

Ethics and public administration's actions in the 21st century.**Brief considerations**

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ABSTRACT

Any analysis of public administration in the 21st century must emphasize the complexity of its field of action, a consequence of new political, technological, environmental and medical issues. In our century, there are direct challenges to public administration activities, because the need for public service performance is different now. Ethics is a key factor influencing trust in government agencies and public sector officials. Citizens include administrators in their assessment of the governmental system, suggesting that 'public administrators are both part of the problem and part of the solution to declining trust in government'. Because not all countries are rich and their rule of law level is not high, there is a continuous danger for citizens in the 21st century. The main menace is represented by the unique tools that can be used in political competition, not just the internal ones, but also above any frontier. These new instruments are given by the Internet world, and their provocations on ethical area are considered on this text, in a brief form, as a necessary step for a future volume.

KEYWORDS: *ethics, public administration, evolution, administrative actions.*

1.Introduction

Any analysis of public administration in the 21st century must emphasize the complexity of its field of action, a consequence of new political, technological, environmental and medical issues. Medical and environmental issues are fairly new and less expected decades ago, but technological



and political issues are almost eternal. The mixture between politics and technology creates in this century a complicated product, not easier to control, this result being generally the consequence of politics.

The relationship between politics and administration can crucially affect, for better or worse, any modern state's capacity for good government. However, neither the laws ordained by legislators, nor those revealed by scientists seem able to free that relationship from muddle and confusion. The problematic may be inherent in the condition of modernity itself, rooted in the legislative compulsion typical of all modern or modernising societies¹.

It is true, in the analysis of the relation between politics and public administration there is an important bias caused by the author's nationality: a student who lives in a dictatorship will underline just some parts of public administration role, related to public service fulfilment, but someone who lives in a consolidated democracy will have a wider approach, etc.

Public administrations are intimately related to the political system and history of each nation. As such, they are usually perceived as highly representative of the institutional specificities of a country. This perception is reflected in the scientific approach to public administration, which tends to focus on the specificities and distinctive features of national administrative traditions. Accordingly, national administrative traditions are usually distinguished from each other according to a series of characteristics and typologies. This approach reflects the historical reality of the construction of nation states across centuries. However, an excessive focus on the specificities of national administrations tends to conceal important phenomena of transfer, exchange and hybridisation actually taking place across nations².

The world today is different and new, if not brave, as Huxley once thought. In our century, there are direct challenges to public administration activities, because the need for public service performance is different now. What was new or unimaginable decades ago is a reality today, as

¹Coombes, D., *Politics and Bureaucracy in the Modern Administrative State: Comparing Western and Eastern Europe*, in Verheijen, T., 2001, *Politico-administrative relations: who rules?*, NISPAcee, p. 26.

²Bartley Hildreth, W., Miller, G. J. and Lindquist, E. A. (eds.), 2021, *Handbook of Public Administration*, Fourth Edition, London, UK: Routledge, London, p. 13.



hybridization is commonplace in everyday vocabulary, with interdisciplinary seen as a necessary step for broader conclusions. If someone speaks now of governance, we will observe their appeal to a broader conceptual dimension, mixing history, law, economics and social characteristics, without any guarantee for a correct diagnosis of the problems of public administration.

It is not surprising that scientists, political leaders and legislators have not been able to create a perfect world. This result depends mainly on political and administrative practice, as much as it depends on human behaviour. Specifically, politicians were once “simple people”, with all the good and bad of every human being. The fact that they are mentally changed from the moment they reach a relevant position in the political or administrative hierarchy is not only a consequence of the position, but also of behaviour they had before occupying these new functions.

Political and administrative practices are still created by man, even if new technologies bring changes and improvements. Therefore, in order to consider the action and development of countries' prospects in this century, we must first consider human behaviour and then how the human mind uses various tools and technologies. In this context, the human spirit needs above all a clear relationship with several aspects related to the noble meaning of human communities, of which ethics stands out the most.

2.Important reflections

* The history of modern *homo sapiens* is inextricably linked with *collective* survival. Since their arrival, humans have preferred banding together in groups as opposed to isolated individual existence. Though group size has greatly expanded in the last few thousand years, the human tendency to live collectively is an organic part of our composition. This is important, as any political, moral, or social philosophy needs to take into account the interdependent and social nature of humankind³.

