

## Review

# The development of the concept of the "one best method" in public administration

Wasim Al-Habil

The Islamic University of Gaza, Palestine. E-mail: [al\\_habil\\_wasim@hotmail.com](mailto:al_habil_wasim@hotmail.com)

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**The notion that there is one right way of accomplishing a given task had an influential role in the theory and practice of public administration. This theoretical paper presents the impact of the scientific approach on the founding literature of the science of public administration. The main reform proposals that emphasized this concept will be presented through the early writings in the field. Then it discusses the main public administration authors who recognized the limitations of the "right way" and weakened its role in public administration. Finally, the current impact of the scientific management on the field will be highlighted.**

**Key words:** Taylorism, public administration, one right method, positivism.

## INTRODUCTION

The notion that there is one right way of accomplishing a given task has had an influential role in the theory and practice of public administration. The one "right way" is a major component constituting the politics-administration dichotomy in the field and is connected to Taylorism, which refers to the use of scientific management to reach efficiency. The research argues that the scientific perspectives that shaped the establishment of public administration as a field of study were highly influenced by the concept of "one best method." However, through the development of public administration as a field of study, the limitations on this scientific approach have been recognized and criticized. Although, the role of scientific management is not presented in a clear fashion in contemporary public administration, it continues to have a considerable impact on the field through the new public management. This paper presents the impact of the scientific approach on the founding literature of the field. The main reform proposals that emphasized this concept will be presented through the early writings in the field. Then, it will discuss the main public administration authors who recognized the limitations of the "right way" and weakened its role in public administration. Finally, the current impact of the scientific management on the field will be explained.

Public administration as a field of study was highly influenced by positivism as a way of thinking and producing knowledge when it was established by the end

of the 19th century. Positivism came from the 17<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment and emerged in the United States during the progressive era when Woodrow Wilson wrote the first essay on the study of public administration (Adams, 1992; Spicer, 1995). Gay Adams (1992) argued that the foundation of public administration as a field of study was strongly influenced by the instrumental rationality in management. Spicer (1995) argued that many, if not most, early writers in the field of public administration were influenced by rationalism by emphasizing "the powers of reason to order human affairs". Rationality infused some concepts in public administration such as efficiency, expertise, the business model, specialization and professionalism, which could all be handled through the science of administration.

## THE FOUNDATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Brian Fry and Lloyd Nigro (1998) argued that the search for a science of public administration was tied to the politics-administration dichotomy. This dichotomy was stressed by public administration writers who advocated the science of administration as a means of reforming public administration. When Wilson wrote his article "The study of administration" in 1887, he called for using a scientific logic in the field of public administration. Wilson recognized that "it is getting harder to run a constitution

than to frame one” and advocated a reinvention of government from the corrupting influences of the spoils system, or the system gone awry due to the abuses of politics. He believed that public administration should be detached from politics and that the separation of administration from politics would provide orderly operations for government free from any corrupting political influences. According to Shafritz et al. (2004), based on a belief in the separation of administration from politics, Wilson called for the development of a science of administration as a means of reforming and making public administration more efficient. For Wilson, a science of administration was necessary for government to ensure the “utmost possible efficiency and at the least possible cost.” In order to run a government efficiently, Wilson suggested that public administration should emulate the field of business, since “the field of administration is a field of business” (Wilson, 1887). This essay established some main concepts in public administration, such as the role of science, business-like management, efficiency, and professionalism as methods of reform in government. This foundation prepared the field to accept scientific perspectives to ensure the most efficient performance of public administration.

Frank Goodnow in his 1900 book, politics and administration, supported the same argument as Wilson in terms of the use of the science of public administration to reform government. Goodnow (2005) clearly articulated the politics-administration dichotomy when he stated that politics and administration could and should be distinguished from one another. For Goodnow (2005), the administrative function in public administration should attend to the scientific, technical, and commercial activities involved in governance ensure the most efficient performance. The science of administration ensures efficiency through professionals with scientific knowledge who are (ideally) “absolutely free from the influence of politics.” (Goodnow, 2005). The considerable support that Goodnow gave to Wilson prepared the field to positively react to any scientific approach to reform the performance of government.

