

Book Review

A Transatlantic History of Public Administration: Analyzing the USA, Germany and France, by Fritz Sager, Christian Rosser, Céline Mavrot and Pascal Y. Hurni

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It is frequently claimed that we have been passing through an era where global ideas are met within local contexts, not least the ideas of how to organize the state machinery, or in other words the public administration. However, for others this is not a phenomenon peculiar solely to our contemporary world. In their book, *A Transatlantic History of Public Administration: Analyzing the USA, Germany and France*, F. Sager, C. Rosser, C. Mavrot, and P. Hurni trace the global, or at least “transatlantic”, transfer of intellectual ideas about public administration back to the late 19th century. Drawing on their framework between the logic of tradition and logic of transfer of ideas, the authors analyse the content of seminal historical works (micro-context) to understand how the ideas, theories, and intellectual thinking in public administration has been transferred between the traditions in Germany, France and the USA (macro-context). In this respect, the book provides the reader with the insight that Continental European (German and French), and Anglo-American public administration traditions are not *distinctively unique breeds*, but are rather hybrid *crossbreeds* due to the historical transfers between two shores of the Atlantic Ocean.

The book was published by Edward Elgar in 2018 and over eight chapters covering 210 pages provides the reader with approximately 170 years of public administration history. In chapters one to three, the authors present why they have decided to write this book, their theoretical points of departure, and the methodology that they have employed for data collection and analysis. The subsequent chapters concern the import of ideas concerning public administration by the USA (chapter four), Germany (chapter five) and France (chapter six). The book follows a discussion (chapter seven) regarding the purity or hybridity of public administration traditions in Germany, France and the USA based on the observations in previous chapters and concludes (chapter eight) with implications for the understanding of how the ideas are transferred, adopted, or rejected. In relation to transfer of ideas, the book’s main argument focuses on the hybridity of public administration traditions.

In chapters one to three, the authors introduce their aim, as well as methodological and theoretical points of departure to frame the book. They introduce their framework of transfer-of-ideas in contrast to the understanding of public administration systems as a tradition, and provide a model of *mediation, selection and reception* of the ideas to trace their effects (transfer) in a specific context. These bases constitute the keystones on which the rest of the book is constructed.

In chapter four, the authors illustrate how the works of German (Hegel and Weber) and French (Fayol) authors have been transferred and interpreted by the intelligentsia in the USA. The chapter starts with the influence of Hegel on the understanding of state and bureaucracy in the USA. Through documenting the three strands of translations, interpretations and influence, the authors illustrate how Hegelian understanding of a more organic and normative state that actively safeguards the common good, rather than a description of a (Hobbesian) state based on individuals agreeing upon a social contract, has a role in shaping the administrative ideas of Wilson and Goodnow. This is based on an understanding of civil servants as defenders of civil rights, which necessitates the separation of politics and administration as an opposite to the spoils system, and requires tenured, well-educated, and professional public servants to ensure the efficient implementation of public policy and safeguard the common good. Following on from Hegel, the chapter continues with the impact of Fayol on the understanding of (public) administration as a technical, apolitical and value-free area of study. The book draws an obvious connection between Fayol's scientific management and the well-known abbreviation of "POSDCORB" coined by Gulick (subsequently together with Urwick) for an efficient (public) administration. This efficiency links to the (if reluctant) influence of another German author, Weber, though not precisely in terms of what he meant by the terms "ideal-types", "bureaucratization" and "authority", but rather in terms of their (mis)interpretations and unconscious applications. The chapter finishes with a detailed account of how these terms found themselves used as a counterpart as "efficient" bureaucracy.

In the following chapters, the transfer of knowledge from the USA to Germany (chapter five) and France (chapter six) have been covered. Such transfers include technocracy, politics-administration dichotomy and cybernetics to Germany, and the approach of public administration as a scientific discipline, as increased productivity/rationalization, and as organizational behaviorism to France. Although giving an overview of the transatlantic historical flow in a fluent way, the documentation lacks the detail accounts in these chapters in comparison to the transfer of European ideas to the USA. Such aspect is also visible in the "thickness" of the chapters (51 pages for the USA, 36 pages for Germany, and 25 pages for France). Perhaps more importantly, as a reader I would expect to observe more dialectical aspects, not only the origin of the idea travels from east shore of the Atlantic to the west, and vice versa, but also how such idea consequently travels way back to its original context with any possible modifications. An example can be drawn on the connection of Hegelian influence in the USA (from Germany to USA) and then the politics-administration dichotomy in Germany (from the USA to Germany). Likewise, the book does not cover possible transfers between German and French intellectuals, which would make the arguments in the book even more interesting.

Based on these observations, the chapter seven discusses the transfer-of-ideas in terms of the pureness or hybridity of public administration traditions in these three countries and shows in a continuum the periods when these countries represent more of a truly "traditional flavor", and more of a "hybrid crossbreed." The book concludes by stating the inevitability of transfers-of-ideas, and therefore the impossibility of protecting the understanding of public administration as a pure tradition peculiar to a nation.

Having read the book, I found myself in a time-machine travelling from the late 19th century to late 1970's, but also I returned back to today with some concerns. My first concern is about the transfer-of-ideas approach. I wonder whether the acceptances, refusals, and manipulations, and/or (mis)interpretations that have been argued in the book by such transfers-of-ideas can be the *translations, per se?* (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005) I guess it could be then a slightly different story to argue how “Weberian bureaucracy” (in a German context) has become as “efficient” (in the USA context) as a (mis)interpretation. My other concern is about the selection of time interval for the analysis. It is unfortunate that the book does not cover the changes in understandings of public administration (or in authors' terms, the transfers of ideas) in the last decades which undoubtedly impacts the society that we are living in now. While the authors in the introductory chapter of the book mention the contemporary debates under the banner of New Public Management (NPM), I think it a shortfall that the finishing point of their analysis is the organizational behaviorism of the 1970s. By embracing the recent history in their analysis (such as NPM), the argument regarding the hybridity of administrative ideas would also find itself great support.

Although the book covers only three countries, I think the discussions may aid the scholars to find relevant implications for understanding the historical development of the public administration in other countries, as well. Though, I think the book addresses a narrow span of its readers, for not only history does not attract the interest of the many, but also for its peculiar focus on the public administration. The book is at first hand addressed to readers in (history of) public administration, but also of interest for scholars in history of (political) thought, political science, likewise management and organization studies. *A Transatlantic History of Public Administration* can be a fruitful reference book for the scholars in the area of (public administration/management/political) history, and a useful teaching material in the courses within these disciplines. It gives a brief documentation of a long history and helps the reader to understand how we have come to where we are right now.

References

- Czarniawska, Barbara and Sevón, Guje (2005) *Global Ideas: How Ideas, Objects and Practices Travel in the Global Economy*. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur, Web.