Human evolution had needed a specific framework able to prevent continuous conflicts between people. For this it was necessary to create a set of principles able to be kept in mind by

³Friesen, Bruce K., 2015, *Moral Systems and the Evolution of Human Rights*, New York, USA: Springer, 2015, p. 5.



everyone, because the written support was rare. In such purpose the main problem was to address both to the people, seen as individuals, but also to “organisations” – as they once were. Human evolution gave a name to these concepts, and also has developed organisation's types into many areas – public and private. In this paradigm, we call these concepts morality and ethics.

The terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are not always used consistently and precisely in everyday contexts, and their ordinary meanings do not always correspond with philosophers’ use of the terms. Ethics is often used in connection with the activities of organisations and with professional codes of conduct: for instance, medical and business ethics, which are often formalised in terms of exhaustive sets of rules or guidelines stating how employees are expected to behave in their workplaces (such as in respect of a duty of care or confidentiality that health-care workers owe to their patients; or the medical ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for autonomy, and justice). Morality, on the other hand, is more often used in connection with the ways in which individuals conduct their personal, private lives, often in relation to personal financial probity, lawful conduct and acceptable standards of interpersonal behaviour (including truthfulness, honesty, and sexual propriety)⁴.

Ethics is a set of values as a guide, reference, guide for what to do in carrying out one’s duties, but also serves as a standard to assess whether the nature, behaviour, actions in the performance of the task is considered good or bad. Therefore, in ethics there is something of value that can give an assessment that something was said to be good or bad. Ethics can be understood as a form of self-responsibility, or even as an inhibition of the actions of organisations and public administrators; however, internal action may arise from the demands of factors external to the behaviour of administrators.

* Among human created-organisations there is a group of institutions with a special purpose: fulfilling the state interests. In fact, humanity created states with the help of the military branch of public administration, which had a complex role in law enforcing. After centuries, complexity

⁴SOAS, University of London, *Introduction to ethics. Unit 1*, p. 12, available at https://www.soas.ac.uk/cedep-demos/000_P563_EED_K3736-Demo/module/pdfs/p563_unit_01.pdf



forced public administration to be much separated by specific political needs and to act in the citizen's favour.

Citizens are not concerned with “big politics”, but they want a friendly administration, with clear procedures, with legal protection of any person and without abusive behaviour. In fact, in a very simple description, they want morality, as much as they want moral people in everyday life. We must underline that ethics cannot exist in institutions without the morality of its civil servants, but not always the level of servants' morality is equal with institutions' ethical level.

Concepts of moral and ethical value in public administration are formulated in order to be applied in the life of the state and for the real scope of administration. The benefits of such an ethical conception will only be felt if it can truly be part of the modern administrative dynamic. In many ways, the philosophical concepts and theories about morality in the field of public administration are also derived from the practice of day-to-day administration. Therefore, the discussion of the ethics of public administration is not in a vacuum, it must always include a discussion of its application, how bureaucrats and administrators act or must act according to existing ethical rules.

Related to various problems of abuse of governmental power, public administration ethics is one form of control over the government apparatus in implementing what the main duty, function and authority are. When public administration wants its attitude, actions and behaviour to be said to be good, then in carrying out its main tasks, its functions and authorities must rely on the ethics of public administration. Public administration ethics, besides being used as a guide, reference, reference to public administration can also be used as a standard for determining attitudes, behaviours, and policies to be good or bad.

Ethics is also a key factor influencing trust in government agencies and public sector officials. Citizens include administrators in their assessment of the governmental system, suggesting that ‘public administrators are both part of the problem and part of the solution to declining trust in government’. In a context of greater distrust in politicians, advisors, and officials, increased marketisation and privatisation of public services, and growing politisation and precarity of administrative roles, the central tenet of obedience of the public official needs to be balanced

with concepts of public interest in the broadest sense. In the pursuit of public good or social equity, a conflict arises when this comes against political decisions based on ideological positions or practicalities of policy making. 'Public administration is ultimately a normative field based on the use of administrative power and discretion for the good of a democratic society'. The lack of ethical behaviour could result in 'administrative evil'. Administrative evil, which results in harm to people, is often carried out by ordinary people when doing their jobs, masked by the administrative apparatus and moral inversion, is slightly different from maladministration that often results from inefficient or dishonest administration⁵.