## **THE IMPACT OF TAYLORISM ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

The contribution of the scientific management school, which asserted the same set of values that Wilson and Goodnow emphasized, had a great influence on public administration. Fredrick Taylor (1911) argued in his book *Principles of Scientific Management* that there is “one best method” of achieving any task. Taylor (2005) believed that scientific management consists of certain broad general principles. He tried to increase outcomes through the fastest and the most efficient method of production through these principles. Taylor (2005) believed that the “one way” of performing tasks “right”

and in the most efficient way requires trained individuals who are guided by scientific management. Taylor emphasized faith in universal principles and on the science of administration, but values, public, and democracy were not part of his focus. Scientific management procedures seemed to be applicable in public organizations, which supported the perspective that the science of administration can guide practice in public administration. Michael Spicer (1995) argued that, based on the faith in science during this era, it was believed that if “enough data could be collected and properly analyzed, one could find the ‘one best way’ of administering public services and render public administration more ‘business-like’.

Although, Taylor paid little attention to public administration, the influence of scientific management “helped to create and sustain the idea of a dichotomy between politics and administration” (Holden, 1996). Richard Stillman (2000) pointed out that the scientific management school gave the field “both rational managerial methodology as well as solid scientific legitimacy to ‘do good’ public administration”. Taylor’s “one best method” found its practical way to public administration through direct influence on the Taft Commission, the New York Bureau of Municipal Research, and later the Brownlow Committee. According to Joseph Uveges and Lawrence Keller (1998), Taylor’s scientific management “formed the basis of the recommendations of the president’s commission on efficiency and economy (1912). The Taft commission sought to implement the principles of scientific management in government to improve its performance (Lynn, 1996). A few years later, the New York Bureau of Municipal Research used the scientific approach to consider the functions of public administration (Holden, 1996; Lynn, 1996). According to Camilla Stivers (2000), the bureau’s scientific approach was reflected in its motto: “To promote the application of scientific principles to government’. The major components of the bureau’s philosophy emphasized that government is more business than politics and called for increasing efficiency in public management through scientific inquiry (Stivers, 2000).

Later, the Report of the president’s committee on administrative management (1937), better known as the Brownlow committee, evaluated the machinery of government. From a managerial perspective, the committee provided some managerial techniques to reform the performance of government. The report, which was prepared by Louis Brownlow, Charles Merriam, and Luther Gulick, is also a part of scientific management and orthodoxy, which influenced public administration during the progressive era and focused on efficiency and economy as the main goal for public agencies (Lynn 1996; Stillman, 2000). In general, the influence of Taylorism not only shaped practice in public administration, it also affected public administration

theory, which could be clearly seen in the early public administration writers.

The influence of scientific management on public administration also clearly appeared when the first 2 textbooks in the field were published: *Introduction to the study of public administration* by Leonard White in 1926 and *the principles of public administration* by W. F. Willoughby in 1927. Both authors presented the field of public administration based on scientific grounds of governance and asserted the importance of scientific principles to public administration. White (1967) argued that the study and process of public administration should be based on management rather than law, according to Shafritz et al. (2004). He sought to find principles that could present a performance guide to reform public administration. White (1967) observed that “we are wholly justified in asserting that a science of management appears to be immediately before us”. According to Stillman (2000), “White’s book succeeded as no other had at gluing together various functional specializations as well as disparate ideas of Taylorism, Goodnow’s dichotomy, and other administrative innovations”.

Stillman (1999) and Lynn (1996) asserted that Willoughby also supported scientific management and the role of scientific principles as a means of reform in public administration. Willoughby sought to emphasize the role of fundamental principles and standardization to secure efficiency in public administration. For Willoughby, “a systematic treatment of certain fundamental principles is quite possible” (Sly, 1928). Willoughby (1927) asserted that “these principles are to be determined and their significance made known only by the rigid application of the scientific method to their investigation”. Holden (1996) pointed out that Willoughby translated the language of Taylorism into the theory of public administration. In fact, both White and Willoughby tracked the pathway of Taylor’s “one best method” and Wilson’s belief in the power of science through faith in scientific principles that should be followed to reform public administration.

Henri Fayol’s (1916) major work, *general and industrial management*, which was translated into English in 1925, also extolled general scientific principles, which are “flexible and capable to every need” (Fayol, 2005) and can improve the performance of management in public administration. According to Shafritz et al. (2005), Fayol believed that there is “a universal set of principles of administration... and viewed formal organizations as rationally designed instruments for achieving goals and maximizing machine-like efficiency”. This generic model of Fayol’s general principles had an impact on public administration because it was theorized to work in both public and private organizations.

