
Article

The Aims of Public Administration: Reviving the Classical View

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Abstract

The scholarly field of public administration (PA) was launched at a dangerous moment in American and world history. This fact influenced early understandings about the aims of the field. PA was understood to be concerned with big problems of governance relating to the very survival of liberal democratic states. This expansive view of PA no longer prevails, for two reasons. One is the cession of territory once included within the domain of PA to fields such as International Relations, Statebuilding, and American Political Development. Another is the rise of Public Management (PM), a more constricted way of thinking about the territory remaining within the domain of PA. Criticisms recently made against PM suggest that a new approach to PA is needed. This new approach should reclaim abandoned territory and revive understandings about the aims of the field that were prevalent at the time of its founding.

Needed: A Broader View of Public Administration

The purpose of this article is to argue for the recrafting of understandings about the aims of research in the scholarly field of public administration (PA), particularly in the United States. PA scholars ought to raise their sights and acknowledge the state as a basic unit of analysis in the field. They should take a longer and broader view of the forces that guide the evolution of states and seek to understand the processes by which states respond to those forces. They should define their role as one of providing advice on the design, consolidation, management, and adaptation of states so that they are effective in advancing human rights.

This proposed approach is not entirely new to American PA. It revives a way of thinking about the field that was familiar to the scholars who launched it in the 1930s and 1940s. This classical conception of PA went into decline after the early 1950s. Parts of the territory that were examined by classical PA were abandoned and occupied by other scholarly fields. Scholars in International Relations (IR) specialized in the design

of institutions that were necessary for diplomacy and war. Scholars in the field of Statebuilding specialized in the design and consolidation of institutions within less developed countries. And scholars in American Political Development (APD) claimed responsibility for studying the historical development of public institutions in the United States.

Within the territory that was left to PA, an approach known as Public Management (PM) became dominant. PM should be regarded as a response to the distinctive problems of the United States and other advanced welfare states in the last decades of the 20th century. However, the limitations of the PM approach have become increasingly obvious. To some critics, the PM approach is pinched and shortsighted. These critics are looking for a more expansive approach to the study of PA. In fact, what they are looking for is an approach that reclaims the territory ceded to other fields over the past decades and reconstructs an understanding about the field of PA that would have been familiar to the scholars who founded it in the middle of the 20th century.

The Classical View of PA

The field of PA emerged in the United States in the late 1910s and was consolidated by the late 1940s (Roberts 1994). This was a time of extraordinary disruption in domestic and world affairs. The American economy suffered a short economic depression in the early 1920s and a much longer one in the 1930s. The American Midwest was devastated by climatic change in the mid-1930s. Millions of people were struck by epidemics of influenza and polio. Millions migrated across the United States—from farms to cities, and from the segregated South to the industrialized North. Social and political affairs were upended by a revolution in transportation and communication technologies. The United States was also drawn into two world wars, and then a cold war with the Soviet Union. It struggled to reconstruct countries that were “wrecked and demoralized” by war, in which the prospects for democratic government were dim (Gallagher 1948, 251). Even in the United States, the survival of democracy was not taken for granted. Many Americans were overwhelmed by the rush of events and wondered dictatorship was necessary for peace and order to be restored (Roberts 2017, chap. 3).

The men and women who launched the new field of PA in these decades were acutely aware that they lived in dangerous times. Their views about the aims and scope of the field were shaped by this awareness. They understood that there were certain basic functions that a state must perform, such as the maintenance of peace and order, protection against external threats, and the promotion of stable economic growth (Merriam 1944, 21 and 22; White 1948, 5). They also understood that the American state was failing to perform these functions: that it was, in Charles Merriam’s words, a “sick state” (Merriam 1945, 32). This sickness arose because the institutions of American government had not been updated to suit modern conditions. As Luther Gulick said, public institutions were “three generations behind our necessities and our social and economic world” (Gulick 1933, 63). Consequently, scholars in the new field examined how those institutions should be renovated so that the health of the state could be restored, in the United States and abroad. “The stakes are beyond price,” Leonard White warned in the 1939 edition of his textbook on PA. If democratic government failed, “an autocratic alternative may await the opportunity to seize power” (White 1939, 34).

The view of PA that was shared by these early scholars had six features:

1. It operated at a high level of analysis. Its view of the field was founded on the concept of the state and a concern for the relationship of the state to broader social and economic conditions (Roberts 2013, 9–21). “The idea of the state,” Woodrow Wilson said in an essay that was widely admired by early PA scholars, “is the conscience of administration” (Wilson 1887, 201).
2. It was concerned with the external as well as domestic affairs. It recognized that the United States and other states confronted similar challenges in building effective institutions, that national security was an essential aspect of governance, and that a well-designed international order was necessary to avoid relapses into “chaos and misery” (Wallace 1943, 3–4; Walter 1945, 183).
3. This conception of public administration was dynamic. The conditions confronting states were understood to be turbulent, requiring the constant renovation of institutions so that they were adapted to “the compulsions of the environment” (Gulick 1948, 1).
4. It was understood that a long-run view of institutional development was necessary. Good scholarship required a “historically conditioned sensitivity” to the relationship between administrative practices and environmental factors (Caldwell 1955, 459–461).
5. Early scholars were realists. They believed, as Alexander Hamilton did, that “the circumstances that endanger the safety of nations are infinite,” and that the durability of public institutions could not be taken for granted (Hamilton, Madison et al. 1888, 136). The “breakdown of government” was a real possibility (Baxter 1938). “[F]ailure to respond to the necessities of change” could lead to the collapse of social order (Merriam 1945, 37).
6. Finally, these scholars had clear normative commitments. They were determined to improve state capacity while also protecting a broad range of individual rights. Indeed, the very aim of statebuilding was to improve “the capacity of peoples for the attainment of the good life” (White 1939, 7; White 1948, 148). It followed from this that the study of public administration had to include the examination of “such matters of justice, liberty, obedience, and the role of the state in human affairs” (White 1948, 10).

