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Public Administration in Latin America

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The debate on the autonomy of public administration vis-à-vis the political system in which it operates, is an open discussion where both opposing and complementary points of view have been expounded. Understanding how the concept of modernization has developed is an important aspect of this debate because it helps us understand that public administration responds to the imperatives of the historical evolution of a given society; in other words, it is not an instrument governed by considerations that can be applied to any context or social scenario. The very concept of public administration is closely tied to the concept of state, particularly to the political system of which it is a part. Thus, according to Rafael Bañón, it is an unpredictable concept, one that varies over time, in a “process that accumulates meanings and changes the predominant validity of [those] meanings and paradigms. As a result, the concepts ‘public’ and ‘administration’ differ depending on the social role [assigned] to the state and on the relationship between state and society.”ⁱ

Discussing public administration in Latin American countries implies, on the one hand, not forgetting that this is not a homogenous region where everything occurs in much the same manner, and, on the other hand, recognizing the fact that the basic referent for public administration in these countries has been the state model in general, and particularly the model of development. In Latin American states, development did not follow the benefactor state model adopted by countries in western Europe; the conceptual bases of the former were taken from the CEPAL model, those of the latter, from Keynes. Latin American countries developed political systems with a populist bias, based on state intervention in many aspects of social life that in turn led to the creation of popular national states rather than true benefactor states. In these popular national states, participation is through social mobilization, not through consolidating representational systems, as was the case in Europe. Lastly, they developed mechanisms under a corporate scheme that hindered interactions between democratic and parliamentary interests.ⁱⁱ Public administration in Latin American states was adapted to the chosen model, and its actions subordinated to the model’s imperatives.

In Latin America public administrations became a privileged space for political negotiation precisely because they concentrated both budgetary and legal resources, and supplanted other spheres of political power. However, we must consider specific experiences. Public administration also became an effective vehicle for political intermediation between government and society, especially in countries that lacked a solid party system or those with a dominant

party. This is why bureaucracies founded their legitimacy on their abilities. They had to handle many public issues with a certain degree of specialization, at times pitting their relative independence against the political class.

However, the actions of “modernizing groups” embedded in high bureaucratic spheres of most administrative structures brought to the fore the key question regarding the administration’s behavior: How to reconcile the fact that bureaucratic groups whose actions fall within a hierarchical and pyramidal scheme can, at times, act almost independently, promoting effective actions, without violating the principle of constitutional and political subordination. In answering this question we cannot avoid mentioning the tension that exists between the autonomy required by administrators and their subordination to the political project they are committed to if they want to be effective. The problem that arises in view of modernizing proposals is that said proposals seem to have a logic of their own, that allows for spaces where a group of officials can create values and norms that are not necessarily shared by the rest of society. Techno-bureaucracy bases its proposals on this logic: The bureaucratic arrangement is transformed, based now on a different “verticality,” with autonomy that is at times excessive, where the modernizing group favors its own ends over all others.

The modernization criterion becomes an element that allows a dynamic, as opposed to a linear, understanding of how administrations behave. From the moment Latin American countries redefine the state—as no longer interventionist and populist—the criteria it operates with forces it to clearly differentiate areas of competence. Thus, administrative aspects will tend to gain in autonomy and, as a result, also be more clearly defined. Positions will be assigned based on merit, and seniority will no longer be a deciding factor. Rational authority emerges as a condition to improve or increase those state powers that coincide with social development. Public administration reforms necessarily address these processes, and thus become an attribute of technocracy. This leads to divisions in bureaucratic bodies, with traditional bodies lagging behind while resisting change, and this may eventually become an obstacle to achieving objectives.

The modernization of administration becomes an objective as a result of developments in science and technology, which, among other things, emerge as a way to reconcile differences. It is necessary to identify the particular experiences, because there are important differences between Chile, Uruguay and Mexico. And the debate and discussion continues only within legislative bodies and political parties. Another result, one that was not foreseen, is that technocracy not only gains strength, it becomes more politicized. On the one hand, part of the bureaucracy continues to depend on the results of political and party negotiations, while the “modernizing” bureaucracy increasingly steers away from this dynamic, precisely because it is recruited based on its “technical” abilities, and these are very different from those that were characteristic of traditional bureaucrats.ⁱⁱⁱ Recruitment is now based on more impersonal, and allegedly more professional, criteria. This is why decisions that emanate from the Executive, and particularly from the “professional” bureaucracy, are paradoxically removed from traditional “legitimizing” mechanisms but close to the new inputs needed to achieve social cohesion, such as citizen participation.

