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Editorial

Democratic Crisis in the 21st Century and Research Challenges in Public Administration

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Abstract

Public administration research is constantly challenged to reflect on the complex relations between administration and democracy. The national and international reemergence of far right political forces, which use democratic ground rules as tools against classic liberal democracy, poses additional theoretical and epistemological challenges to the field. Which knowledge production challenges and perspectives appear in the field of administration, especially regarding the articulation between management models and democracy, considering society projects and development models? Such a debate requires mobilizing critical knowledge, redesigning study subjects, reframing participation, deepening the interdisciplinary character of research, and clarifying the political dimensions of the relationship between *res publica* and democracy.

Keywords: public administration; democracy; far right; participation; interdisciplinarity.

A quarrel had arisen between the Horse and the Stag;
so the Horse came to a Hunter to ask his help to take revenge on the Stag.

The Hunter agreed, but said:

“If you desire to conquer the Stag,
you must permit me to place this piece of iron between your jaws,

so that I may guide you with these reins,
and allow this saddle to be placed upon your back so that I may keep steady upon you as we follow after
the enemy.”

The Horse agreed to the conditions, and the Hunter soon saddled and bridled him.

Then, with the aid of the Hunter,
the Horse soon overcame the Stag and said to the Hunter:

“Now get off, and remove those things from my mouth and back.”

“Not so fast, friend,” said the Hunter.

“I have now got you under bit and spur and prefer to keep you as you are at present.”

The Horse, Hunter, and Stag (The Fables of Esop)

Introduction

Although public administration has been consolidating itself as a research field, it requires innovation in its approach to specific themes and, above all, in how it articulates themes, scopes, contexts (political, social, economic), scales and sectoral, and structural elements. Publications and profile analyzes of scientific production in the field point out a rich and fruitful literature that address, more or less strictly, various themes: (a) management model, strategy, and practice at various scales; (b) federalism, federative coordination, decentralization and local power; (c) bureaucratic-, managerial-, societal- and strategic-based planning; and (d) managerial, financial control and transparency in the public sector. Studies related to technology, information, public governance, public resource allocation, smart government, international relations and marketing, as well as organizational values, science and knowledge management are important to the field.

Similar to the sectoral organization of the public machine, our journals have published research on health administration, education, environmental policy, assistance, housing and sanitation, social security, transportation, as well as public management performance evaluation; public, social and decision-making policies; strategic management of people and management by competencies; administrative reform, public debt, modernization and regulation; third sector, NGOs, social movements and social participation; risk management, sustainability, citizenship and accountability, among others (Brasil & Jones, 2020; Brunozi Junior, 2022; Dijissey Shikida, 2022; Marques, Chimenti, & Mendes, 2021; Norman & Alemán, 2022; Seabrooke & Sending, 2022;). The list is long, and our intention is neither to be exhaustive nor to systematically review the field's production, but rather to bring some elements to the debate.

Studies often associate—albeit indirectly—various themes, such as those previously mentioned, with the debate on democracy. Some works posit stricter correlations discussing, for example, the association between administrative efficiency, federative coordination, organizational structure, governmental action, and legitimacy in the exercise of power and democracy. Other scientific production and publications, with editorial orientation that address sectoral aspects or themes, seek to build more structural and explanatory correlations. Moreover, several empirical-theoretical research try to escape the often self-absorbed, self-referential, and poorly analytical case study syndrome (Irigaray & Stocker, 2022; Lima, Pereira, & Dias, 2022; Love

& Stout, 2022; Peters, Pierre, Sorensen, & Torfing, 2022).

The national and international reemergence, in the mid-21st century, of far-right organizations, movements and forms of government emphasizes the theoretical and epistemological shift necessary to deepen the relationship between issues in the field of public administration and democracy. Only then will we be able to face the challenges of deepening knowledge on the area and understanding its complexity during these times of crisis. Clashes over topics and the complex relationship between forms of management structuring and development models incorporate a different range of interests and political projects, putting into question the very notion of *res publica*, the functions and scope of state action and, consequently, the concepts and limits of democracy itself. Such challenge is posed both for consolidated and mature bourgeois liberal democracy, such as the US, and younger democracies, such as Brazil.

