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Critical book review

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Philippe Bezes

Handbook of Public Administration, B. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre (eds), London: Sage Publications, 2003.

This imposing work (640 two-column pages), co-edited by two eminent specialists in the field of public administration, B. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre, professors in the departments of political science in the Universities of Pittsburgh in the United States and Gothenburg in Sweden, has many claims to becoming a 'Bible' for all those – researchers, university people, students and practitioners – who are interested in public administrations, in how they function and how they change. Belonging to the well-established publishing category of the 'handbook', it offers a multiplicity of entries and summary chapters covering a vast range of questions, thematic areas and works relating to the 'administrative phenomenon'. Several of the options chosen confer unity on the project and give it its scholarly interest, ensuring that it will become an indispensable instrument of research, discussion and understanding. The approach adopted for the enterprise is first of all particularly careful in the choice of contributors and in the general direction taken: under the supervision of the two editors and of a prestigious committee of university people of international repute not involved in the drafting of the work, 14 thematic sections were defined, each made the responsibility of a specialist who introduces and presents the themes and contributions. All in all, some 68 writers are included in the project, accounting for 49 chapters and 15 introductory presentations, all of them university people, whether of long standing or in the making, coming from the United States, Canada, the antipodes (New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong) and ten European countries (Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Norway, Greece, Sweden, Italy, Denmark, Germany). It is therefore an international project and a blend, not only of intellectual traditions, but also of disciplines and approaches: the sweep of research brought together under the global title of 'public administration' includes political scientists (the majority), legal scholars, sociologists and specialists in 'public management'.

As in the case of all summary and encyclopaedic works, the *Handbook* makes choices and proposes its own cartography of the vast academic field of studies on public administration. In so doing, the co-directors have chosen to account for the double dimension, theoretical and practical, of the issues raised by public administration and claim to have done so by means of precise, scholarly and well referenced discussions. The 14 sections take three structural directions in turn:

- theoretical discussion of the analysis methods of administrative phenomena (organization theories, the historic perspective, the comparative approach, formal approaches arising out of rational choice, public policies, etc.);
- long-established and more recent problem areas in issues concerning bureaucracies (relations between the public administration and the political world or between the administration and society; the new *accountability* of civil servants; the implementation powers of the public service; administrative reform in the English-speaking countries and in Western Europe, but also in the

developing and transitional countries, in Eastern Europe and in the countries of Asia, Africa and South America);

- finally, thematic areas linked to the operational activities and functions of public administrations (administrative law and legality, the management of human resources, public finances and the budget, issues connected with intergovernmental coordination).

The discussions presented throughout the work are homogenous and give pride of place, in describing the public administration, to the approaches of the social sciences and their analytical and empirical foundations. The work does not in any way obscure the more managerial and prescriptive perspectives, which are given in several chapters of the functional sections, but these contributions do not constitute the dominant philosophy of the *Handbook*. Rather than focusing on a vision of 'public administration' as a practical art centred on the issue of efficiency, the editors have chosen to defend a concept of research on public administration which re-establishes the wealth of a particularly dynamic academic field. The classical works are represented but the volume is first and foremost concerned with the more recent contributions.

It is obviously not possible, within the limited framework of this account, to describe the multiplicity of the contributions. We will therefore concentrate on certain very clear lines of inquiry which are present throughout the work and lend it much of its interest.

The first great merit of the *Handbook of Public Administration* is to bear witness to the wealth of perspectives and issues arising from the research and discussion concerning public administrations. Historically, from the 1960s, policy analysis as a discipline has competed with 'public administration' in the English-speaking world. This success of the analysis of public policies contributed for some time to marginalizing theoretical and empirical analyses of the functions and issues involved in public administration, of the various groups of civil servants, of routine administrative activities and the relation between bureaucracies and democratic mechanisms. Reversing this direction, the *Handbook* perfectly illustrates the recovery of a certain 'political science of public administration', supported by theoretical currents which promote the development of new forms of inquiry. Thus, sociological neo-institutionalism (see the contributions of Jean-Claude Thoenig and those of Dionyssi G. Dimitrakopoulos and Argyris G. Passas), historical neo-institutionalism (Martin Lodge), the formal theories arising out of rational choice (agency or transaction costs theories, whether in Jack H. Knott and Thomas H. Hammond or Mark Halleberg), interactionist sociology and the theories of citizenship (see the chapters on the 'street-level bureaucrat' by Steven Rathgeb Smith or Marcia K. Meyers and Susan Vorsanger), the research into social capital (Bo Rothstein), the comparative perspectives (the section directed by Edward C. Page with a summary by Marleen Brans) or historical perspectives (Jos C.N. Raadschelders) have considerably revitalized and enriched formulations in the administrative problem area. From this point of view, the *Handbook* is above all a good illustration of theoretical and methodological inventiveness in this field of research.

