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A State of the Field: Increasing Relative Ignorance¹

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Enthusiasm for public management in administering the public's business has burgeoned over the past decade.² This emphasis has borne a burden of hope (and hype) as public agencies (tagged inaccurately with the political epithet of "bureaucracies") continued to come under assault from aggressive politicians and unremitting fiscal crises. "Public management" subspecies proliferate, techniques and catch words gain standing, suffer the embarrassment of application, and subside leaving a residue of puzzlement and analytical skepticism.

¹Revision of a discussion paper for Public Management and Bureaucracy: The State of Theory—A Panel Discussion, Berkeley Symposium on Public Management Research, University of California, Berkeley, July 19, 1993. I take the title of the panel as rhetorical and advisory; my referent will be theories of the behavior, dynamics, and effects of public organizations and their leaders. My thanks to Chris Ansell and Craig Thomas for their comments.

²This is contrasted with a more mature public administration perspective and the "impact" emphasis of public policy. Often used invidiously, the terminology setting off "public administration," "public policy," or "public administration" "types" from one another, while similar to other territorial spotting behavior, serves at once to nourish a propensity to avoid both analytical critique and the search for cumulative possibilities and to confuse students and practitioners.

³It also gives one permission to "sound off." I hope the outcome will not be a "pop off."

⁴See LaPorte and Consolini (1991) and Roberts (1989) for an overview of this research program.

It is necessary from time to time to ask about the theoretical standing of these views—not only for scholarly reasons, though these are too seldom stressed. It seems also apparent that at least some of these views are taken seriously by reformers, eager politicians, and congressional staff. Scholars who study public organizations and teachers of some who inhabit them have an obligation to attend to the kinds of "state of the field" issues raised by this symposium. This obligation rests on the tacit claims we make that we are the stewards of theory building, teachers of potential practitioners, and advisors vis-à-vis the critique and reform of ongoing public organizations and the design of new ones. Given the state of public organizations in the United States and in many other countries, it is a particularly important duty. The symposium organizers are to be commended for their efforts in catalyzing the event.

The invitation to consider "the state of theory" was intriguing, though the time allowed was quite brief. Accordingly, my views are overly compressed, a caricature.³ They have been intensified in recent years by: a) our work attempting to understand "high reliability organizations," that is, public or regulated organizations that operate systems of great technical power so intrinsically hazardous that substantial portions of the organizations' energies are devoted to preventing significant failures;⁴ b) my current advisory responsibility considering matters of

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institutional trustworthiness or public trust and confidence in the context of managing the nation's radioactive wastes;⁵ and c) an attempt in graduate seminar to set out the dominant conditions that now confront U.S. public organizations.

In considering the "state of theory," I find the news both mildly positive and somewhat unsettling: the good news is that recent symposia like this bring together researchers from public management and administration and those in political science.⁶ These gatherings signal increased activity and possibilities. May their numbers and effectiveness increase. As Kettl's symposium talk and forthcoming paper nicely summarize, there have been interesting theoretical developments; these provoke and add yeastiness to our struggles to understand phenomena in and of public organizations.

The unsettling news is that, in its current state, "theory," while perhaps improving absolutely, exhibits a growing relative ignorance. The balance of my comments addresses this situation and outlines its implications. First, a note on context. "Theory" as used in the public management/bureaucracy literature has at least three connotations—often mixed or mixed-up in ways theoretical work is conducted. What follows is familiar but bears brief repeating.

"Theory" is used variously to typify or connote:

1. a guide to normative frameworks for managers and policy evaluators, for academics and pundits, and for political critiques of public organizations in democracies. This is a sizable literature. Much of Kettl's symposium paper falls nearly in this category, and this perspective was in evidence at the symposium;⁷
2. the basis for designing new institutions or attempting to reform institutions. Proposals are pressed as if we have good ideas about what is wrong and sensible ideas about what is possible. The tone usually suggests that we are able not only to spot aberrations and dysfunctions to complain about, but also that we know what changes are quite likely to result in wished-for outcomes without great offsetting surprise;⁸ and
3. the basis for descriptive understanding, analytical insight, and prediction.