One proposal would be to go back to our classics and its multiple references and possibilities that may suit our diverse theoretical and ideological preferences, such as Emile Durkheim (2007), Max Weber (2000), Karl Marx (1988), Guerreiro Ramos (1989) and Maurício Tragtenberg (1977), among many others. Going back to the classics is a typical movement in times of paradigmatic crisis, when one must reinvent or even rediscover correlations and determinations between instituted and consolidated research themes. Redesigning our objects or establishing a greater interrelation between the field's multiple research themes—particularly the models of management, development and participation—and the theoretical debate on democracy, can constitute a fruitful renewal exercise.

Reflections on the correlation between public administration and democracy are based on the controversial assumption that the exercise of power, materialized in (more or less democratic) forms of government in its different scales, determine and condition meanings and practices in public administration. Despite a certain obviousness, this statement is far from being a concrete explanatory reference in many public administration studies. The ongoing discussion about the scientific paradigm crisis, throughout the 1990s, posed the following challenge: in times of crisis (which seems to be permanent in our lives) we sometimes need to ask simple questions, those that only children ask. This can be a good start for questioning how we think about our themes and our time.

When we talk about public administration, collective life, *res publica*, we are talking about power—even when we feed our future executioners believing that we are thus fighting against a greater evil, as Aesop's fable (2013) teaches us. Such is the context in which we suggest articulating and deepening our reflections on traditional development models (developmentalist and neoliberal), bureaucratic or managerial management models (usually permeated by patrimonialist elements and traits), and citizen participation (more or less emancipatory or functional) with determinations, concepts, and practices related to democracy.

After all, what are the challenges and perspectives in knowledge production within public administration in our current democratic crisis, particularly regarding the articulation between management models and democracy, considering the different projects of society and development models? We reiterate, therefore, that we need to move forward questioning how public administration builds explanatory arguments by performing the necessary theoretical and epistemological displacements to understand the multiple determinations that involve this field's

complex universe, under penalty of failing to face the current democratic crisis and, although contemporary, we are aging.

This structuring question unfolds into many others: Which projects and models of society and development can contribute to democratize *res publica* management? Which management models, practices, and experiences have contributed to deepening participation processes, particularly on their political dimension, redesigning already consolidated paradigms? What experiences in management, policy making, participation at different scales (local, regional, national and international), have contributed to confronting structural issues such as universal access to infrastructure and public services, access to land in the countryside and in the city, social support, the fight against hunger, the environmental crisis?

Let us advance in this debate by reflecting on (a) the complex relations between public administration, democracy, and neoliberalism—which leads us to discuss some concepts of democracy; (b) on management and participation models under democratic deconstruction; and (c) on public administration and the challenge of interdisciplinarity. Thus, we will try to suggest some clues about how the crisis of liberal democracy places new theoretical, epistemological, and practical demands on public administration.

Public administration and democracy: a necessary critical analysis

The raising and strengthening of far-right political forces complexifies the relations between public administration, democracy, and development models. In the early 2000s, Carlos Nelson Coutinho (2008), in a seminal text for debates about democracy, points out some theoretical and political difficulties in working with the notion of democracy, especially in a political arena where virtually all forces claim to be ‘democratic.’ One must be careful, argues Coutinho, when using the concept of democracy to refer to the most recent redemocratization process in Brazil: “. . . the fact that everyone today calls themselves ‘democrats’ does not mean that they actually believe in democracy, but rather that the recognition of democracy as a virtue has become widespread” (p. 1).