Going beyond this overview of the approaches, the two editors re-establish the cardinal character of the issues involved in administration and insist, in the introduc-

tion, on the necessity of setting the study of public administrations back at the centre of discussions on the activities of government. This requirement — setting studies on public administration back into a more general discussion of politics — is largely sustained throughout the work. In their respective chapters, Morten Egeberg, Martin Lodge and Gary C. Bryner emphasize the essential influence of the institutionalized structures of national civil services in the forming and results of public policies. Specifically, John L. Mikesell, for example, discusses the merits of the various possible forms of taxation authority and their effects in terms of efficiency and legitimacy. It is a way of emphasizing how, without the civil service, the activity of the government is fragile and uncertain, but also of describing the different forms of influence the service has on politics (see the section directed by Nicole de Montricher). In their respective contributions and with very different perspectives, John Halligan, Robert Gregory and Luc Rouban analyse the renewal of the 'political-leadership' imperatives of bureaucracies in the western democracies, as they manifest themselves in different forms: transformations in the leadership, methods of monitoring and accountability and the forms of the politicizing of senior civil service positions by elected executives. Gregory examines, for example, the dilemmas and ambiguities of the demands for the accountability of senior civil servants in the name of democracy and the New Governance. Elsewhere, the formal conceptualizations of writers (Knott and Hammond) who see the control of the administration in terms of 'agent-principal' transactions between the bureaucracies and the multiple democratic institutions (Parliament, executive, representatives of special interest groups, etc.) also make it possible to set the study of the administration back into the research on political theory. The new discussions of accountability (the section directed by Paul G. Thomas) or those, more long-standing, of representative bureaucracy (chapter by Lois R. Wise) confirm this point. The new forms of the 'governance' of public action and the reconstructed roles played in them by the public authorities are also well illustrated in the section by Martin Painter on the transformation of relations between the central and local players, in the chapter by Dimitrakopoulos and Passas on the growing influence of supra- and transnational organizations and in the contribution of Pierre Lascoumes and Patrick Le Galès on the new interactions between bureaucracies and interest groups. The same desire to relate technical questions to the issues involved in the contemporary arts of government informs Jorgen Gronnegaard Christensen's contribution on the, at first view, austere subject of the remuneration of the public governing class. While emphasizing the multiplicity of the forms of material or symbolic remuneration (salaries, pensions, allowances, material advantages, holding of two or more offices, etc.), he demonstrates the importance of a discussion of political theory and offers a fascinating stylization of the issues involved in salary policies and the theories interpreting them. In particular he discusses, both theoretically and empirically, the hypothesis taken from Tocqueville of a process of degradation of the remuneration of the western politico-administrative élites, the effect of political competition in the democratic systems. All in all, the issues involved in the interrelation between administration and government are extensively set forth in the *Handbook*.

The societal dimension of bureaucracies also pervades the work. The section by Soren C. Winter on implementation shows clearly, for example, how the renewal

of studies on Implementation largely rests on a vision of the subject which is now integrated and can analyse more subtly and systematically the role of the official in the field — the 'street-level bureaucrat' — and also those of social groups, firms and citizens benefiting from public policies and interacting with the administration. In their contributions, Steven Rathgeb Smith and Marcia K. Meyers and Susan Vorsanger underline the wealth of recent research carried out in the wake of the work of Michael Lipsky on the policy-making of the street-level bureaucrats and on their growing social role in the treatment of the beneficiaries of the policies of the Welfare State. The issues of citizenship, participation and justice now constitute serious areas of inquiry in administrative studies, usefully shedding light on the classical perspectives which only consider the effectiveness and efficiency of governmental action. From a different angle, and on the basis of a discussion of the legitimacy of public administrations, Bo Rothstein resumes discussion of the theories of social capital, suggesting the importance of a causal mechanism according to which the confidence of individuals in other people and in society (social trust) would depend on the quality and non-corruption of the administrative institutions. At a more general level, this pronounced structuring of government services by the 'societies' and cultures within which they are to be found also characterizes the different chapters devoted to the developing and transitional countries (Africa, Asia, Latin America, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, the post-communist countries, etc.) and those, more historical, on the western administrations. They make it possible, among other things, to measure the interdependence of the phenomena and, in particular, the multiple forms and degrees of differentiation of the administrative systems in relating to social functions. The cardinal role of intermediation played by the administrations in society, between the elected political authorities, local government, interest groups, social groups, tax-paying users and citizens is clearly underlined.