We can call this the classical view of PA. It faded away in the 1950s and the 1960s. Today, dominant understandings about the aims and scope of PA are quite different. PA scholars generally do not talk about the state and its relationship to social and economic conditions. Some key state functions, such as defense, diplomacy, and policing, are given little attention in the PA literature. Scholarship in PA is not permeated by a sense of the fragility of state authority. Nor is it affected by historical consciousness. Instead, most research looks at short time frames, and the immediate past.

What explains this change in attitude within the field of public administration? One cause is the fragmentation of the territory once encompassed within the classical approach. For example, a considerable amount of work relating to defense and diplomacy is now done within the field of IR. Similarly, a great deal of research on problems of state fragility is now done within the field known as Statebuilding, while research on the long-run evolution of state capabilities in the United States is undertaken within the field of APD. The surrender of all this territory left the field of PA with a more limited set of problems. This encouraged the emergence of narrower views about the aims and scope of research in the field.

One of these narrower views is known as PM. PM is an approach to the study of governmental action that emerged in the 1970s in the United States and a few other advanced democracies. Today, the “Public Management paradigm” is well established in the United States and western Europe. Indeed, some scholars suggest that it has “effectively supplanted” the domain previously known as PA (Hughes 2003, 45). The PM approach is an understandable response to the difficulties encountered by mature welfare states in the late 20th century. Nevertheless, challenges to the PM approach have intensified in recent years. Critics have lamented its lack of historical consciousness, its inattention to the social and economic forces that shape governments, and its blindness to the distinctive problems of fragile states. In other words, the broad complaint against the PM paradigm is that it lacks many of the features that were typical of the classical approach to PA.

There is a way to respond constructively to these complaints. We should develop a new approach to the domain of PA, which in many ways revives the classical approach to PA. Some features of classical PA are still evident in other domains that have occupied territory once claimed by PA. An useful first step in this project of intellectual recovery is to canvas these four scholarly fields—IR, Statebuilding, APD, and PM—to understand and contrast their approach to the study of governmental action.¹ Then we can outline how the project of intellectual recovery might proceed and anticipate three objections that are likely to be made against this project.

Looking Outward: IR

IR is a scholarly field that is mainly concerned with the study of relations between states, and the strategies

used by states to advance their interests within the international state system. In the last 20 years, many scholars have argued for a more expansive view of IR domain, with greater emphasis on the global interaction of non-state actors (Baylis and Smith 2014, 2–3; Jones 2014, 37). But the more common conception of the field is one that focuses on the interaction of states and the evolution of the state system.

The field of IR is only a few years older than PA itself. It emerged in the aftermath of World War I, with the creation of chairs and research centers in leading universities in the United Kingdom and the United States. The first American textbook in the field was published in 1925 (Buell 1925), while the first graduate degree was offered in 1928. Today the field is well established. More than 4,000 scholars at US colleges and universities specialize in IR (Maliniak et al. 2011). The leading scholarly association in the field, the International Studies Association, is almost 60 years old and has 7,000 members internationally. More than 80 IR journals are recognized by the Social Science Citation Index.²

At first, there was a close connection between the fields of IR and PA in the United States. Between the world wars, the University of Chicago was home to the nation’s leading IR program as well as the Public Administration Clearing House, the main body for national coordination of scholarly and professional activity in PA. Charles Merriam, chair of the university’s political science department between 1923 and 1940, played a key role in shaping both scholarly projects. As a result, there were close connections between them. A graduate of the department recalled that “anyone getting a PhD in international relations” at the university was expected to “know a lot” about PA (Thompson 1996). Meanwhile *Public Administration Review*—also based at the University of Chicago—published many articles on problems of defense, diplomacy, and international organization. Leonard White, a professor in the department of political science at Chicago and the first editor of *Public Administration Review*, wrote a book on defense and war administration (White 1942). The two scholarly communities were also bound by a shared normative vision, expressed in the United Nations Charter of 1945: of a world of “peace-loving states” committed to “respect for human rights and . . . fundamental freedoms for all” (United Nations Charter, Art. 1.3 and 4.1).

Soon, though, a division of labor emerged between PA and IR. By the late 1950s, PA scholars had largely retreated to the domain of domestic policy and civil

1 These scholarly enterprises are referred to interchangeably as disciplines, subdisciplines, fields, and subfields. For convenience, I refer to them all as fields.