I limit my comments to "theories of the third kind." If used deductively they inform: what we expect from organizations, given their situation and missions; how we construct the meaning

⁵See Department of Energy, Secretary of Energy Advisory Board (1993).

⁶For example, the several national public management research conferences in 1991 and Oct. 1993.

⁷Perhaps due to the heterogeneous nature of this literature, the most intense, sharpest antibureaucracy critique leveled at the alleged suppression of the organizational member (not so much the client) was largely missing from the symposium's agenda. See, for example, Bellone (1980), especially parts 2 and 3; Harmon (1981); and Kass and Catron (1990), especially White and McSwain, and Hummel. Cf. Denhardt (1993), especially chaps. 5 and 7.

⁸Recall Barnard's "efficiency" (Barnard 1938, especially chap. 6).

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of organizational error; what we take as evidence of a vigorous, healthy, dysfunctional, or pathological organization; and our views of the limits that constrain institutional performance and possibilities. Tacitly, I take the view of agency managers, though not necessarily the top political leadership.⁹

It has been argued that we lack a substantial and cumulative base of knowledge; that we run off in a remarkable variety of analytical directions (for example, T. Moe 1991). This is certainly the case when we consider the status of strong tests of assertions, hypotheses, or theoretical fragments. What we draw from sociology, social psychology, and economics is fractured, and when it joined with concerns for problems of operations or political ideology it splays out in a messy pattern with limited cumulative effect.¹⁰

This is a familiar state of affairs in numerous academic areas. Should it be a matter of concern for us? I think so. A growing range of public organizations operate or regulate systems whose failures can set in train grievous consequences, not just for policy proponents or budget political harmony but directly for the safety and lives of citizens and consumers. Public organizations make a significant difference, and understanding them is imperative to the avoidance of operational decline and public damage—before such organizations inadvertently lose their internal coherence and productive capacities. The quality of theory about public management, bureaucracy, and organization is important not only for academic purposes but because designers and critics need to take the theory seriously.

We face a situation in which, even as there are greater and more provocative efforts in theory building about public organizations and management, the phenomena of interest are differentiating and changing even more rapidly than our advances. Our grasp of the dynamics and behavior of public organizations is slipping further and further away: *we know less of what we need to know, even as we know more than we did*—and even as prescriptions for change and improvement proliferate.

How is it that as we work at greater intensity and higher rates (see the lists of topics at symposia like this) it can be argued that our ignorance grows? What are the conditions that produce this effect?

Public organizations face a striking array of conditions. Each presents demanding operational and theoretical challenges. In combination, they pose extraordinary descriptive and

⁹Much of the writing on public management is tacitly from the view of an outsider, for example, an aggrieved client, a distracted elected official, or a frustrated political appointee. It is a grumpy theory of bureaucratic dynamics much in the spirit of overburdened, naive parents bent on "controlling" a large, willful, sometimes recalcitrant adolescent.

¹⁰There are only a few efforts to bring some integration to these views. See Rainey (1991); Gortner (1987); Hult and Walcott (1990); and perhaps Bozeman (1987) chaps. 1-3. Compare Scott (1992).

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explanatory puzzles. Two important sources of analytical ignorance are the growing heterogeneity of public organizations and their embedding networks (see items A and B, exhibit 1). These networks are more than the familiar relationships and tensions of federalism and involve skeins of interagency/contractor relationships that extend increasingly across national borders (cf. Kettl 1993). In effect, the types and variations of public organizations are growing and their missions "speciate."¹¹ As a result, it is increasingly difficult to generalize from one or a small set of agency behaviors to the dynamics of other agencies.

¹¹See Bozeman (1987) for an intriguing way of conceptualizing these differences.