At times, we are faced with an estrangement, a dissociation between speech and action, or what Coutinho, resorting to 17th-century French thinker *La Rochefoucauld*, defines as the hypocrisy of those who claim to be enthusiastically democrats: “the hypocrisy consists in the fact that, extremely often, this word—although said with emphasis—does not mean at all what the history of humanity and political thought have understood and understand by democracy.” Or, as *La Rochefoucauld* puts it, hypocrisy can be understood as the homage vice pays to virtue. Finally, recognizing the virtue of others does not make us virtuous subjects. As an example, let us not forget that throughout history liberalism, an ardent defender of individual freedom, has not always presented itself as democratic (Coutinho, 2008, p. 1).

Following the crisis of the socialist countries and the end of dictatorships in Latin America, although openly authoritarian regimes persisted here and there, democracy—liberal, capitalist bourgeois democracy—, seemed to have finally become universal. Some even claimed the end of history. In fact, a certain universalization of the concept of democracy always hides a great diversity of meanings and practices.

In reporting on more recent history, what exactly are do we mean by democracy? There are several possible answers. Joseph Schumpeter (1961), for example, defines democracy as a procedure characterized by competition among elites for the right to rule, not exactly referring to the notion of common good. According to Friedrich Hayek (1994), democracy is an instrument to safeguard individual freedom and defend negative freedom, that is, an instrument to fight against submission, servitude, the tyranny of the majority, being materialized in the market. Based on a certain Marxist tradition and using the notion of public sphere as a structuring element, Jürgen Habermas (1997) defines democracy as a process, as a communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding, as an unhindered communication between free and equal men, as a process of forming public opinion and will. In a more radical political perspective, Nikos Poulantzas (1997) emphatically states the structural impossibility of democracy under capitalism, since material inequality prevents the effective exercise of freedom.

Circumscribing our scope to the 20th century, many are the theoretical frameworks built around this debate, and the definitions are innumerable. But how to articulate the debate around freedom (individual and collective) and equality, constituents of the concept of democracy, with our reflections in public administration? A significant part of our reflection, referring implicitly or explicitly to its various themes, treats this diversity as a given—almost as an assumption. As if this diversity of concepts, hegemonized by liberal notions of democracy, were a background without major implications or with already established implications in addressing topics in the field of public administration.

Let us continue to explore the concept of democracy, approaching contemporary times and Brazil, to try to advance our argument for the need to reinvent its correlation with public administration. *La Rochefoucauld's* principle of hypocrisy and the conceptual diversity around democracy are mandatory for this debate. However, the 21st century begins by challenging some of our classics, provoking and instigating our capacity for reflection, since the very concept of liberal democracy is in crisis. Today, many who declare themselves as right-wing and far-right do so through democratic institutions and sometimes, in a distorted and contradictory manner, still claim to be democrats. We are facing a widespread crisis of the hegemonic concept of liberal democracy, well characterized by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's scathing and controversial *How Democracies Die* (2019) and Yascha Mounk's *The People vs. Democracy* (2019). The concept of illiberal democracy, in its clarity and imprecision, inspires and questions reflection on the impact of current political processes on the different forms of *res publica* administration.

The election of Donald Trump in the US in 2017 and of Giorgia Meloni in Italy in 2022 are examples of the weight far-right political forces have had in America and old Europe. Inspired by the Nazi formulation "Deutschland Über Alles," with the slogan "America First" and "Dio, patria e famiglia," these political forces not only reject and oppose the historical experiences of the new deal and the welfare state, but also the very foundations of the *res publica*. A similar movement gained traction and clearer political expression with the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, whose motto precariously summarizes the spirit of the leaders and movements referred to here: "Brazil above all others, God above all else."

The first decades of the 21st century saw emerge, nationally and internationally, a set of political forces, social projects, and administration models that not only diverge from conventional democratic conceptions and practices, but that deny the most general principles of classical

democracy, ardently defending dictatorial and authoritarian forms of government. Some authors even qualify them as fascists or neo-fascists. The old democratic ground rules are being questioned. Mutual tolerance gives way to hate speech, traditional republican institutions are attacked in their principles, and even the so-called free press (which has always been associated with class interests), is now considered an enemy.