Finally the *Handbook* offers numerous analyses of the most recent transformations of the administrative systems. It particularly notes the phenomenon of the 'managerialisation of the state', characterized by the increasing importance of budgetary constraints and the development of multiple methods of control based on the production and processing of information through the development of quantitative management instruments and indicators. Along with the two vast sections devoted to the management of human resources (Patricia W. Ingraham) and the financial and budgetary dimensions of the public administration (Frans K.M. van Nispen), there are several chapters concerning performance issues in the public sector (Carolyn J. Heinrich), electronic government (Helen Margetts) and, more widely, administrative reforms (Theo A.J. Toonen's section). Sometimes analytical and scholarly, sometimes managerial and prescriptive, the contributions make it possible, whatever the case, to highlight large-scale contemporary changes linked to the putting in place of new financing, budgeting, management and monitoring arrangements. Clearly, economic and financial pressures, as well as the increasing influence of techniques used in the private sector are leading to a re-examination of budgetary procedures (Hilton and Joyce, and Kok) in the light of mechanisms which enhance the transparency of public processes and financial information, the measurement of performances and monitoring by means of audits. Influenced by the same historic movement of economic rationalization, the management of human resources is also

evolving towards systems of remuneration according to performance (Michael Katula and James L. Perry), towards contractualization of employment and job insecurity and new individual forms of activity assessment (Sally Coleman Selden), or towards professional relations marked by the decentralization of salary negotiations (James R. Thompson). In these two operational areas, one can regret the insufficient presence of more sociological and critical perspectives, analysing the forms of this 'managerialisation' of politics and the civil service, clearly richer and more complex than the contributions coming from the public management sector would give one to understand. An illuminating counter example is that of the chapter by Helen Margetts on the coming of an electronic government, a subtle discussion of the very contemporary issues of the rationalization, control and efficiency of the administration in relation to the development of the new information and communication technologies.

As a general project the *Handbook* obviously cannot satisfy on all points as it is in its very construction an impossible exercise. With regard to content, for example, one could regret the absence of a section, or at least a chapter, devoted to the sociology of public officials, from the senior civil servant to the street-level bureaucrat. The advantage of more sociographic approaches comparing the training, orbits, positions and conceptions of roles is missing in a group work which sets itself the task of covering the different facets of the administrative phenomenon. One could also regret the little attention given to the analysis of administrative activities aimed at the 'shaping' of government action, from the 'functional politicising' of senior civil servants to the drafting of legal material by middle-ranking officials. By devoting a section to 'implementation', the *Handbook* gives priority to the traditional instrumental function to the detriment of more pro-active roles of bureaucracies in the process of government. In addition, if the editorial choices have in the majority of cases a solid scholarly basis, one could have certain reservations about some chapters in the operational sections (Human Resources Management, Budget), which are insufficiently critical as they are too directly the vehicles of prescriptive managerial viewpoints. With regard to regrets concerning the form of the work, one could mention the overall organization of the sections, the logic and sequence of which are difficult to understand, and the overlapping between the contributions of different sections. The reverse side of the independence accorded to the section directors is that several chapters could in fact be moved to other sections, corresponding better to the themes they discuss. The *Handbook* will also be assessed in accordance with the yardstick of use. While the thematic index is well designed, one could regret the absence of entries by country, which would facilitate comparisons between the analyses of national administrative systems dispersed throughout the work.

But in the end, these reservations are of no account in view of the scope of an enterprise offering so wide a panorama of analyses, perspectives and references concerning public administration. Even if the Anglo-American paradigms and referents clearly appear to dominate, the editorial choice and the diversity of the contributors ensure that readers will have a veritable mine of information at their disposal, intended no doubt more for researchers and students interested in public administration than for practitioners in search of ready-made solutions. The *Handbook* represents the state of the art in its most up-dated form and is thus indispensable for research on bureaucracies.