Exhibit 1
Summary of Properties of/Facing U.S. Public Organizations

Imposed by Socio-Economic Environment

Increasing:

- A. *Heterogeneity* of goals and means
- B. *Density of networks* of relations among public organizations
- C. *Technical character* of task processes
- D. Demand for *services w/less tolerance for error*

Decreasing:

- E. *Resources* relative to operational/technical need
- F. *Public confidence* in capacity of public organizations

Inflicted by Principals upon Agents

Continued:

- G. *Adversarial* executive vs. elected official relations
- H. Constraints/*micromanagement from courts and by legislatures*

Increasing:

- I. National and agency *policy volatility*
- J. *Proportion of regulatory to line responsibilities*
- K. *Dependence on third parties* (contractors)
- L. *Centralization of budgetary/audit control* with more *decentralization of operations* to heterogenous experts

} Stem from economic doctrine

Decreasing:

- M. *Technical competence* of agency contract overseers
- N. *Incentives for professional achievement* or career
- O. Effectiveness/*autonomy of senior management*

} Stem from admin. control process

Developed spring 1992, near the end of the Reagan/Bush administration, with students in my graduate seminar (see note 12 for partial list of sources). By 1993, the political rhetoric had softened, though little has changed in the significant properties imposed and inflicted upon U.S. agencies.

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In addition, public organizations face a daunting array of "environmental" conditions¹² (see exhibit 1). Some are imposed by the socioeconomic environment, with little possibility that they could be changed rapidly through the efforts of ruling parties or executive action. Others are "inflicted by principals upon agents";¹³ for example, they are "inflicted" on public organizations by political regimes and stem from economic and/or administrative ideology. Each condition individually is more or less familiar; in combination they confound and confuse. It is a sobering ensemble within which to attempt flexible and effective operations. These conditions are especially daunting when the functions of public organizations are crucial for the political and social health of our communities.

In terms of our discussion, the conditions present a remarkably tough analytical challenge as well. For example, take any four conditions, holding the rest constant (though they would not be constant in real life). On what analytical basis could we predict confidently an organization's response? I set out three quartets below and invite your speculation. In considering these simplified (and artificial) situations, what degree of precision can be achieved—on the basis of current theory—in predicting the capacity of a public organization to operate coherently so that it avoids serious operating failure; maintains this capacity for a work generation; and manages to keep the public's trust and confidence in the process? How closely can speculations be derived from administrative, management, or organization theory?

Set **. (++) = increasing; — = decreasing)

- ++ *Density of networks* of relations among public organizations (B),
- *Resources* relative to operational/technical need (E),
- ++ *Dependence on third parties* (contractors) (K), and
- ++ *Demand for services with less tolerance for error* (D).

Set ^. (++) = increasing; — = decreasing)

- ++ *Centralization of budgetary/audit control* with more *decentralization of operations* to heterogeneous experts (L),
- *Incentives for professional achievement* (N),
- *Technical competence of agency contract overseers* (M), and
- ++ *Technical character* of task processes (C).

Set <. (++) = increasing; — = decreasing)

- ++ *Heterogeneity* of goals and means (A),
- ++ *National and agency policy volatility* (I),
- *Public confidence* in capacity of public organizations. (F)
- *Effectiveness/autonomy of senior management* (O).

¹²These "conditions" were derived in part from reviewing Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) (1989); Bozeman and Slusher (1979); Goodsell (1983); Kettl (1991); Levine (1986); R. Moe (1987); T. Moe (1989); Hargrove and Glidewell (1990); Rainey (1991); Rourke (1991); Ventriss (1991); Waldo (1990); and Wildavsky (1988). See also Kettl (1993).

¹³With apologies to principle-agent devotees.

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To gain some purchase on these analytical (and design) problems, we can and mostly do retreat to conventional administrative and political wisdom. While this might be tempting, it should not be an early option for seekers after rigorous analysis. As an alternative, we can turn to an increasingly familiar set of middle range theories to nourish deductive speculations.¹⁴ They are:

- Resource dependence and contingency theory;
- (New) institutionalism;
- Economic theories of organization and choice;
- Network theories of social/organizational relations;
- Management and "bureaucratic" theories.

When the conditions listed above intensify, turning to these theories for inference and deduction gives small comfort. None of them furnish firm grounds for predictions about expected public organizational dynamics. They provide only limited insight into the complex situations in which most public organizations (managers and evaluators) find themselves. In short, *we confront a theoretical shortfall, and uncertainty about the utility of our concepts of choice* (and I do not mean public choice).