In general, the influence of the scientific management movement on the field led Luther Gulick and Lyndall Urwick (1937) to focus in papers on the science of administration on the appropriate executive functions to reform public administration. According to Lynn (1996),

Gulick and Urwick drew their principles “heavily on the work of Henri Fayol”. Gulick and Urwick believed, as Taylor did, that there are universal principles of management that can maximize efficiency in organizations. Fry (1998) pointed out that Gulick aspired to “the application of scientific methods to administrative matters”. Thus, these principles were to be proposed based on scientific observations of the performance of public executives. Gulick and Urwick (1937) argued that the planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting and budgeting (POSDCORB) functions of executives were the reform model to increase the effectiveness of public organizations.

Max Weber’s work about bureaucracy, translated into English in 1946, was another one of the major contributions that influenced the literature of public administration. Weber (1946) presented bureaucracy as both a scientific and generic model that can work in both the public and private sectors (Rainey, 1996). Weber’s bureaucracy consisted of the traditional way of thinking in public administration, which relied on the same “ingredients” to reform public administration based on the science of administration (Thompson, 2005). According to Weber (1946), bureaucracy “is, from a purely technical point of view, capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency and is in this sense formally that most rational known means of carrying out imperative control over human beings”.

Many public administration writers describe the era between the 2 world wars as a period of “orthodoxy” in the field (Waldo, 1984; Henry, 2001; Stillman, 2000; Shafritz et al., 2004). Stillman (2000) reflected the domination of the scientific approach on public administration through the key theoretical question that shaped the field during this era: “How to build and apply administrative science?” Lynn (1996) also emphasized that “scientific administration, which stressed the separation of administration from politics and efficiency as the goal of administration, became the dominant idea in public administration from roughly 1910 to 1940”. Spicer (1995) affirmed the same notion that the early “public administration writers had a deep faith in the power of reason”. Based on this presentation to the main contributions to the early literature in the field, one could see the influence of Taylorism on the traditional way of thinking in public administration. This influence includes the emphasis on specialization, professionalism, objectivity and the use of a scientific approach to ensure efficiency in public administration as a means of reform.

## THE PROBLEMS AND LIMITATIONS OF TAYLORISM

After the great depression and world war II, many school-ars started to question the performance of public organizations and raised concerns regarding the need for a new reform. The scientific approach of the orthodoxy in

public administration failed to offer administrative guidance to the top levels of administration (Lynn, 1996). In fact, a new paradigm emerged in the field of public administration during the 1950s that rejected the traditional way of handling government by the "one best method" of Taylorism as well as the orthodoxy of public administration (Stillman, 2000; Henry, 2001). The problems are associated with the scientific management started to be emphasized by many scholars, who observed the deficiency of the scientific approaches used by many early public administration writers and the recognition of the political factor in public administration. According to Lynn (1996), orthodoxy "was finished off in public administration after World War II in a series of articles and books" including the works of Simon, Dahl, Appleby, Waldo, Long, and Marx.

The criticism of Taylorism and orthodoxy was based on different perspectives in regard to the limitations and problems associated with the science of administration in the field. One of the strongest voices to criticize scientific management and orthodoxy in public administration was Herbert Simon in his 1946 article the proverbs of administration (and later in his 1947 book, the administrative behavior), although, he acknowledged Taylor's work. He argued that a true scientific method should be used in the study of administration, but what was used by the orthodoxy lacked the empirical basis to do so. Simon (1946) believed that for "almost every principle (of orthodoxy) one can find an equally plausible and acceptable contradictory principle." For Simon (1946), the POSDCORB functions of the public administration orthodoxy were inconsistent, conflicting, and inapplicable in public administration (Shafritz et al., 2004). Thus, he postulated that what were called the (POSDCORB) principles of administration are only proverbs of administration because public administration should only deal with facts. Simon proposed the fact-value dichotomy because it provides a stronger basis for a science of administration. Through the behavioral approach, Simon narrowed the scope of rationalism by separating facts from values and introducing his concept of bounded rationality. According to Fry (1998), Simon rejected the politics-administration dichotomy because of its failure to "define a value-free domain required for the development of a science of administration, since administrators are involved in policy functions and thus values consideration". Simon (1946) called for empirical research and experiments to determine the appropriate administrative arrangements that can run organizations effectively.