Evolution of the administrative modernization concept

The concept of administrative modernization has evolved, thus allowing Latin American administrations better correspondence with the demands not only of the economic model but of social evolution. However, we must point out that concepts that were appropriate for a given historical moment—for example when the bases of the nation-state are established—do not necessarily lose their effectiveness when times and circumstances change. Rather, new criteria have had to combine with the old in order to face the challenges of social development because we have not yet reached a scenario where the bureaucratic model yields to the so-called post-bureaucratic model, in spite of the pressure exerted on Latin American administrations.

As a normative criterion. Contemporary Latin American societies increasingly applied more intensive and extensive norms to regulate social behavior in general and especially state actions. First, to justify the need to centralize authority and, second, to justify the growth of state intervention in the economy. Today this criterion is still applied: As rules favoring interactions with other countries, notably those that govern trade agreements, like NAFTA, on the one hand, and to perfect general norms, adapting them to the particular reality that has resulted from internal decentralization processes, on the other, processes that have been very important in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Costa Rica concerning primarily the “devolution” of federal attributions to municipalities.^{iv}

Both, no doubt, are dynamics that respond to their own logic. Another aspect of the application of the legal-technical criterion has to do with the processes of deregulation that were a consequence of the growing temptation to “shrink” the state. In many cases, these processes have led to in-depth revisions that have not necessarily implied a reduction of the prevailing set of norms but a readjustment of these norms to a different reality. Likewise, norms are related to a different appreciation of the areas that are subject to regulation. In other words, the national boundaries of the state’s activity aren’t as clear and they are extended to include air and nautical space, telecommunications, markets, and financial exchanges, to name the areas that need to be renewed when the concept of sovereignty undergoes a severe redefinition.

In its relationship with economic development. In the 1960’s, Latin American countries began to consider that administration was a resource that could be used to encourage development; this train of thought was labeled Administration for Development. Administration was considered not only an administrative agent but as an active resource for economic growth. Attention was centered on growth and on the activity of the so-called state-owned sectors. The—in some cases—excessive growth of these sectors caused serious problems when coordinating central agencies and decentralized agencies, since at times the latter carried greater political weight than the former. This led to a significant effort to perfect controls, especially those related to budgetary resources. These changes were a part of programs identified as “administrative reform”; in the 1960’s they had enormous impact. However, these programs, identified as Reform Programs as the ones in Colombia and Venezuela, were limited because they were assigned formal goals, and because they created broad expectations which, when confronted with results, were significantly below those expectations.^v The reforms that were implemented in the 1960’s and especially the 1970’s were formal operations whose technical content was usually taken from foreign models. As a result, processes which did not acknowledge the nature of

political systems ensued, and proposals were designed and discussed exclusively in the circles where they were formulated.

As programming and planning exercises. As a result of the above, there was a moment when it was thought that planning would help solve the problems that troubled Latin American public administrations, —not only problems related to coordination, which were evident in face of the growing number of agencies and that decentralized agencies could easily avoid central controls, but also problems that arose because goals were not met, and led to inefficiency and to the first signs of ungovernability. Planning was a means of expressing aims, objectives, and even goals, clearly. In France, research by Lucien Nizard and Michel Crozier offered a different approach, and in certain cases, questioned the alleged advantages of planning exercises. Once goals were explicit, organizations and agencies that were supposed to work in coordination, following criteria meant to make them homologous, open to concerting decisions, paradoxically became more closed and more competitive. This competitiveness hindered combined efforts, which are a central element of planning exercises. In Latin American countries, like Brazil or Argentina planning was an exercise where goals became aggregate, and it was therefore not easy to identify the responsible parties, resources, or results. Evaluation was not a central element of a process that should never have been considered linear, but, if anything, circular, requiring feedback when facing obstacles or problems that affected the fulfillment of established goals.

As a criterion of efficiency. Once we understand administrative modernization as a resource conducive not only to development but to a distribution of its benefits, it acquires even greater autonomy. Social pressure increases, and becomes more active, demanding, and better informed, all of which forces a distinction between the political project, and government and administrative achievements. Demands increase and become more complex, and the viability of the state as an agent able to create conditions for development, and especially for social justice, is questioned. Public administrations are part of the package of elements that needed in-depth adjustments. A proposal is set forth that includes not only regulations and structures but above all aims and the functions required to meet them. And certainly not in any way or at any cost, but efficiently and effectively.