2 The most influential are *International Organization*, *International Security*, *World Politics*, and *International Studies Quarterly* (Colgan 2016, 490).

administration (Ni et al. 2017, 6). Meanwhile, scholars in IR continued their work in a manner that would have been familiar to early scholars in PA, although largely limited to the realm of military and foreign policy. The IR field today operates at a high level of analysis, typically treating either states or the state system as the basic object of study. The design and behavior of states is understood to be explicable as a response to a range of powerful “trends and forces” (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2017, 15). The most important of these external factors is the fact of competition with other states (Bull 2002); others include the structure of the global economy, changes in technology, mass migrations, and climatic changes. The challenge for national leaders is to design and adapt “grand strategies” for advancing vital state interests in a world that is typified by “constant flux” (Kennedy 1991, 1–7).

The IR approach assumes that policymakers execute these grand strategies by building institutions. For example, leaders build up their diplomatic corps so that they can communicate with other states and military capabilities to defend against attacks from other states. They develop systems of taxation to pay for diplomacy and defense, and systems for promoting economic growth so that tax revenues will increase (Cappella Zielinski 2016). Countries may even develop institutions for protecting human rights if this is necessary to maintain support for the state in times of international conflict. States also collaborate to build international institutions that protect their vital interests. This includes a corpus of international law that regulates interstate relations, bodies like the International Court of Justice that apply the law to interstate disputes, and a host of other international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization.

The IR approach recognizes that circumstances may change, and that opinions about the design of grand strategies may change accordingly. When this happens, institutions must also be modified. Indeed, IR scholars emphasize the extent to which domestic and international institutions have been renovated over time to meet new realities. An obvious example is the dramatic expansion and contraction of military capabilities in response to changing perceptions about the threats faced by states. The international order has been subject to similar “great transformations” (Buzan and Little 2000; Cox et al. 2001). This view about the plasticity of domestic and international institutions is encouraged by the fact that IR scholars take a long-term view of their subject (Opello and Rosow 2004). Analyses of the changing international order may span centuries, often beginning with the Peace of Westphalia in the mid-17th century. Similarly, studies about grand strategies pursued by individual states often span

decades. This “historical sensibility” makes it easier to recognize “the broad dynamics (economic, geopolitical, and cultural) that influence contemporary events” (Brands and Suri 2015).

A final distinctive feature of the IR approach, also shared with the classical approach to PA, is its awareness of the perils confronting states. Many IR scholars regard the world as a volatile and often dangerous place (Kennedy 1991, 6). It follows that care in the design of grand strategies is important, because misjudgments can have disastrous consequences (Ross 2008, 23). “A state that ignores systemic pressures,” Charles Jones observes, “will not survive any more than a firm that persistently ignores market signals” (Jones 2014, 41). But the task of crafting strategies is complicated by conflicting objectives and an inability to accurately predict the consequences of any specific course of action. Leaders are forced to make choices “in a chaotic and uncertain environment, where crucial information is often unknown or unknowable, where conditions can change rapidly and unexpectedly, [and] where foes and spoilers lurk at every turn” (Brands 2014, 11).

The Developing World: Statebuilding

Another way in which the field of PA has fragmented is by the sharp division of scholarly work relating to affluent and stable countries from that relating to poorer and more fragile states. In the early years of PA, this division of labor was not well established. Many American PA scholars were engaged in programs launched by the Truman administration to support reconstruction in Europe and governmental reform in poor countries elsewhere (Lehman 1945; Miles 1953; Simon 1953). Post-war volumes of *Public Administration Review* were “sprinkled with accounts of foreign administration . . . in an unfamiliar setting” (Waldo 1963, 182–183). The Chicago group of PA scholars launched a project on comparative administration (also known as development administration) which gained momentum in the early 1960s (Riggs 1965, 72–74). But enthusiasm for research on comparative administration dissipated in the 1970s (Heady 1998, 33–37). A proponent of comparative administration lamented in 1976 that “American public administration has become increasingly parochial as it ignores what is happening in the rest of the world” (Riggs 1976, 652).

Today, problems of governance in poorer and weaker states have become the concern of a scholarly field known as Statebuilding. This community of scholars coalesced in response to the failure of international peacekeeping efforts in war-torn countries in the 1990s. The United Nations and major powers

were frustrated as these countries relapsed into violence when peacekeeping forces were withdrawn. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, policymakers in developed states also worried about the threat posed by terrorist networks that were based within poorly governed states (*Executive Office of the President 2002*, v). For both reasons, it seemed essential to put more emphasis on the development of institutions in weak states that could maintain order while respecting human rights (*Chesterman 2005*, 4–9; *Lotz 2010*, 222).

The Statebuilding field is now well established. There are graduate degrees and research centers dedicated to the subject, and a “vast amount” of scholarly material (*Scott 2007*, 3). There is a specialized periodical, the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, established in 2007.³ This scholarly community works in concert with a network of national development agencies, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations that support projects to improve public institutions in struggling countries (*Brinkerhoff 2007*, 1). The military forces of major powers such as the United States also invested heavily in this work after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (*Brooks 2016*, chap. 4). Several indices of state fragility have been developed (*Sisk 2013*, 175–176). These indices show that the Statebuilding field has broad relevance. The Fragile States Index suggests that most of the world’s states, and 9 of the 10 most populous states, are fragile (*Fund for Peace 2016*). There are more people living in fragile states than there are in developed countries like the United States (*World Bank 2011*, 2).

