study of public administration. Both take, to use an analogy, an “underlaborer” view on administrative history.

3. But one could proceed and argue, thirdly, that administrative history is also valuable in itself, for its own sake: for instance because of the stories it tells and the wonder and delight that gives. This is indeed an effect, of course, of good historiography. In this role, the strangeness of the past is particularly emphasized: the distance and difference between ‘them’ and us’. By doing so, it may (unintentionally) lend support to the Whiggish idea that the present is mainly an improvement of the past.

These three views do not exclude one another, but are cumulative. Neither are they simply wrong. To the contrary: the informative, critical, and aesthetic roles of administrative history are surely valuable.

4. There is, however, a fourth view, which I prefer myself. This is the view that the role of history, including administrative history, should be “to do justice to the dead”. This memorable expression is from the late Dutch historian Arie van Deursen. He meant by it that historians should give due recognition to the people who lived before us, preserving the memory of their thoughts and actions for those who will live after us. This view relates, of course, to the idea of Edmund Burke that a society is “a partnership of (...) those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born”. In this view, history is not about strangers, about ‘them’ (as in the third view), but about our own ancestors and their neighbors: we share family ties and social ties with them. Because we are one community with our predecessors, history is also always about ourselves. Writing about their evils still hurts and embarrasses us; writing about their greatness gladdens us and fill us with pride.

A humanistic discipline

In this last view, the one I take, history is (to borrow a phrase from Bernard Williams) a *humanistic* discipline. This does not mean that it should be anti-religious or morally progressive, but that its main interest is *man*. Historians, in this view, want to study what is typically human – or inhuman, for that matter, but not what is unhuman. It aims to show human life in its full richness, that is, both in its greatness and its weakness, and even (occasionally) in its wickedness. Put differently, historians in this view want to understand human nature and the human condition.

The singular is important here. The assumption is that, despite unique individual traits and circumstances, we share a common nature and condition with our contemporaries and predecessors. And therefore history should try to be a coherent field itself and to be integrated with other fields that study man. Extreme specialization, in this view, should be avoided; interdisciplinarity and open-mindedness promoted. This also means, that notwithstanding many changes, history shows a deep continuity: there are certain 'perennial questions' that must be addressed over and over. For example, to stay within our field, how do we guarantee that government has sufficient but at the same time limited power? How can public servants remain subordinate and loyal and still morally responsible? To address such timeless questions, history has to do what humanists have always tried to do, namely going back to the sources (*ad fontes*). For many of the best humanists in history, during the Renaissance and beyond, this meant going back to the ancients. For us, it means this as well, but also going back to other classics that have appeared since.

History, thus understood, is at bottom one of the *moral* sciences. More precisely, it is part of philosophy, the search for wisdom. To recall Eliot, historians ultimately want to proceed from information and knowledge to wisdom. In particular, they seek for *practical* wisdom, helping us to answer the question: 'What to do?'. It answers this question for people in the past (What did Clive Ponting have to do in the Belgrano-affair?) and thereby it helps us to address similar questions in the present. Thus history teaches prudence. That is also why it is so important, indeed integral, to the study of public administration: because public administration is arguably the exercise of practical reasoning in the sphere of government.

To obtain practical wisdom, this humanistic approach adopts an *interpretative* approach to administrative thought and practices. That is, it asks for their meaning and the reasons behind them. In the interpretative approach, as Weber realized, *objectivity* is a crucial requirement. This is often taken as a quality of the *object* of research, for instance that it exists outside of our ideas, but objectivity is at least as much a characteristic of the *subject*, of the researcher. It is one of the virtues of the academic to be objective. It means being fair, to pay proper respect to the facts, to do justice (again!) to your object of study. Objectivity

thus understood does not deny social constructions. One can very well be objective, even believe in objective reality, and still recognize that much of social life, including public administration, is socially constructed (John Searle showed this in his wonderful book, *The Construction of Social Reality*). Objectivism further does not exclude normativity and value judgments. Sometimes words like cruel, heroic, or statesmanlike are simply the best terms to describe, objectively, what is the case.

How and what to choose?