Four examples highlight the point. A dominant feature of high reliability organizations—that is, organizations that seek and attain very high levels of operating reliability—is the sense that the costs of some types of incremental trial and error learning exceed the value of the lessons learned. In the extreme and continuous possibility, the next error may be the last trial. In such organizations, we found theoretically unexpected behavioral responses in decision making, in patterns of authority, in processes of discovery (LaPorte and Consolini 1991; Roberts 1989; Schulman 1993), and in responses to regulation (LaPorte and Thomas 1993). We could derive only modest assistance from the empirical or theoretical literatures in providing plausible hypotheses or explanations.

Related work raised the problem of conditions in public organizations sometimes sustaining or, more dramatically, recovering public trust and confidence in advanced democracies. The initiating context was U.S. radioactive waste management policy and operations, an area in which the salient public and private organizations have for some time been distrusted by most relevant stakeholders. From an analytical perspective, we found a startling lack of systematic theoretical or empirical work ventilating these conditions, say, as the properties of an agency's work processes vary or as its political environment changes (Thomas 1993a).¹⁵ This was particularly true when considering situations,

¹⁴See Scott (1992) for a cogent overview.

¹⁵There is a substantial literature that provides evidence of widespread and intense distrust of government in general, for example, Citrin (1993); compare Hill (1992).

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again extreme but increasingly apparent, where the agency operates systems where there is intrinsically a long lag in the time needed to discover failure or determine success and the magnitude of consequences is high but the victims uncertain. Such an agency risks losing trust and confidence due in part to the weak applicability of current accountability processes (DOE 1993; LaPorte forthcoming).

In another important, perhaps more prosaic, vein, proposals for reorganization come fast (and loose) when operational problems and/or policy frustration mount—"what we can think up *has* to be better than what we have got."¹⁶ Such proposals often are offered for reasons other than enhancing the power of their proponents, as if they had good reason to suppose that other desired outcomes—for example, equity, efficiency, improved quality of personnel, speed of technical development, or enhanced safety—predictably would result. But there is little systematic evidence to support good-hearted enthusiasm or vindictive hopes in promoting one type of structural reform over others in public reorganizations. *The relationship of particular organizational forms and the outcome values they are asserted to enhance is simply indeterminate.* There is, of course, a good deal of organizational folk wisdom but no systematic knowledge of the types of effects particular structural changes have in securing the values that are subsequently enhanced (Thomas 1993b).

A similar situation obtains in understanding the webs of relationships that bind and facilitate the work of public organizations.¹⁷ Clearly, agencies are enmeshed in spreading skeins of exchange relationships among a wide variety of private contractors and political groups and, of course, political executives and legislatures. This trend is likely to continue, perhaps accelerate, in an era of "reinvention" and other earnest efforts to "fix government" (for example, Osborne and Gaebler 1992). Some emphasis on complex interorganizational relationships, networks, might be drawn upon to explicate these developments. Organization theorists have stressed the importance of informal relations and the personal networks through which they operate, and studies of implementation and policy networks have employed the language of interorganizational networks. But this work remains far less developed than the networks the theories seek to describe. There has been little systematic work casting current network thinking in terms of public administrative or management phenomenon.¹⁸

¹⁶This example also comes out of our experience in the radioactive waste management arena. The depth of frustration among stakeholders has been great and proposals for radical reorganizations have been floated for at least fifteen years (DOE (1993).

¹⁷I thank Chris Ansell for development of this point.

¹⁸Cf. trends in social work which have pursued a theoretical agenda emphasizing social networks.

Implications for Theoretical Work on Public Management (and Reform)

What implications does this argument have for scholarly agendas? First, it certainly calls for continued work on

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integrating theories and rendering what we know in rigorous form with strenuous attempts to put these theories to the test. It also suggests that these tests should be conducted across a wider range of public organizational types than is now usually the case. If more representative tests were given, we could move with greater confidence toward more broadly applicable theoretical understanding. While most of us hold to this notion, I wonder how rapidly this could happen, or rather, what conceptual (contrasted to methodological) requirements must be met for broadly representative, credible public management and organizational studies?