Statebuilding scholars, like classical PA and IR scholars, operate at a high level of analysis. Their goals is to build institutions that enable fragile states to perform essential functions (*Ghani and Lockhart 2008*, chap. 7; *Rotberg 2004*, chap. 1; *Sisk 2013*, 167–168). It is understood that judgments about the relative importance of functions, and the appropriate design of institutions, must be guided by “environmental factors”; that is, by the social, economic, and political conditions that prevail within a state’s territory (*Brinkerhoff 2007*, 15–16; *Dodge 2013*, 1210; *Goetze and Guzina 2008*, 326–327 and 338–341). The broader realities of international affairs must be considered as well. A range of foreign entities—such as occupying or peacekeeping forces, international organizations, development agencies, and philanthropies—seek to influence the design

of domestic institutions (*Chandler and Sisk 2013*, xxii and 43–44; *Ghani and Lockhart 2008*, 7, 97–99; *Lake 2016*, 1, 46, 197; *Lotz 2010*, 228).

Statebuilders are also realists, like classical PA and IR scholars. They recognize that the capacity of public institutions to perform basic functions such as the maintenance of peace and order cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, the assumption is that many states have “weak or disintegrated capacity to respond to citizens’ needs and desires, provide basic public services, assure citizens’ welfare, or support normal economic activity” (*Brinkerhoff 2007*, 2). Consequently, statebuilders focus on fundamental problems, such as reducing conflict, building core administrative capabilities, and persuading powerful factions to recognize the legitimacy of central authority (*OECD 2011*, chap. 3). It is recognized that it is not easy to execute any of these tasks, but that the human costs of failure can be massive. Statebuilding scholars also have clear normative commitments, like classical PA scholars. The single overarching aim of Statebuilding is the advancement of human rights.⁴ Indeed, the main work of the field is often described as “liberal peacebuilding and statebuilding” (*Campbell et al. 2011*, 4).

The match between the Statebuilding approach and the classical PA approach is not exact. For example, the Statebuilding approach largely neglects national defense. Attention to this function seems unnecessary because “the rulers of fragile states feel immune from external attack or conquest” (*Kraxberger 2012*, 52–53). This feeling of immunity is encouraged by international norms against wars of aggression that have been consolidated since 1945 (*Shaw 2008*, chap. 20). Moreover, the great powers and international organizations that support statebuilding projects have a strong interest in protecting client states from attack, and little interest in improving their capacity to start wars.

Another critical distinction between the Statebuilding and classical PA approaches is that Statebuilders are concerned primarily with the construction and consolidation of new institutions. The emphasis is on finding ways of demonstrating “credible commitment” by rulers to new institutions, and persuading powerful social groups to “become vested” in them (*Lake 2016*, chap. 1). By contrast, classical PA scholars were primarily interested in the problem of adapting well-established

3 This journal is not yet included in the Social Sciences Citation Index. Research on statebuilding also tends to be published in journals specializing in development policy or international relations. According to Google Scholar, the SSCI journals most likely to publish articles referring to statebuilding include *Third World Quarterly*, *Journal of International Development*, *International Peacekeeping*, *World Politics*, and *Global Governance*.

4 The aims of statebuilding have been described as the improvement of physical security, the reduction of poverty, development, and the promotion of human rights (*OECD 2008*; *Chandler and Sisk 2013*, xiii and 5). These four objectives could be reduced to one. The UN Declaration of Human Rights regards personal safety, economic security, and “full development of the human personality” as basic human rights, along with more familiar interests, such as protection against arbitrary or discriminatory state action, and the right to participate in the selection of governments.

institutions to new circumstances. One important aspect of this work consists of *deconsolidation*: that is, unwinding “credible commitments” to existing institutions and overcoming the “vested interests” who defend them (Gaus 1942). Of course, classical PA scholars recognized that redesigned institutions have to be consolidated all over again. But in their view of the world, commitment and investment could be problems as well as virtues.

Looking Backward: APD

Classical PA scholars took a long-run view of institutional development. They believed that institutions acquired their present form through a long chain of events. As Luther Gulick said in 1951, institutions emerge “historically piece by piece” (Gulick 1951, 62). It followed that the study of PA had to incorporate some form of historical inquiry: it was impossible to understand present-day administrative developments unless they were “related to their own organic past” (Gulick 1948, 1).

This aspect of classical PA scholarship became known as “administrative history.”⁵ By the early 1940s, it was a critical part of the overall PA research program (Nichols 1944, 240–241). Its most prominent advocate was Leonard White, who produced four award-winning books on administrative history between 1948 and 1958 (Roberts 2009, 764). Several other scholars pursued similar research in the 1940s and 1950s (Roberts 2013, 15–20). In 1955, Lynton Caldwell insisted that the study of administration was necessarily historical, because history provided the only means “of discovering how factors in the environment condition organizational behavior and what types of organizational adaptation have proved successful” (Caldwell 1955, 453–461). But interest in administrative history declined sharply after the 1960s. By the 1990s, PA research was routinely criticized for its lack of historical consciousness (Luton 1999; Durant 2014, 14–15; Durant and Rosenbloom 2016, 9–10; Adams 1992; Schachter 1998, 16). “The study of public administration pays little attention to history,” Jos Raadschelders concluded in 2010. “[S]ystematic training in research and methods of administrative history is sorely missing in public administration higher education” (Raadschelders 2010, 236).