Another strong voice that criticized the one best way of scientific management and orthodoxy in public administration, albeit from a different perspective, was Dwight Waldo (1948) in the administrative state. Stillman (1999) asserted that Waldo "effectively demonstrated the serious shortcomings of POSDCORB doctrines". Fry (1998) pointed out that Waldo denied "the possibility of

constructing a science of public administration... and doubted the existence of 'principles of administration'. Waldo (1984) depended on the history of political theory to argue that the POSDCORB is not a neutral administrative doctrine because it is infused with values. According to Fry and Nigro (1998), Waldo pointed out that even though some aspects of public administration may be amenable to scientific examination, public administration is suffused with political values. Waldo believed that "despite the field's claim to be 'a science with principles of universal validity,' it operated on the basis of 'political theories'" (Stivers, 2000). Therefore, he argued that the objective of the study of public administration should not be focused on how to detach a science of administration from political considerations, but instead should be focused on how to facilitate cooperation between political and administrative domains.

Robert Dahl presented serious problems attached to the science of administration in his 1947 article "The Science of Administration: Three Problems". Dahl (2001) argued that the traditional science of administration was not able to deal adequately with values in public administration. For him, "disputes about ends and difficulties in distinguishing between ends and means raise value questions that should be made explicit, not disguised under the banner of scientific neutrality" (Fry and Nigro, 1998). Dahl (2001) criticized the attempt to make public administration rational by creating laws and principle, because they would only work in administration if human beings could be considered rational. Dahl (2001) asserted that efficiency was only one of the criteria through which the performance of public administration must be evaluated in a democratic system. Dahl (2001) pointed out that public administration in a democratic system is committed to other values such as responsiveness. Indeed, efficiency may be an important value in public administration, but it is less important than democracy. Dahl (2001) pointed out that the problem of the traditional science of administration is that it is not sensitive enough to social conditions in public administration. The assumption that the administrative principles could be applicable in different settings in public administration is arguable. Dahl concluded his article emphasizing the deficiency of the science of administration, which requires more clarification of the position of values and a better understanding of the nature of human beings (Stivers, 2001).

From a different perspective, Paul Appleby (1945) in his book the big democracy rejected the use of the scientific management approach in public administration. He compared the public sector to the private sector and asserted that "government is different because government is politics" (Appleby, 1945). He emphasized that the notion that politics can be separated from administration is a myth (Shafritz et al, 2004). Appleby (1945) argued that public administration is not separate

from politics, but it is the center of American political life. He believed that because administration includes policy choices, it also includes politics. Therefore, according to Stillman (1999), administration becomes relativistic for Appleby and there is no longer one best way to obtain the most efficient performance. Appleby argued that there may be many best ways depending on the specific situation.

After Waldo, Dahl, and Appleby's (in addition to Simon) strong critiques of the scientific movement in public administration, other scholars tended to give more weight to political considerations in the effort to reform public administration (Yates, 1982; Kingdon, 1995). Many scholars, according to Lynn (1996), "began to resurrect the role of politics in executive administration and criticized the emptiness of the narrow doctrine of efficiency as an administrative goal". However, Spicer (1995) argued that "with the fragmentation of the field of public administration following World War II... the rationalist view is no longer expressed in quite so clear or evangelical a fashion. Nonetheless, it continues to have dominant influence in public administration thinking". This impact could clearly be seen again through the main themes presented by the new public management school and the reinventing government movement.

### **SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

The same traditional tensions in the field of public administration between administration and politics, facts and values, bureaucracy and democracy can be seen in the "New Public Management". This section discusses how the scientific management movement has had a continuous impact on the field of public administration through the new public management, which appears to be "old wine in a new bottle." The new public management, as a new effort to reform government, is presented here in association with the reinventing government movement, based on the argument that they both are very similar (Shafritz et al., 2004; Denhardt and Denhardt, 2003).

Christopher Hood (1991), a British scholar, clearly presented the main themes of the new public management in his article, "A Public Management for All Seasons." The core concept of Hood's (1991) argument is that the public sector should borrow the tools and terms used in the private sector to ensure efficient performance. Hood (1991) states 7 major aspects of the new public management, among them are: "professional management," "explicit standards and measures of performance," "emphasis on output controls," "competition in the public sector," and "private sector styles of management". The new public management called for the use of market mechanisms in public administration to provide services to customers, not

citizens. These concepts were similarly presented in the United States during the 1990's through the reinventing government movement (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2003; Shafritz et al., 2005).