As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019) state: “Democracy’s erosion is, for many, almost imperceptible,” “democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box” and “democracies may die at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders . . . , as Hitler did in the wake of the 1933 Reichstag fire in Germany” (p. 15). The authors continue: “the tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy’s assassins use the very institutions of democracy—gradually, subtly, and even legally—to kill it” (p. 19).

Drawing on the controversial concept of authoritarian populism, Mounk (2019) reflects on the political expressions resulting from the discontent of a significant portion of the population, which threatens some of the historical principles of liberal democracy. According to him, we are facing the historical dissociation between liberalism and democracy, particularly the attack on classical individual rights and independent, consolidated institutions. In general terms, it is about rejecting the classic rules of democracy or even (poorly) compromising with the rules of the game.

As in other times, anti-democratic forces, sometimes described as fascists or neo-fascists, had broad support from a significant portion of the population and achieved power through electoral processes, with alternation of power. Attacking institutions and rejecting the legitimacy and otherness of their opponents are movements that have been built through formal processes situated within institutionalized legal frameworks. In any case, looking at our time from a historical perspective, as Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019) state, democracies are born, grow, and die.

This new way of constituting political life weakens and erodes organizations, the raw material for administration and public administration. These new old leaderships have the reproduction of messianic authority relations as one of their most characteristic traits, reinventing a *mythical* figure and, consequently, weakening or effacing the mediation between the leader and the masses. We are talking about the dismantling of a wide range of public and social institutions, traditional elements of mediation and representation.

The reinvention of this kind of leadership, against a backdrop of extraordinary advances in communication technologies, has brought back a political and cultural agenda that was apparently dormant or even, at least in part, had been overcome. Alongside the unconditional emphasis on individual freedom, we see a generic criticism of politics and “traditional” politics, while reproducing typical elements of the “old” politics, such as corruption. Conservative discourses are produced by blending traces of nationalism, racism, and even irrationalism, of distrust in reflection and critical thinking. Digital media, which promised us so much (including the deepening of democracy), becomes a powerful tool of manipulation and misinformation.

Together, these elements add new challenges for understanding how organizations and institutions work, the profile of work and workers, the organizational culture, and the various themes specific to public administration. The return to old forms of authoritarianism based on violence and fear, the non-recognition of difference, of otherness, of the public and collective dimensions of life, deconstruct the advances and gains achieved in the most recent

democratization process in Brazil.

Thus, the most recent changes in the forms and ways power is exercised, particularly under the so-called crisis of bourgeois liberal democracy, in development models, policy making, and *res publica* administration challenge academic research in its different dimensions. How do the dilemmas surrounding democracy building under neoliberalism, with authoritarian traits, shape *res publica* and its management? What can be said about traditional themes in the field of reflection and action, such as management, control, strategy, centralization and decentralization of power, planning, governance, and policy making involving different sectors and territories? What can be said about the institutional dimension of the processes of regulation, production, and management of risks (social and environmental), in short, what about the possibilities of sociability itself?

The very notion of *res publica* has always been fraught with controversy and clashes over its definitions and practices deepen. The principles of public sphere as the result of private wills and that the pursuit of individual interest, competition, and the invisible hand of the market achieved and ensured collective welfare were strongly reaffirmed. In these terms, the State would only be responsible for creating the conditions for the proper functioning of the market. It updates, in a refined way, the principle formulated by Adam Smith (1996), by which “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interests” (p. 74). It is not to humanity or complacency, but to self-respect, to the baker’s personal and financial advantages, that we owe our breakfast.