A great many qualitative (and quantitative) differences exist among public organizations. I am struck by the extraordinary differences, for example, between management of social security or welfare agencies contrasted to public health service or terrestrial space development bureaus; between management of overcrowded state prisons contrasted with a large program in the support and conduct of performing arts, a tax collection agency, or a state lottery program. I have not included judicial, legislative, or military examples, though they should be taken into account. Are these differences so great—and their political environments so particular—that a broad theory of public management or administration is premature? I think it is, but I do not believe that these differences are so great that attempts to develop theories of the middle range should be denigrated or abandoned. The question could be put: What are the conceptual categories that would become catalysts or organizing principles for systematic theories about various "clumps" of the phenomena?¹⁹

Second, the substantial list of stressor conditions presently "imposed" and "inflicted" on public organizations (exhibit 1), seems on its face to confront public organizations and their evaluators with a much more rigorous, daunting, and endangering environment than has been the case for agencies and programs in the last half of this century. But these conditions do not confront public organizations equally. Some have to deal with only a few, others with almost the whole set. The more numerous and intensive these conditions, the more the agency and its services to citizens are endangered and the less likely the agency is to perform or adapt effectively. This suggests work that calibrates the degree to which imposed and inflicted conditions actually are thrust upon agencies. It also suggests studies that examine the limits of potential organizational capabilities when an agency or program faces particular clusters of these imposed and inflicted conditions.

¹⁹See Barzelay (1993).

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How effective can an agency be or become, given environmental conditions over which it has little control? We now lack theoretically well-founded bases for estimating the degree to which an agency/program could actually achieve politically demanded levels of effectiveness in the face of intensely imposed and inflicted conditions. We are challenged to provide analysis for reasonable expectations about the evolution and dynamics of public organizations else we should expect a growing number of managers facing an increasing proportion of "impossible jobs" (Hargrove and Glidewell 1990). This would be a more credible basis for estimating the degree of improvement that depends on changes of the agency's environmental conditions, contrasted with those that are controlled by political executives and legislatures.

A third implication of this argument is the need to examine the utility (and likelihood of error) of formulations of policy, management, and leadership theory (or rhetorical arguments that are presented or taken as if they were theory) as a basis for the design or reform of new or existing institutions. This is particularly important when such theory or rhetoric is drawn upon in political debate, for example, in those instances where they are taken seriously by executive and legislative policy makers—either as means actually to redress problems or, more seriously, when they are taken up in the hope of demonstrating earnestness without much expectation for actual change. One rarely exercised aspect of this would explore more rigorously the full range of effects, especially the negative "surprises of success" or deferred regrets, were designs and changes based on such theories actually to be implemented at full scale.

This article ends with a first order hunch and a discouraging word: the first about the most fruitful next stages in our theoretical development; the second about resources. A next important theoretical stage would be the development of network theory in combination with resource dependence notions tempered by jousts with the organizational economists and used in the study of organizations in the public sector quite broadly understood. One underlying expectation is that the more extensive and dense the networks, the larger the error term in theories derived from economic paradigms. This expectation stems from the mismatch of economic paradigm's assumptions of relatively high levels of unorganized complexity (for example, quite high division of labor or differentiation with low levels of system interdependencies), while increasingly dense networks result in high levels of organized complexity (for example, degrees of differentiation and interdependence of components).²⁰

²⁰For the classic discussion of these forms of complexity see Weaver (1948). Compare LaPorte (1975) especially chaps. 1 and 10, and Metlay (1975).

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²¹This point was raised during the symposium panel discussion by Harvey Averch, who noted, "During my eighteen years at National Science Foundation (NSF), I never heard anyone come to us calling for a public administration grants program." Could it be that the reticence of some of us public administration/management/organization researchers to be separated from political science has overly inhibited us from seeking relief from the tender ministrations of the NSF political science program as a source for public organization studies?

Notably, these comments, by implication exhorting the public organization studies communities to do more complex and generalizable work, skipped over the matter of resources needed to conduct such relatively costly studies. Overcoming relative ignorance will not "come cheap." At this time, I do not see the resources available to carry out such studies.²¹ Nor do I see much focused emphasis within our communities to reach beyond constrained and derivative theoretical or empirical study.

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