The slogan is then to do more and better with fewer resources. The integration of administrative structures is redefined, as is the usefulness of public function, the profile of the officials, and actions in diverse contexts. As was stated above, traditional paradigms (such as the bureaucratic paradigm) are questioned, and administration and its members are the subject of debate among scholars and professionals alike. Many countries begin reform processes based on new, or at least renewed, conceptions: Chile is one good example. The world over, the ineffectiveness of obsolete plans are discussed, as well as the need to construct new plans to make public action respond to current circumstances. These changes require thinking and acting differently. There are theoretical positions that identify the changes which most nations—especially those in Western Europe, but others as well—have embraced. Since the 1980's, administrative reform has been a topic in the political agenda of most countries.

As Communication and Information Technologies. The rapid changes observed in recent years have affected state action and also influence many other aspects of social life. One of the core elements of these changes has been the technological development, which has led to a unique

experience in public administration, so much so that it has been influential in defining the content of the concept of administrative modernization. IT systems have revolutionized public administration. Public function, which had up to now based its performance on its “knowledge” and experience, has become more fluent and flexible. Information technology—data bases and electronic communications—has facilitated the use of computer equipment at operational and professional levels, which intersect the vertical hierarchy. The use of computers in operational levels—while visible results are processed at higher levels—has developed abilities that favor the performance of assigned tasks, beyond decision-making.

Yet despite the fact that these changes are so important, the hierarchy is maintained. But there are new routes in bureaucratic functioning that are well worth analyzing. Networks are created differently, and are no longer based on hierarchical foundations. The assumption that “information is power” becomes relative, because information is no longer the source of individual actions at the top of the pyramid. The nature of the function also changes, because it crosses many spheres of action and increases the significance of projects implemented by better-integrated groups. Although agencies continue to be governed by rules, the rules themselves become less visible and, it seems, less oppressive.^{vi}

The nature of the work changes, and so do those who carry it out. That is, handling technology, especially technology applied to information, may lead to a public servant that is able, by correctly handling that technology, to render his or her daily tasks more complex. This would put him or her in a privileged situation regarding promotions, something that would never have happened if they had received traditional training. This, no doubt, can influence institutions ruled by seniority and rank. These applications have reduced space and time, they have yielded increases in crossed or shared functional arrangements, and have encouraged foreign exchanges. Finally, this technology has helped to, if not eliminate, at least reduce the tension that arises when functions and resources are decentralized.

Final comments

Administrative modernization is not a static concept, it grows and is enriched as the state itself is transformed and the government and administration process its transformation. Thus, for analytical purposes, we can identify the different stages that it has experienced; these stages are nothing more than society’s notions and perceptions of its own development, many times interpreted by groups at the top of the bureaucratic pyramid, that is, the groups that support modernization.

In their modernizing zeal, bureaucratic elites often do not interpret society and impose notions shared only by the elite. Frequently, this annuls the modernizing effort. The modernizing effort cannot ignore the fact that, difficult as it may be, the sectors that fall behind must also somehow benefit from the changes, because if this isn’t the case, the transformation loses its meaning and becomes nothing more than an attribute of the technocracy and an aim in itself. Thus, it becomes estranged from its commitment to transform in order to benefit the society as a whole.

ⁱ Rafael Bañón, “Los enfoques para el estudio de la administración pública: orígenes y tendencias actuales,” in Rafael Bañón and Ernesto Carrillo (eds.), *La nueva administración pública*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1997, p. 33.

ⁱⁱ See Reynaldo Maia Muñoz, “Reforma de Estado en América Latina: ¿descentralización o decadencia del Estado-nación?”, in Mauricio Marino (ed.), *Cambio político y gobernabilidad*, Mexico: CONACYT-Colegio Nacional de Ciencias Políticas y Administración Pública, 1992, p. 118.

ⁱⁱⁱ See research by Rogelio Hernández.

^{iv} See María del Carmen Pardo, “La nueva administración pública: alcances y retos,” *Revista Iapem*, July-September 1998, pp.77-86.

^v In the Mexican case, the state-owned sector registers considerable growth since the Luis Echeverría administration, when a large number of trusts, whose mainspring was, in many cases, economic, but were kept from passing central controls when it came to budgetary resources. Administrative reform programs flourished during the José López Portillo administration. See María del Carmen Pardo, “La reforma administrativa para el desarrollo social,” *Foro Internacional*, October –December 1984, pp. 101-117.

^{vi} See Jane E. Fountain, “The Virtual State. Toward a Theory of Bureaucracy for the Twenty-First Century,” in Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Democracy Governance in a Networked World*, Cambridge: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2000.