Inspired by Bernard Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees* (2018), some liberals have not hesitated to remind us that the foundations of society, of collective life, are not just the so-called friendly qualities or real virtues, but can be called evil, whether natural or moral. This would be the principle “that makes us sociable creatures, the solid basis, the life and support of all trades and employments without exception; . . . and the moment evil ceases, the society must be spoiled, if not totally dissolved” (p. 2). Ultimately, private interests can become public virtues, a principle that is sometimes wrapped up in a moralistic anti-corruption, war-mongering, and nationalistic discourse.

Friedrich August von Hayek (1994), among others, is frequently mobilized by recent academic production, especially for his considerations on the individualizing and moral nature of sociability, by stating that the constitutive element of ‘sociability’ is the fact that we have learned to *follow rules* and that the rule is, finally, something that results from the complex association between *instinct* and *reason*: “it is the replacement of *innate reactions* by learned rules that makes us human” (p. 27). It is inherited learning, habit, custom and instinct that humanize us. We are more imitation than perception or reason, and sociability—collective life—is the result of this complex process of interaction. Such a characterization of collective life and its constitution could only have as basis the notion of democracy as negative freedom.

What theoretical and empirical elements from this vast theoretical and political tradition do we use to analyze development and management models, public policies, plans and projects, such as the housing policy of the Workers’ Party government, materialized in the Minha Casa Minha Vida Program (2009-2017), the environmental policy of Bolsonaro’s administration (2019-2022)? What concepts of democracy and *res publica* underlie the reflections on the efficiency and

effectiveness of those plans, policies, development and management models?

The scenarios and perspectives are unclear and our ability to evaluate is always limited. Some signs seem, at times, to indicate a certain cooling of the far-right wave that has swept through this beginning of the century—a certain demobilization of *Make America Great Again*, which is a good indicator. We seem to be returning to a certain problematic, controversial, segregated, racist normalcy, but recognizing that stability and rules are somewhat necessary. Particularly, the rules of bourgeois liberal democracy are necessary under capitalism, whether at its center or periphery.

Almost as a lament, David Brooks, in a New York Times opinion piece titled *The Fever Is Breaking* (November, 2022), appeals to common sense: “as Irving Kristol once wrote, the people in our democracy ‘are not uncommonly wise, but their experience tends to make them uncommonly sensible’.” Yes, this is a moment that requires common sense and critical reflection, fundamental requirements of good research. Are we returning to the abnormal normal? Can we, in our research, expand the notion of normality to fit so many other objects, themes, and correlations? What can we say, after all, about management and development models when liberal democracy (with all its diversity and complexity) is no longer a hegemonic theoretical reference and practice?

Participation and democracy in public administration research

The necessary relationship between development and management models and democracy brings us closer to the discussion about the advances and setbacks experienced by citizen participation in recent decades in Brazil, especially considering the challenges imposed by the current setbacks regarding rights and affirmation of authoritarian practices. We have a vast theoretical and empirical repertoire that reflects and documents the political-institutional mobilization that involved redemocratization (after the 1964 military dictatorship), based on the Constituent Assembly and a result of campaigns for direct elections; the struggle for rights of political organization, labor rights, women’s emancipation; the fight against racial discrimination and high prices; and the struggle for land reform and the right to have rights.

We place ourselves, then, alongside the foundation of organizations such as the Workers’ Party, the Unified Worker’s Central (CUT), the Movimento Negro Unificado, and the Landless Worker’s Movement, of the reorganization of the political and party arena, and of the rich studies that analyze everyday participation at different government spheres—especially on how bureaucracy is established and on the relations between the State and civil society. Reflections on the so-called coalition presidentialism, the relations between powers at the various federative and participatory scales, social control, and the constructs related to governance and accountability are still very rich and diverse.

During the 1990s, we witnessed a certain counterpoint and conflict between an analytical and propositional framework around participation qualified as substantive (which involved decentralization of power) and a markedly neoliberal nature (from a managerial perspective, based on efficiency, effectiveness and productivity). In the first two decades of the 21st century, the political proposal of the Workers’ Party promised to break with the neoliberal model of *res publica* management, which has been richly documented by academic production.