* Understanding the citizens pressure for a better life – let us not forget that the French Revolution showed where public anger can lead to – governments and political parties adopted during the 19th century more constitutions and administrative regulations to offer better public services, pensions and other public goods. As result, the life expectancy has grown from an average of 29 years before 1900⁶ to almost 73 years in 2019⁷, before the pandemic. In any case, this great global achievement means an effective public health service, an effective public administration and a positive political behaviour.

The quality of government is not measured just by this indicator – in this case we need to watch another indicator, related to the rule of law⁸ and democracy⁹. In fact, here we can find the real dimension of administrative ethics, because a basic medical service can assure to almost everyone 70 years of life, but not the moral satisfaction and – more importantly – possibilities to develop one's own skills. Separation between words and facts is measured by such kind of items

⁵Fuertes, V., *The rationale for embedding ethics and public value in public administration programmes*, in *Teaching Public Administration*, 2021, Vol. 39(3), p. 252 – 269, DOI: 10.1177/01447394211028275, p. 258.

⁶Roser, M., Ortiz-Ospina, Es. and Ritchie, H., *Life Expectancy*, available at <https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy>

⁷World Health Organisation, *Global Health Estimates: Life expectancy and healthy life expectancy*, available at <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mortality-and-global-health-estimates/ghelife-expectancy-and-healthy-life-expectancy#:~:text=Globally%2C%20life%20expectancy%20has%20increased,reduced%20years%20lived%20with%20disability>

⁸See for details, *Rule of Law Index*, developed by The World Justice Project. The 2021 edition is available at <https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP-INDEX-21.pdf>

⁹International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm, *The Global State of Democracy 2021*, available at https://www.idea.int/gpod/sites/default/files/2021-11/the-global-state-of-democracy-2021_0.pdf



and ethics appeared in every superior top position. Public administration as a tool for citizen and not as an instrument for dominating the people means more ethics and fewer empty words.

How is it possible to develop ethics in public administration? One of the main instruments used for this purpose is the code of ethics.

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Codes of ethics are systematic efforts to define acceptable conduct. To their supporters they are a means of providing guidance to public officials on doing good and avoiding evil. They instil confidence in government and elevate the standards of administrative behaviour in public organizations. They provide guidance to decision-makers dealing with situations where values may be in conflict. They are a means of defining ethical conduct for public professionals by linking occupational standards with the context of public action. Codes of ethics often include a statement of ideals, canons of action consonant with the ideals, and binding means of enforcing behaviour within the boundaries established by the code. Their use of rhetoric is a signal that the code is a symbolic statement binding adherents to larger issues of public interest, professional and personal identity, or standards of right conduct. They exist as political statements that the public's business is being conducted fairly, honestly, and competently. This way, their value is not to catch miscreants or even guide the behaviour of bureaucrats through the thickets of administrative discretion. They serve to extol the values of democracy and increase the level of public trust in government¹⁰.

Of course, the codes of ethics are not enough, because there are many other problems on their implementation. There are a lot of cases when highest principles were strongly affirmed in written documents, but after a while they were violated without any hesitation. Let's not forget that war was forbidden as a political tool by Briand-Kellog Pact of 1927, and in less than a decade wars reappeared in China, Ethiopia and soon, across Europe.

Any legislator must remember that four essential wisdoms help us understand the context of public service and its ethics. First, there is no way of avoiding personal and private interest in the calculus of public decision making. Whether the motivation is survival or greed, the human

¹⁰Plant, J. F. *Code of ethics*, in T. L. Cooper (ed.), 2001, *Handbook of administrative ethics, 2nd ed., rev. and expanded*, New York, USA: Marcel Dekker, 2001, pp. 310 – 311.



condition fosters personal and private interests. Secondly, as humans, we are as much rationalizers as we are sometimes rational beings. The more educated and sophisticated we are, typically the better we are at rationalizing our actions sometimes even to ourselves. Thirdly, more successful public discourses require an effort to transcend, sublimate, and transform narrow vested interests, but this capacity is exercised imperfectly and intermittently. Fourthly, there is no public decision that is a total victory for the right and a total defeat for the wrong. In the process of milling to arrive at the “public’s will”, all parties will ultimately feel either that they did not get all that they wanted or that they did not lose everything¹¹.

* There is no doubt that the last decades created a huge and unique library called Internet. Millions of articles and books are now available for any legislator and politician, just ready to be read and applied on their best options for good governance. Like never before in mankind history, almost every average educated person has the possibility to read about good administration and good governance, no matter where and when it is/was.