As PA abandoned the territory of administrative history, another scholarly enterprise known as APD began exploring it. APD began as an “insurgency” in

the early 1980s and by the early 2000s was one of the fastest-growing subfields within American political science (Kersh 2005, 335). Its main journal, *Studies in American Political Development*, was launched in 1986. A “shared core” of “canonic works” in APD is now taught in graduate programs across the United States (Kersh 2005, 344; Orren and Skowronek 2004, 3 and 35). The subfield is supported by the Politics and History section of the American Political Science Association, which had more than 600 members by 2010 (Brintnall 2010, 180). This made it considerably larger than APSA’s PA section.

Some scholars have seen a link between APD and the research on administrative history that was completed in the 1940s and 1950s (Gerring 2003, 84). Leonard White has been described as “the great-grandfather of APD” (Katznelson 2013). But APD is better understood as a product of tensions within the discipline of political science itself. It emerged in reaction to a tendency in American political science, in the decades following World War II, to discount the relevance of governmental institutions in explaining the substance of policy decisions.⁶ These decisions were typically explained as the simple product of pulling and hauling by interest groups. APD aimed to “bring the state back in to its proper central place in explanations of social change and politics” (Skocpol 1985, 28).

As a first step, this required that APD scholars acknowledge the existence of an American state (Mettler and Valelly 2016, 7). The next step was to show how institutions within the state play an important role in shaping government policies. It then became necessary to explain why these institutions take one form rather than another. Scholars within the APD enterprise argue that “processes of state formation” in the United States can only be understood by taking a long view. “The theoretical precept” undergirding APD is that a polity “is constructed historically” and that “the nature and prospects of any single part will be best understood within the long course of political formation” (Orren and Skowronek 2004, 1). The shorthand version of this precept is that “history matters” (Steinmo 2008, 127). The method of inquiry that is associated with the APD enterprise is known as historical institutionalism (Steinmo et al. 1992).

On the surface, there are strong similarities between APD and classical PA, as well as the IR and Statebuilding fields. For example, all operate at the same level of analysis, taking the state as the basic theoretical construct. But closer examination reveals some key differences.

5 “Administrative history . . . is the study of the development, organization, of those agencies which have composed the national government. Special attention is given to procedures by which agencies come into existence, existence, undergo changes as to organizational form or functions, and are absorbed or liquidated” (Trever 1941, 160).

6 Laurence Lynn Jr., explaining the rise of Public Management in the early 1980s, wrote that it did not look to political science because that discipline “had largely abandoned the study of organizations” (Lynn 1994, 233). APD scholars had only begun addressing that gap at exactly that time.

For example, APD scholars are reticent about specifying the essential functions or desirable qualities of a state.⁷ Usually, the predilections of APD scholars must be inferred. For example, APD scholarship betrays an ongoing concern about the weakness of the American state, and particularly about the difficulties associated with building administrative capacity and legitimacy within central government (Novak 2008).

Another peculiarity of APD scholarship is its exclusive focus on the American state. IR and Statebuilding scholars examine larger classes of states, and the classical PA approach, while focusing mainly on the United States, did not assume that its work was limited to that country.⁸ But it is an axiom of research in APD that the United States is an exceptional case. Ira Katznelson says that the idea of US exceptionality has “been at the substantive core of the APD field from the start” (Katznelson and Shefter 2002). Similarly, John Gerring observes that “work in the APD genre has remained, to some considerable extent, an inquiry into American exceptionalism” (Gerring 2003, 84). One justification for this claim of exceptionality is that the United States lacks the highly centralized institutions that European states developed because of centuries of interstate war (Balogh 2009, 74). For this reason, the United States is held out as “the great anomaly among Western states” (Skowronek 1982, 6).

The claim of exceptionality ought to be viewed skeptically. Even if the United States is different from the major western European states, that does not necessarily make it exceptional in the whole society of states. Indeed, the case that is made for American exceptionalism is like the argument that is made about today’s fragile states. Derek Brinkerhoff observes that in many fragile states, “national government is incapable of exerting authority throughout the national territory, and subnational entities are sufficiently powerful to resist and operate autonomously” (Brinkerhoff 2007, 17). This is an apt description of the American state until the early 20th century. Despite this commonality in experience, there is a high wall between the APD and Statebuilding fields. Students of statebuilding in the United States never refer to scholarship on statebuilding in fragile states, and students of statebuilding in fragile states never refer to the experience of the United States (see Table 1).