Through considerations and criticism, studies evaluated the creation of participatory institutional spaces by the neo-developmental model (2003-2016) as significant advancements for the relations between social participation, management model, development and democracy. Examples of these initiatives include (national, state and municipal) conferences on topics such as the environment, health, women, cities; the creation and reformulation of councils, such as the Council for Economic and Social Development; the approval of regulatory frameworks, such as the MROSC (Law no. 13,019/2014); and the implementation of the National Policy for Social Participation and the National System for Social Participation (Decree no. 8.243/2014).

But these advances, as recorded by academic production, seem not to have been sufficient to prevent the emptying of the political dimension regarding the participation of broad sectors of society in policy making. Participation captured by interests outside the political democratic forces, whether left-wing or more to the center, produced a very particular scenario: alongside deregulation and the emptying of citizen participation in the management process, political forces considered to be right-wing and far-right filled Brazil's streets dressed in green and yellow, demanding the return of the military dictatorship. *Vem Pra Rua* and *Brasil Livre*, two movements and political organizations of this new era, make unrecognizable and disrupts the old (and still political relevant) slogans that shaped the streets and the public sphere during redemocratization.

A vast academic production has focused on discussing participation, public management and democracy in Brazil. A great deal of effort has gone into research, building taxonomies, metrics, and attempts to measure effectiveness to further this reflection. However, we will insist on the appeal of associating our themes to the more general debate on democracy, drawing on the concept of *perverse confluence* proposed by Evelina Dagnino (2002).

Perverse confluence posits that participation can end up serving political projects that, in theory and in practice, defend different and even conflicting models of society. Within Brazilian public management, it was during redemocratization, for example, that civil society was called upon to collaborate with state action, assuming provision and management attributions of public policies and services, among others, in the areas of labor mediation and social support.

As part of the literature on the managerial State reform process points out, however, this harmony between State, market and society was achieved by dismantling the traditional spaces for popular struggle organization. Trade unions, for example, suffered with the labor rights reforms that, associated with their ideological effects, produced the political emptying of these organizations.

Moreover, as research has shown, public policy implementation through resource decentralization and the waiving of State responsibility by mobilization of civil society organizations, has important repercussions for the relationship between participation and the democratization of relations between these spheres. One such repercussion is on the ideological and organizational effects that the bureaucratic imperatives that operationalizing policies carry, particularly the separation or hierarchization between technique and policy, which results in the separation between the sectors that think, formulate and decide policies and those who implement them.

As such, the experiences of participation, even those qualified as substantive and associated with social developmental projects, as the academic production registers, were

permeated by traditional co-opting and depoliticizing practices of social movements and their leaders. Even collegiate spaces like Committees and Councils, which allow the participation of organizations and social movements, were shown to be necessarily capable of changing the centralized structure of the decision-making process.

Analyzing the participation on the River Basin Committees, the “Water Parliament” foreseen in the Water Law (Federal Law 9.433/97), for example, we find strong evidence of the effects produced by the power economic sectors exert on decisions concerning the use and appropriation of common resources, which reinforce economic inequalities and social exclusion. In this regard, as Gohn (2019) points out, when one starts from the analysis of structural inequalities in the economic sphere, the profusion of studies on participation fails to establish an agenda for effectively overcoming political and social inequalities.

When discussing participation, we must highlight the conflict between its functional and political dimensions, and even the multiple meanings of its refusal. We are talking, therefore, about the association between participation and the political project and, consequently, between participation and democracy. After all, what does participation mean in development models—neoliberal and developmentalist or social-developmental—and in management models—managerial, bureaucratic, societal (according to some approaches)—, and how is it articulated with democracy?