The advent of the Internet has led to a unique situation in history. Specifically, the number of people a message can quickly reach has increased enormously – today the users of this technology are close to 5 billion people¹². But this is just the settlement of a fundamental change in political and social participation: for the first time in history people are able to gather on different platforms and ask in real time for rights or solutions to public problems that arise. Suddenly a news story about a serious deed committed by a politician – a bribe caught in the act; an abuse of power, etc. – could suddenly mobilize hundreds of thousands of people, who in less than an hour could pulverize any political career. This huge change has been obvious since the new Internet platforms started to have a special feature related to the rest of the press: the messages that appear on them in real time are almost impossible to control and people are aware of this, preferring them to the traditional media.

¹¹Cox III, R. W. (ed.), 2009, *Ethics and integrity in public administration: concepts and cases*, New York, USA: M.E. Sharpe, p. 12.

¹²Statistics recorded 4.95 billion Internet users worldwide. See <https://datareportal.com/global-digital-overview>, consulted at 19th of December 2021.

All this huge number of Internet users and Internet books and articles create a strong pressure for good governance implementation. It means that public administration gets a real scientific and popular (more correctly, citizen) support for its main task: to fulfil public needs. In an honest look of the new situation – created by Internet advent – civil service has for the first time a real advantage, because its members have two big opportunities: to be daily informed about good practices in administrative service, and to be able to communicate to a wider public, achieving support for their needs and tasks. Moreover, civil service gets for the first time an opportunity to defend itself against politicians, with a public appeal for a support of its position.

We must be realistic and admit that public administration and civil service are not always innocent. Of course, national traditions and economic differences make from this sector a target or a fundamental area of interest for both citizens and politicians. There are some strong economies where civil service is a part of a lucrative behaviour, but there are countries where economic capacities are low and public administration is one of the main employers. In this second economic perspective, politicians have a stronger possibility to influence the quality of civil service activities, promotion in administrative hierarchy, place of work and even to decide on some particular career – mostly on their end. The stability provided by the civil service in a weak economy can be a very important characteristic and politicians know this too. In fact, a clear distinction between politicians' power over public administration is given by the salary policy: in a country where the civil service provides a higher salary than the national average it means that public administration is under strong political control and the capacity to fulfil the public task in an ethical way is low. This analysis item – public administration as one of the main employers – is very relevant for the country's strength, because the global average of the nominal GDP per capita is USD 10,920, but only 67 (of 194) states reach this level¹³, without considering the population of every political entity, even this topic explains why global migration reached 281 million people in 2021, despite the pandemic¹⁴.

¹³World Bank, *GDP per capita*, available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>

¹⁴International Organisation for Migration, *World Migration Report 2022*, available at <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2022-interactive/>



* In this paradigm, to think that a country where the nominal GDP per capita is lower than USD 10,000 can perform on its public administration is a bit strange. Why such a consideration? Firstly, because there is no connection between nations' GDP per capita and their natural resources. In fact, we have small countries, with huge GDPs per capita, as Luxembourg and Lichtenstein, but also countries with more than 100 million inhabitants and with a high GDP too – USA and Japan. There are also other big countries with big natural resources, but their economic progress appeared only in the 20th century and not before. Without a strong implementation of rule of law mechanism, these new rich countries may lose a good part of their development shortly after the natural resources run out.

The main key for development is the correct relation between state powers and between politicians, public administration and citizens. As much as the larger the circle of persons and institutions are involved in decision'-making mechanisms, as the stronger the country is. This process should be very long, as Acemoglu and Robertson underline: “Rich nations are rich largely because they managed to develop inclusive institutions at some point during the past three hundred years. These institutions have persisted through a process of virtuous circles. Even if inclusive only in a limited sense to begin with, and sometimes fragile, they generated dynamics that would create a process of positive feedback, gradually increasing their inclusiveness. Inclusive political institutions create constraints against the exercise and usurpation of power. They also tend to create inclusive economic institutions, which in turn make the continuation of inclusive political institutions more likely. Under inclusive economic institutions, wealth is not concentrated in the hands of a small group that could then use its economic might to increase its political power disproportionately. Furthermore, under inclusive economic institutions there are more limited gains from holding political power, thus weaker incentives for every group and every ambitious, upstart individual to try to take control of the state. A confluence of factors at a critical juncture, including interplay between existing institutions and the opportunities and challenges brought by the critical juncture, is generally responsible for the onset of inclusive institutions. But once these inclusive institutions are in place, we do not need the same confluence of factors for them to



survive. Virtuous circles, though still subject to significant contingency, enable the institutions' continuity and often even unleash dynamics taking society toward greater inclusiveness"¹⁵.