A final peculiarity of the APD approach relates to its predispositions regarding institutional adaptation. The three other fields examined here—classical PA, IR, and Statebuilding—generally take the view that the state is pliable and can be remolded to accommodate new circumstances. APD scholars are more skeptical about the adaptive capacity of public institutions (Krasner 1984, 234). They regard the deconsolidation and reconfiguration of institutions as an extraordinary challenge. Indeed, some APD scholars compare institutions to “dried cement” (Rhodes et al. 2006, xv). This emphasis on the rigidity of institutions is closely linked to the claim that institutions have an independent role in shaping public policy (Cortell and Peterson 1999, 187). If it were to be conceded that institutions respond rapidly to environmental pressures, then the argument could be made that environmental pressures, rather than institutions themselves, should be treated as the truly important determinants of policy outputs (Thelen and Steinmo 1992, 15).⁹ Skepticism about the pliability of institutions, combined with an awareness of the frequency with which reforms generate unintended consequences (Pierson 2004, 16), also makes APD scholars cautious about providing prescriptions for institutional reform. Ambivalence about giving prescriptions on institutional reform is another way in which the APD approach differs from the others canvassed here.¹⁰

The Residual: PM

Over the last half-century, the field of PA has experienced two major changes. The first, just described, has been the loss of territory to other fields: of defense and diplomacy to IR, governance in poorer and weaker states to Statebuilding, and administrative history to APD. The second has been a transfiguration of understandings about scholarship in the territory that remained within the domain of American PA. The last 40 years have seen the expansion of a distinctive approach, PM, which emerged in the late 1970s in the United States, and grew so rapidly that it threatened to displace the “traditional public administration paradigm” entirely (Boyne 1996; Bryson et al. 2014, 445; Lane 1994, 139; Lynn 2001).

An extensive infrastructure has been developed to support PM scholarship over the last 40 years.

7 Stephen Skowronek offered a list of qualities in 1982, but these were criteria for describing rather than judging states (Skowronek 1982, 19–20). More recently, Suzanne Mettler and Richard Valelly have made reference to “crucial tasks of governance,” without specifying what they are (Mettler and Valelly 2016, 1).

8 J.E. Hodgetts, a student of Leonard White, applied the methods of “administrative history” to the Canadian case (Hodgetts 1955; Hodgetts 1964; Hodgetts et al. 1972; Hodgetts 1973).

9 Some scholars have challenged the prevailing view. Suzanne Mettler and Richard Valelly argue that “adaptive or reconstitutive change is a central dynamic in American politics” (Mettler and Valelly 2016, 5). For a more complete discussion of this question, see Roberts (2017, chap. 6).

10 This might simply be a manifestation of a broader diffidence within the discipline of political science about direct engagement with the world of public affairs (Drezner 2017, chap. 4).

Table 1. Citation Among Four Key Journals in 2014 and 2015

	IO	TWQ	SAPD	JPART
Total citations in journal	4,981	12,595	2,702	6,875
Citations from IO	7.4%	0.4%	0.2%	0.1%
Citations from TWQ	0.0%	2.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Citations from SAPD	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%
Citations from JPART	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	9.7%

Note: This table examines inter-citation rates for leading journals in four scholarly fields—International Relations, Statebuilding, American Political Development, and Public Management—over two years, 2014–2015. IO = *International Organization*, a leading journal in International Relations. TWQ = *Third World Quarterly*, the most common outlet for Statebuilding articles that is included in the Social Sciences Citation Index. SAPD = *Studies in American Political Development*, the leading journal of American Political Development. JPART = *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, the top-ranked journal in the field of Public Management. Bold entries are self-citation rates. Citation data drawn from *Journal Citation Reports* and full-text searches of the journals.

Several scholarly organizations are partly or wholly dedicated to the promotion of PM research, such as the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (founded in 1979), the Public Management Research Association (founded in 2003, following a series of biennial conferences begun in 1991), the International Public Management Network (1996), and the International Research Society for Public Management (1997). In addition, several journals specialize in the publication of Public Management research. The most highly ranked is the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, established in 1990, which is now the official journal of the Public Management Research Association.¹¹ There are schools, faculty chairs, and graduate degrees dedicated to PM.

PM scholarship does not regard the state as a basic concept for research. It operates at a lower level of analysis. Its main concern is the ability of public agencies, or networks of public and private agencies, to achieve objectives that are set by political overseers.¹² A popular textbook describes PM as “the formal and informal processes of guiding human interaction toward public organizational objectives. The units of analysis are processes of interaction between managers and workers and the effects of management behavior on workers and work outcomes” (Frederickson et al. 2012, 100). Similarly, Carolyn Hill and Laurence Lynn Jr. define PM as “the process of ensuring that the allocation and use of resources available to government are directed

toward the achievement of lawful public policy goals” (Hill and Lynn 2016). Emphasis is put on the efficient use of scarce resources; that is, on improving “the value for money achieved by public services” (Bovaird and Loeffler 2016, 5). PM research has tended to focus heavily on agencies that are concerned with the delivery of education, health care, welfare and other social services, as well as environmental protection and other forms of health and safety regulation. By contrast, relatively little PM research has been conducted in the domains of national security, diplomacy, or policing, or on problems of management within the judicial and legislative branches of government.