Despite its limitations and contradictions, the importance of participation within public management in these models is reinforced when evaluated from a political context of anti-democratic threat. Confrontations with right-wing and far-right political forces mobilized the broadest *concerted efforts* in the political field. Returning to Dagnino’s argument of perverse confluence, the inclusion of civil society organizations in the rebuilding of democratic institutions must be addressed critically and reflectively by public administration research.

What academia for a long time took as assumption, the regulation of participatory public management, easily dissolved in the air in recent years. The repeal of the Decree that established the National Policy for Social Participation and the National System for Social Participation, and the enactment of Decree no. 9,759/2019, limits and, in practice, extinguishes instances of collegiate management. This is made possible by the partisan political scenario of erasing the streets as a place for emancipatory and democratic expressions. Movements and organizations that call for military intervention use their own democratic rules and institutions to fight democracy.

In identifying the roots of our violent and authoritarian status, even recalling the marks left (and permanently renewed) by slavery and patrimonialism, Lilia Schwarcz (2019) unveils the elements that shaped our economy, society and organizational culture. The 2013 mobilization processes, according to Schwarcz, “uncovered the cauldron of democracy,” from which emerged the most radical expressions of disguised, however persistent, values of a racist, misogynistic nature and contrary to the republican ideal of constituting a *res publica*.

In Brazil today, when one speaks of social movements, participation, public management, and democracy, one must use adjectives to indicate the existence or not of more or less functional or emancipatory meanings. We must therefore reflect on the effects of our recent theoretical-practical journey toward an institutionalized participation, a movement that has sometimes

distanced us from the political dimension of participation. Problematizing the relationship between participation and democracy, even if we refer to liberal democracy, is paramount in times of denialism and dismantling.

Discussions about the relationship between participation and democracy must overcome the conservative bias of legitimization and instrumentalization. We need to recognize their conflictive (rather than harmonious) nature, highlighting the material (especially economic) implications that make up historically consolidated inequalities. Hence, the debate on participation and democracy, that is, on management-related theoretical and practical determinations, can greatly contribute to reinvent the very notion of public administration.

Public administration and interdisciplinarity: challenges and perspectives for research

Debates around the challenges and perspectives of public administration and its relationship with democracy requires the mobilization of specialized knowledge produced during the process of establishing administration as a science; however, in times of upheaval and paradigmatic crisis the boundaries constituted by disciplinary knowledge must be broken.

Undoubtedly, the field of public administration was established and developed based on an interdisciplinary dialogue, which, in turn, has contributed in constructing the field's identity. However, as Guerreiro Ramos (1989) suggests, we need to renew and expand our research horizons to a critical interdisciplinary perspective that avoids merely borrowing concepts from other areas of knowledge and is able to redefine objects and approaches in order to reflect their richness and complexity. Incidentally, it is also Guerreiro Ramos who reminds us of the need for an adequate articulation between theoretical advancements in the sciences (particularly the social sciences) and the concrete issues that characterize our economy and our society. When we talk about diversity in organizations, for example, we must reflect on a meaning different from the one used by prescriptive, operational, and functional literature, related only to productivity increase.

In Brazil, diversity actually means inequalities—gender, race and ethnicity, social class—, which unfold and materialize themselves in precarious living and working conditions. As such, knowledge production in public administration will have to overcome a great theoretical and practical challenge if it wants to contribute to realizing democracy. An important step is the valuing of knowledge and experiences from different traditions (including non-Western ones) that consider, for example, emancipatory forms of relations between power and community and that reject validity as the main criterion in knowledge production.

We are, after all, an applied social science. Besides the always alluded proximity between knowledge and action, we need to face the challenge of producing reflective knowledge, able to focus on its episteme and political-institutional meaning, otherwise we will fail to understand the ongoing transformations around us and to support public action, speaking uncreatively to a small bubble. In fact, the theoretical and practical challenges related to public administration and democracy have theoretical, epistemological, methodological (the old quali-quantitative compartmentalization impoverishes us and distances us from the world of life—from the *lebenswelt*, as the phenomenological tradition says), and also ontological meanings, since they

concern knowledge production, social action, sociability, and the construction of life in society.