In fact, those countries where the differences between leaders' richness and average citizens worth are small introduced such tendency more than a century ago, and this process relies on an effective rule of law and real public administration independence. In such countries citizens have enough strength to oppose government, having trust in public administration, operating with a clear separation between these two branches of power.

3. Conclusions

Because other countries are not so rich and their rule of law level is not high – as [the] rule of law and democracy index shows – there is a constant danger for citizens in the 21st century. The main menace is represented by the unique tools that can be used in political competition, not just the domestic one, but also beyond any frontier. These new instruments are given by the Internet world, in fact, mostly by the Artificial Intelligence and its wide area.

Today Artificial Intelligence plays a triple role, less understood by society. First, there is a category of scientists and politicians who consider it either a panacea for the country's problems or the supreme political weapon. The second part is represented by those who vaguely understand what this technology could be, being rather biased by SF movies and books, in which higher intelligences become dangerous for the human species and the planet. The last group is made up of those who consider Artificial Intelligence as a very important technology for many spheres of political, social, economic, private life, etc., but who try to maintain their sense of reality, corroborating its capabilities with all other means and tools used today. From this perspective, Artificial Intelligence must be studied rationally, without sentimentality, analysing its own

¹⁵Acemoglu, D., Robinson, J. A., 2013, *Why Nations Fail. The origins of power, prosperity, and poverty*, New York, USA: Profile Books, p. 341.



capabilities, as well as the possibility of doing good or bad, in relation to the interests of the operators who will use it.

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence was a unique moment for all politicians, regardless of the country. All the technologies until then, as well as the political strategies used for hundreds of years had a pronounced reactive temporal characteristic, because they developed at a time when the operators of the politician's tools had approximately the same knowledge – and this is a fundamental aspect – almost the same physical abilities. Now Artificial Intelligence can be available in every house and is able to control people's life. A recent report found that at least 28 countries – including both authoritarian states and democracies – employ 'cyber troops' to manipulate public opinion over major social networking applications. These cyber troops use a variety of tactics to sway public opinion, including verbally abusing and harassing other social media users who express criticism of the government. These bots are often used to flood social media networks with spam and 'fake' or biased news, and can also amplify marginal voices and ideas by inflating the number of likes, shares and retweets they receive, creating an artificial sense of popularity, momentum or relevance¹⁶.

Where is the public administration and where is the ethics in this political behaviour? In fact, a good part of Artificial Intelligence is used mostly by some specific public administration institutions, and they follow the rulers' orders, by their legal status. In fact, it is not possible for them to oppose to counter such a behaviour, especially if is used against other countries. Administrative ethics is not just national in the Internet world, but is has an international and geopolitical dimension too. If a country faces an IT attack on its civilian infrastructure, is it legitimate – and ethical – to react in a strong way against the aggressor, if this one is a different country?

Public administration will be involved – mostly in less democratic countries – in close surveillance of political adversaries. Where is ethics here? In a brief discussion – the space does not allow us to have a complex debate on this topic – we can give/provide a simple answer, related

¹⁶Bradshaw, S., Howard, P. *Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation*, available at <http://governance40.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Troops-Trolls-and-Troublemakers.pdf>



mostly to the civil service salary average: if it is higher than in a big part of the private economy sectors, it will be easier to find people who will accept to do such actions. But we must underline that politics is not private and a stable and rule of law public administration will act against parties and politicians that are using such tools against their competitors. In this case, there is a risk, because politicians decide the top-level of administrative hierarchies and it is possible that they may not accept such correct behaviour. It is necessary to underline that politician can be everyone can be a politician, no matter regardless of the psychological or professional skills, and this characteristic is a danger for a state and for its administration, because a less talented politician can consider public administration and the rule of law as obstacles.

Ethics in public administration is never a danger, but relations with public institutions are ruled by politicians, who are now in their lowest public trust. In this case, there are two options to cure this: to improve the educational and moral level of politicians, in a close partnership with public administration, or to keep the lack of standards and to find someone to blame. Because of their political interests and permanent mass-media presence, it is possible to see in future some politicians acting against public administration and its pillars, where a fundamental one is ethics, just to ensure their freedom to use any tools in political competition.



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