PM scholarship is best understood as the response to a distinctive set of problems that confronted policymakers in the United States and other advanced democracies in the last three decades of the 20th century. The field was launched as an attempt to address the problem of “implementation failure” that became evident after the expansion of welfare states in the 1960s and early 1970s (Elmore 1986, 69–73; Kettl 1990, 412; Kettl and Milward 1996, 4–5; Williams 1975, 531, 553, 566; Wolf 1982, 546–547; Yates 1977, 370). It gained momentum as economic growth rates declined in the 1970s. Fewer tax dollars were available to support government programs, and citizens were hostile to tax increases. For the next quarter century, policymakers in the advanced democracies struggled to reconcile expansive policy commitments with the reality of scarce resources. PM research promised to show how public agencies could “work better and cost less” (National Performance Review 1995).

This link between austerity and the rise of the PM field has been noted by many authors. Geert Bouckaert and Christopher Pollitt have attributed enthusiasm for PM reform to “the global economic disturbances of the 1970s, and the spreading belief that governments had become ‘overloaded’ and that Western states had become unaffordable [and] ineffective” (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011, 6). Christopher Hood has described the PM movement as “a response to a set of special social conditions” that were distinguished by a desire

11 Other journals include *Public Management Review* (begun in 1999, and associated with the International Research Society for Public Management) and the *International Public Management Journal* (begun in 1997, and associated with the International Public Management Network). Two other journals, *Public Administration Review* and *Public Administration*, also publish a substantial amount of PM research.

12 Early statements about the aims of the enterprise are provided by Lynn (1987, 179–182); Bozeman (1993, 362); Lynn (1994, 231–233); Behn (1995); Kettl and Milward (1996, 52–53); Brudney et al. (2000, 1–6); Agranoff and McGuire (2001). A summary of topics explored within the PM literature is provided by Osborne (2017, 110).

to “slow down or reverse government growth in terms of overt spending and staffing” (Hood 1991, 3 and 7). Owen Hughes has argued that main reason for the “advent of public management” was that “governments were faced with declining real revenue, [and] political demands to maintain services at the same levels. In these circumstances, the only avenue was to improve productivity” (Hughes 2003, 51).

In the last 15 years, however, there has been increasing unease about the character of research undertaken in the PM field. The first of three major concerns is the perception that PM scholarship lacks historical self-awareness. That is, PM scholars do not typically understand the field as a project that was tailored to suit the “special social conditions” prevailing in certain countries at a particular moment in history. As Christopher Pollitt observed in 2008, research in PM has been “decontextualized” (Pollitt 2008, chap. 1). Some other fields develop an adjunct intellectual history that provides a check against decontextualization, by explaining how ideas within a field have evolved in response to changing circumstances. But the PM field has never been adequately buttressed by this sort of intellectual history (Moynihan 2009, 814; Moynihan 2014, 56–57; Roberts 1995, 304; Roberts 2010, 10–12).

A second concern relates to understandings about the geographic span of PM scholarship. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, enthusiasts of the PM approach promoted it as a project that was equally relevant to all countries. The claim was that PM constituted a “global paradigm” or a “global movement” (Kettl 2005; Osborne and Gaebler 1992, 328; Theodoulou and Roy 2016, chap. 5; Walker 2011). This implied that policymakers and scholars in all countries had a common concern with making government work better and cost less. However, several leading writers have expressed skepticism about the “globality” of PM (Hood 1998, chap. 9; Lynn 2006, chap. 2; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011, 11–15).¹³ And there is good reason for such skepticism. In fact, PM—both as a scholarly field and a reform movement—has been most firmly rooted in a very small number of advanced welfare states, as we noted earlier.¹⁴

This is not to deny that scholars from other countries have made significant contributions to PM research, particularly over the last decade. Nevertheless, the

enterprise is still “dominated by western (especially American) scholars, institutions, and publishers” and heavily shaped by western preoccupations (Haque and Turner 2013, 244). Shamsul Haque has described the PM model as “contextually incongruent” in Asian countries (Haque 2013, 263). He observes that there is a “mismatch” between the PM model and political conditions in those countries, which are distinguished by institutional fragility and political instability (Haque 2013, 269). This problem is not limited to Asian countries. Western scholars take for granted many basic things—such as peace and order, functioning legal systems and legislatures, the capacity to tax and spend, the availability of a professionalized and largely noncorrupt workforce—that cannot be taken for granted in most countries. As the Statebuilding literature shows, the governance agenda in fragile states is dominated by basic problems of authority and legitimacy that seemed to have been decisively resolved in the advanced democracies—although recent events might raise doubts about this.

A third concern about the PM field relates to its neglect of “big questions.” Brint Milward, a scholar who played an important role in launching the field 30 years ago, has recently criticized it for overlooking “basic questions about the capacity and purpose of the state” (Milward et al. 2016, 312). Similarly, Donald Kettl has suggested that PM scholars should spend more time studying “the big trends shaping the world of governance” (Milward et al. 2016, 330). Christopher Pollitt argues that researchers have “lost sight of the ‘big picture’: the surrounding architecture of politics, economics, technology, demography, and the natural environment which, however indirectly or slowly, pushes and shapes the actions of public authorities” (Pollitt 2016). Meanwhile, Robert Durant and David Rosenbloom reproach contemporary scholars for neglecting “the political economy of administrative reform and its evolution over time” (Durant and Rosenbloom 2016, 9). All these criticisms are driven by the perception that the PM field lacks a broad view of governance, and thus the capacity to anticipate and respond to new challenges that confront policymakers. The field was built to address a particular set of problems—relating to the sustainability of the welfare state in the last third of the 20th century—but has struggled to adapt as policymakers respond to new problems, such as terrorism, migration, climate change, or political polarization. Every change in the governance agenda has struck the PM field by surprise.