You may have noticed by now, that in this approach, administrative history is not characterized by a special methodology. Of course, a good historian has certain skills (especially the skill of reading well, as Jakob Burckhardt said), but there is no special methodology for historical studies. In the social sciences, as you know, the choice of research topics is increasingly driven by methodology. This leads to the study of all kinds of trivial subjects, merely because there are data available that can be analyzed with fancy techniques. In administrative history this is, fortunately, not the case.

This is not to say that, without their own methodology, administrative historians are free to choose their topics randomly – to the contrary. There is an ocean of facts about past and present governments (*administrivia*, if you want) and this ocean is growing rapidly. How can prudent administrative historians select the relevant trends and topics? Here, I think, the view of administrative history as a humanist science can be of help. In this view, ideas are prior to decisions and deeds. Ideas and ideologies are extremely powerful; in fact, “the world is ruled by little else,” as John Maynard Keynes famously wrote. Hence administrative history should in the first place be the history of administrative ideas and concepts. *Ideen- und Begriffsgeschichte* are of primary importance, although immediately thereafter, of course, actions and practices should be studied, too. Further, persons are generally more important than processes, agents more than structures. They may not be as powerful or influential, but they carry far greater moral weight, which should be done justice to. So I argue for trying more of the kind of history writing that Alexis de Tocqueville associated with aristocratic centuries. Indeed, if there is one methodological point I want to stress, it would be that administrative history should adopt the biographical method much more than it does now. In too many of our writings (also in the Yearbook praised earlier), the governments of the past have remained faceless and unhuman. This is a distortion. We need more studies of the people who have actually served as public administrators in the past.

So ideas and humans are particularly important. But for historians surely not all ideas and humans are equally important and we should not be afraid to aim at big ideas and great persons more than others. Indeed, it is part of doing justice to the dead to pay relatively

much attention to them. A nice example of this comes from the Dutch Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD), which, to keep interest in the Second World War and the Holocaust alive among younger generations, has recently decided to pay explicit attention to war heroes and has, as a start, published a marvelous biography about one of them. This, in my view, is a very sensible thing to do and I am trying to do it myself in my work on 'administrative statesmanship'.

Role of archives

Finally, since this workshop is organized by the Swiss Federal Archives, I feel compelled to share some thoughts about the role of archives. The two challenges I have mentioned must be faced by archives, too. First of all, the information revolution obviously poses very direct challenges to archives. Even if they ever had the ambition, archives can no longer even dream of providing all the information about government. That is simply unfeasible, and it is unnecessary and undesirable, too. The governance revolution, second, makes it harder for state archives to delineate their area of responsibility. Should they also store information about, for instance, the organizations partaking in public-private partnerships? About the actors involved in processes of policy co-creation? And about the international institutions in which 'their' government is active? What are the boundaries?

To deal with these questions, I see two options, a bad one and a good one. The first would be that archives turn into a kind of museums – permanent and changing exhibition shows of special material about a government's past. This would fit the third role conception of administrative history nicely (and perhaps the first and the second, too), but not the fourth. The alternative and better option, in my view, would be that archives take a special responsibility to support the advance of administrative history as described earlier. Specifically, archives should help making the transition from information to knowledge. From the vast amounts of data, they should help make relevant selections – upon request and by their own initiative. It is then up to the academic historians to make the second step, from knowledge to wisdom – a difficult task to be sure, but one made considerably easier if the archives do the first step well. Closer collaboration between the two is therefore required.

Conclusion

I will conclude. Two enormous changes – the information revolution and the governance revolution – are sweeping our field and challenge the just-emergent sub-discipline of administrative history profoundly. I have argued that a humanistic approach to administrative history can help us to cope better with these challenges. Such an approach helps

administrative historians to select what is truly relevant amidst the mass of information about a fading phenomenon. It does not prescribe a particular set of research topics, but it demands that, in our research, we try to do justice to the dead and thereby achieve practical wisdom.

What I have mainly tried to emphasize is that the challenge of change should not become a temptation to change. The two revolutions I described demand not a novel, but rather a classical (even 'aristocratic') understanding of the administrative historian's and the archivist's responsibility. This is less paradoxical than it may seem. Precisely because of the information revolution and the governance revolution, a renewed focus on the human person as a thinking and acting being within the unique moral sphere of government is more needed than ever. Indeed, it is the only way, in my view, in which our field can have a future.

But we could of course begin, modestly, with re-establishing the Yearbook.

Thank you very much.