

On the concept of “Administrative Traditions” A critical view

Gajduschek Gyorgy

Corvinus University, Dept. of Public Policy and Management, Faculty of Economics, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract: The paper argues that the concept of “Administrative traditions” is – unintendedly – misleading. The term is most widely used to address and categorize the variety of administrative systems worldwide. Similarly, one may speak about system-types, “families” (Painter-Peters 2010, 3). This is quite similar to the typology of legal systems (legal traditions, families), with actually quite similar groupings.

‘Administrative traditions’, simply by naming so, refers to historical institutionalism and its key concept of ‘path dependency’. Consequently, ‘administrative traditions’ does not just address the variety, as it is in the present, but it also provides an – at first glance quite logical and convincing – explanation of diversity. It is the historical development, the historical “path” that mainly determines the present form of government and public administration (PA). Path dependency, as the very concept indicates, limits the possible choice options for the countries. This is quite evident from the largely different reactions the the NPM movement; a key issue addressed by most authors who have dealt with PA typology in the past decades. ((Painter-Peters 2010, Peters 2021, Pollitt-Bouckaert 2017 Ch 3)

I argue that this approach – which may unconsciously stem from a kind of ethnocentric bias – conceals the fact that most (the overwhelming majority of the countries) (a) have not had a relative continuity of their history and (b) independence to form their own governmental and PA system. On the contrary! The most obvious examples are the colonies of West-European countries, that – with more or less stringency – exported their administrative system to these colonies. Another example could be the East-Central European countries. Even the statehood of these countries may have disappeared for shorter or longer (i.e. centuries) periods; they were occupied by foreign powers (Ottoman Empire, Russia, Habsburg Monarchy) that handled these countries as parts of the empire, and embraced them into their administrative systems. Communism is undoubtedly due to external impact, whereas the post-communist period may also be interpreted as a more or – rather less – independent acceptance of the NPM ideologies, with – among others – devastating large-scale privatization, and abrupt shift from an omniscient state to an almost-minimal one.

The main argument, thus, is that a given administrative system may as much or – by the number of countries – even more explained by various forms of institutional isomorphism (all three types; Powell-DiMaggio 2012) than by path dependency.

Painter, M., & Peters, B. G. (2010). The analysis of administrative traditions. In *Tradition and public administration* (pp. 3-16). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Peters, B. G. (2021). *Administrative traditions: Understanding the roots of contemporary administrative behavior*. Oxford University Press.

Pollitt, C., & Bouckaert, G. (2017). *Public management reform: A comparative analysis-into the age of austerity*. Oxford university press.

Powell, W. W., & DiMaggio, P. J. (Eds.). (2012). *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. University of Chicago Press.