In this regard, the field of public administration needs to mobilize and value diverse knowledge committed to emancipation and enlightenment; disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and even transdisciplinary theories and epistemologies capable of bringing theory, concept, and reality closer together. As Maurício Tragtenberg (1977) already argued, the field of administration and public administration will always be permeated by bias, ideologies and preferences, like any theoretical-practical production and product. Diluting and even breaking the boundaries between disciplinary knowledge can favor the conformation of our objects— in which the approach of democracy can be a fruitful path.

In fact, several voices in the field of public administration suggest diluting disciplinary boundaries and redesigning objects and approaches, but mentioning them here would be meaningless, besides the risk of being forgotten. We need to strengthen this movement and move forward in the everyday life of academic research, including by encouraging dialogue with other fields of knowledge within the social sciences and beyond its borders. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary dialogue, the return to macro theory, and the dialogue between theories of different scales can help face theoretical and practical challenges and envision perspectives for collectively and democratically developing research in public administration.

Conclusion

Rather than adopting a prescriptive stance, this paper seeks to raise doubts. Doubt and criticism can be fruitful guides in times of crisis. We are currently permeated by a sense of urgency—the very sense of time, as it usually happens in times of transition, displaces us from consolidated and comfortable territories, uproots us. To reflect on public administration and democracy in the 21st century, on its challenges and perspectives, is an invitation to criticism, in its most substantive sense. Perhaps we need to reinforce, once again, the association between criticism and crisis—but when were we not in crisis, exactly? The answer to this kind of question will, evidently, depend on each person's ideological and theoretical perspective. Perhaps what can guide us in this profusion of possibilities is investigate when the experience and perception of the crisis actually became widespread.

In his 1942 autobiography *The World of Yesterday* (*Die Welt von Gestern*), Stefan Zweig, amidst fascist fury, perplexingly recounts the end of the world of security. Until then, “everything in our almost thousand-year-old Austrian monarchy seemed based on permanency, and the State itself was the chief guarantor of this stability” (p. 11). Rights were confirmed by parliament, currency circulated as if immutable—in short, “everyone knew how much he possessed or what he was entitled to, what was permitted and what forbidden. Everything had its norm, its definite measure and weight.” It is true, however, that this feeling of security belonged to those who had possessions (Zweig, 1953, p. 11).

Anyhow, “comfort made its way from the houses of the fashionable to those of the middle class. It was no longer necessary to fetch water from the pump or the hallway, or to take the trouble to build a fire in the fireplace. Hygiene spread and filth disappeared. People became handsomer . . .” (p. 13). In such an environment, radicalisms, conflicts, wars, “revolutions, revolts” had no place—they seemed impossible “in an age of reason” (p. 11). That world vanished like a

“castle of dreams” and, in Zweig’s own terms, the Viennese “good Jewish bourgeoisie” found itself caught in a great storm. The world changed forever.

Extreme situations leads to feelings of deterritorialization, of vertigo. When transitions happen over a long period of time, it is difficult, on an individual and even organizational level, to have a sense of change. We need to sharpen our eyes to tackle the individual, collective and organizational challenge of trying to understand the multiple possibilities and perspectives of our time.

The reflection developed here does not lead us to a conclusion, but to an alert about the current pervasive sense of urgency and the need to denaturalize the crisis situation, which affects how we produce knowledge. In reflecting on the possibilities of public administration research and the need to redesign its objects and perspectives, we point to a movement that is necessary and urgent, in various fields of knowledge, in times of science denialism. What we actually expect from public administration research is the capacity to reinvented itself by dialoguing with other fields of knowledge. Exploring the relationship between public administration and democracy in the 21st century can be an excellent pretext in our undertaking, that is, the daily work of research and enlightenment.

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