Osborne and Gaebler's (1992) reinventing government: how the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector introduced 10 principles for a massive government reform, including such as: steering rather than rowing, injecting competition into service delivery, result-oriented government, finding outcomes not inputs, meeting the needs of the customer not the bureaucracy, earning rather than spending, and market-oriented government. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) thought that by following these principles, a "governmental market" would be created to save the government money, increase its efficiency and reduce red tape.

As part of former vice president Al Gore's effort to reform government as part of the national performance review, he published a report in 1993 that sought to create "government that works better and costs less." According to Shafritz et al. (2005), Gore embraced the work of Osborne and Gaebler in his report. Gore (1993) asserted that "the central issue we face is not what government does, but how it works". The Gore report emphasized that the solution to dealing with an ineffective and inefficient government is the creation of entrepreneurial organizations within the public sector. Donald Kettl's works reinventing government (1998) and the transformation of governance (2000) followed the same track by seeking to replace the traditional rule-based and authority-driven processes with market-based and competition-driven tactics in public administration. Kettl (2000) focused on some core issues to reform public administration such as the use of market-style incentives with public managers, the use of market mechanisms to offer customers greater choices, and the focus on outputs. In general, it seems, in a sense, that the new public management is a representation of Wilson's 100 year old idea that "the field of administration is a field of business" (Wilson, 1887).

Obviously, the connection between traditional public administration and the new public administration could be seen through many different lenses. Both perspectives focus on science, efficiency, professionalism, outcomes, and business-like management. Lynn (2001) pointed out that efficiency is the main objective and ultimate value of government performance in both traditional public administration and the new public management, even if it is more emphasized in the latter. In addition, the politics-administration dichotomy that the early public administration writers used as a basis of building a science of administration "is more clearly expressed in Reinventing Government" (Lynn, 2001).

From a different perspective, Spicer (1995) demonstrated that the early public administration writers "were for the most part deeply rationalist in their thinking". This rational view enhanced their belief in the philosophy

and techniques of scientific management. The rational worldview in public administration, which stresses the power of reason, continued to shape the contemporary view in the field. According to Spicer (1995), “the strength of the rationalist worldview is also suggested in the work of those who seek a renewed emphasis on research into what has been termed “public management”. The rationalist view not only influenced public management in general through the focus on science, but it also had an impact on the New Public Management and the reinventing government movement. For Spicer (1995), the use of new managerial “techniques for ‘reinventing government’ provides evidence of the continuing faith in rationalism and science”. Spicer (2004) agrees with Lynn (2001) that the reinventing government movement represented that same politics-administration dichotomy that the early writers in the field of public administration used to construct the science of administration. Spicer (2004) pointed out that the reinventing government movement revives “the age-old dichotomy between politics and administration”.

Lisa Zanetti and Guy Adams (2000) agree, in general, with Lynn (2001) and Spicer (1995) in regard to the connection between the new public management and traditional public administration. Zanetti and Adams (2000) argued that the new public management is in consistent with the scientific-analytical mindset that dominated the field of public administration during the progressive era. They stressed that the new public management “emerged from the scientific-analytical and technical-rational legacy of western intellectual thought” (Zanetti and Adams, 2000). They pointed out that the rational approach of modernization could be seen in Woodrow Wilson’s work as well as in the construction of the federal government in the United States. Zanetti and Adams (2000) acknowledged Frederick Taylor for applying rationality “to the social world in order to achieve science-like precision and objectivity”. This influence of scientific management shaped the core assumptions of the new public management. According to Zanetti and Adams (2000), the assumptions of the new public management have a clear “reliance on rationality... and the ‘science’ of management”.

## CONCLUSION

The idea that there is a “right way” to practice public administration has a long history in the field of public administration since its establishment by Woodrow Wilson. The rational view of public administration was reflected by most of the early writers in the field through a faith in science. Traditional public administration was based on the notion that efficiency is the preeminent value for government and that it could be reached through the science of administration. In this context, Taylorism’s “one best method” has had a strong influence on the literature of the field because it offered the scientific instrument to

reform public administration.

Although, the limitations and problems of this scientific approach were recognized by many public administration writers by the middle of the 20th century, it continues to shape the literature in the field. The new public management represents this influence in the contemporary public administration literature.

The same ideas will be discussed again and again in the future, and the same conflicting arguments will be encountered. The “one best way” will continue to shape the intellectual discourse in the field of public administration without providing concrete answers. While the tension between politics and administration will continue to be unresolved, the most important thing is to maintain a conversation among the conflicting arguments in various fields.

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