These three concerns about the PM field have something in common. In every instance, criticisms are being made against PM that could not have been made so easily against classical PA. These criticisms have weight because the field of PA abandoned important parts of

13 For a recent effort to accommodate a range of “contextual” factors into public management research, see Meier et al. (2017).

14 All of scholarly associations and journals that are now focused on Public Management originated in the United States or the United Kingdom. American and British scholars dominate the editorial boards of these journals and write the most-frequently cited articles published within them (Hou et al. 2011, i47–i48; Walker 2011, i56; Juliani and de Oliveira 2016, 1036). One study found that almost 90 % of articles on management and performance published in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* between 1990 and 2013 were based on data from the United States and United Kingdom (Meier et al. 2017, 3).

its territory to other fields. If contemporary PA were well-connected to the APD field, for example, it would be less susceptible to criticism for lack of historical consciousness. If it were connected to the Statebuilding field, it would be less susceptible to criticism for overlooking the fundamental problems of poorer and weaker states. And if it were connected to the IR field, it would be less susceptible to criticism for neglect of the larger trends and forces that shape the behavior and overall architecture of states. Unfortunately, there is hardly any connection between these four scholarly fields (Table 1). A remedy for the weaknesses of the PM approach might consist in reclaiming some of the territory that has been abandoned over the last 60 years. In other words, there is a case to be made for reconstructing the field of PA so that it recovers many of the features of the classical PA approach.

Reintegration and Revival

The project of reviving PA does not consist simply in mimicking research in fields such as IR, Statebuilding, and APD. Each of these fields has its own preoccupations and idiosyncrasies. Scholars in PA must be deliberate in defining their own goals and methods. Broadly speaking, the aim is to produce prescriptions about the design, consolidation, management, and adaptation of states that are effective in performing critical functions, with the ultimate end of advancing human rights. To achieve this goal, PA scholars must move to a higher level of analysis, take a broader view of the forces that impinge on states, and operate with a historical consciousness, as well heightened awareness of the fragility of state authority and legitimacy. Having said this, there are many ways in which ideas can be adapted from other fields for use in the construction of a new approach to PA. To a large degree, PA scholars should engage in a form of scholarly bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 16–22; Weick 1993, 351–353), combining ideas that have been freshly invented, recovered from classical PA, and borrowed from cognate enterprises.

The proposal to launch such a project is likely to encounter three objections from scholars currently working in the field of PA. The first is that it underestimates the importance of work done under the flag of PM. It is important to emphasize, however, that expanding the boundaries of PA does not imply the abandonment of research in PM. It is not necessary to choose between one or the other. Other disciplines sustain research programs that run concurrently but operate at different levels of analysis. The study of microeconomics is complemented and not threatened by the study of macroeconomics. Similarly, behavioral studies in political science are not displaced by the examination of “regime level” questions. The difficulty

with contemporary PA is that operates at only one level: it has micro but no macro.¹⁵

A second objection is that it is impossible to address “big questions” about states with adequate rigor. There is a widely held perception that raising the level of analysis implies a return to woolly, “essayistic” analysis and abandonment of the methodological advances associated with PM research (Kelman 2007, 4). Once again, though, the tradeoff between level of analysis and rigor is illusory. Other fields—including IR, Statebuilding, and APD—have demonstrated the feasibility of conducting research at a higher level of analysis while maintaining a high level of discipline in argumentation and use of evidence. Indeed, some studies that examine the design and evolution of states use the same econometric techniques that are privileged in PM research. In any case, scholars are not permitted to sidestep important questions simply because they cannot be answered with familiar methods. The only defensible approach for scholars in PA is to face the critical questions and answer them as best they can.

A third objection is more practical: even if there is a compelling argument for developing a new approach to PA, there are no incentives for scholars to undertake the work, especially at the early stages of their career. Robert Durant has recently enumerated the “professional disincentives . . . against studying big questions,” warning that unless these disincentives are corrected, research priorities are unlikely to change (Milward et al. 2016, 330–332). Philip Joyce has also noted the pressure to explore narrow questions with a limited toolkit of methods (Joyce 2016). The existence of these pressures cannot be denied, but we should avoid a sense of fatalism. We have evidence that research priorities can be changed over time. Approaches that are popular today, such as PM and APD, were once mere insurgencies themselves.

Finally, we should not forget the advantages of undertaking the project of reorienting the field of PA. By developing a new approach, scholars will improve their ability to understand the broad forces that shape the architecture and behavior of governments. They will improve their ability to contribute intelligently to public debates about the challenges facing states today. And they will hone their capacity to anticipate challenges that may confront policymakers in the future. A new approach will also provide the foundation for a truly global dialogue among PA scholars, because its core concepts will be capacious enough to accommodate the full range of problems that are encountered by governments in developing as well as developed states.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Muinul Islam for this analogy.

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