

1.2.5. – KUNO SCHEDLER –
INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC MANAGEMENT NETWORK

Social science is about studying and understanding social (in other words: inter-relational, human) activities and their impact on the functioning of groups, organisations, societal sub-systems or the society as a whole. The object of study is always bounded, with specific contextual and contentious features. Public administration (PA) is such a sub-system, and it is the main target of our field of research, increasingly including its partners in the delivery of public services.

The study of public administration is a genuinely interdisciplinary (and in Europe: intercultural) challenge. As much as it was not sufficient to take on a purely legal perspective in continental

Europe in the past, it does not do justice to the complex environment of PA to limit one's studies and teaching to simplistic management theory or political economy. Although each researcher must have his or her disciplinary "home base", understanding the reality of PA requires openness, curiosity, tolerance for and interest in other disciplines, and the intrinsic motivation to do good to society. Without the latter, I am convinced, will the researcher not come up with the right, and this means relevant, questions that need to be answered in his or her part of the European society.

The demand for PA ideas is influenced by many factors. Firstly, PA is part of the society and thus will have to react to new developments in society, and problems arising from them. The enlargement of the EU, for example, has led to a quantitative and qualitative dimension of migration that was not known before. PA will have to search for its new role in actively integrating the new residents in a culturally sustainable way.

Secondly, it seems to me that the political systems at all levels of Europe are getting increasingly self-referential and elitist. For PA, this has the consequence that it finds itself between the frontlines of political conflicts, rather than being treated and acknowledged as the major source for government efficacy. In too many European countries, PA has turned into a self-service market for individual political benefits, which makes it difficult (if not impossible) to develop PA into an organisation that is open, service oriented, responsive, and offering equally good public services to all citizens. Rather, many PA leaders spend most of their time with micro-politics within PA. Additionally, if PA wants to defend its strategic capabilities, and if PA wants to maintain a motivational climate for its employees, PA needs to build a firewall against political *Willkür*.

Thirdly, PA as one of the largest economic players in each country most often does not get the students it deserves. The amount of chairs for public management, for instance, at Universities in Europe is still very limited compared to private sector management fields. In addition, students in political science often learn more about the history of political ideas, or theories of international politics, than about the mechanisms that turn political ideas into reality: PA processes. In my view, there is an urgent demand for ideas about how these new challenges can be met in the future.

When analyzing the supply for PA ideas, we will find three major sources for innovation:

- a) *Self-initiated innovation*: PA itself, and its members, are a rich source for new ideas about how to improve PA, its performance and results. New public management has been praised and discredited for several reasons – one thing, however, was obvious: in many jurisdictions, the impetus for change came from within PA, in that innovative public managers were aiming at new modes of control and leadership for PA.
- b) *Imposed innovation*: A large share of innovative developments in national public administrations in Europe has been the result of a more or less painful external pressure, for instance from the EU. Students of these processes found, however, that pressure alone is not sufficient. Rather, new ideas need their national champions in order to be successfully implemented – which move us closer to PA-initiated innovation.
- c) *Expert-driven innovation*: In many cases, politicians and bureaucrats pick up ideas from experts, both consultants and scholars, who either seek to sell them for the sake of financial turnover or for the sake of reputation (or both). If they think in longer terms, there is a self interest for experts to develop ideas that have a positive impact, so there is no “natural” reason to question the trustworthiness of high quality experts. For example, if a scholar gets directly involved in the reform of PA (such as was the case with NPM in many countries), he or she will carry the risk of reputational damage in case the reforms are not successful.

Ideas only have a public value if they are shared with others. Within the scholarly fields, journals have become the major platform to publish research results. The sheer amount of publications, however, makes it hard for a scholar to even keep oversight on what is going on in the field. The healthy pressure to do research has turned into a sometimes unhealthy pressure to publish, and the craft of arguing along mainstreams of recognized journals seems to increasingly dominate over innovative, creative thinking. Additionally, the general understanding of the functioning of PA in its context should have a value of its own, especially for young scholars who want to make an academic career and become teachers for future researchers. There is a danger of creating a vicious circle of

specialization, while losing sight on the over-all system dynamics of PA.

In such a context, scholars of PA need to take a step back and to re-think their field: are we still creating knowledge that does good to society? Who can make use of it, other than our own students who have to? In my view, it is essential to have scholarly journals that

- a) have a distinct *European approach*. This is, research is done with a multi-cultural understanding of PA, highlighting the contextual embeddedness of PA. Systemic thinking should gain more attention of young scholars in relation to highly specialized "digging deeper".
- b) are *accessible* for scholars and practitioners alike. This includes the style of language, but also the free or low-cost access through the internet. Online journals as a platform for publications of young scholars should be better recognized by universities in their recruitment process.
- c) allow for *knowledge transfer* between different contexts. This sets a focus on capabilities of analyzing, observing, questioning, rather than the development of tools and models that aim at being applicable in any given context. Scholarly contributions should open the practitioner's perspective, help him or her to understand challenges, to ask the right questions, and look at PA as an organisation in a responsible way. In other words: they should address the reflective practitioner who has an academic background, and who is interested in non-trivial solutions for complex problems.

In my personal context, I am finding it harder to get good doctoral students in the field of public management compared to ten years ago. Maybe it is because – at least parts of – the new public management has turned from a revolutionary reform to an everyday reality in Switzerland, so it may have lost its attraction to young students. Another reason, I suspect, is the growing pressure for academic specialization, combined with the still limited professor positions in Europe. This increases the risk for young scholars in PA: On the one hand, they should specialize as academics, with high specificity and thus sunk costs, and the risk of not getting to one of the few chairs. On the other hand, to keep their value in the labour market, they are required to acquire practice-relevant

knowledge and skills. The wider the gap between a specialized academic and a practitioner relevant training, the greater the risk for young people to strand somewhere in-between. Therefore, I would encourage young students of PA to find a way to do their doctoral studies while doing both: learn from science how to analyze, ask the right questions, write and argue in a structured way; and participate in real-world projects, gain experience in practice, and never lose sight for the impact they have on society. In turn, this requires universities to recruit new academics not only on the basis of their journal publications, but also based on their innovativeness, their acceptance in practice, their teaching abilities, and their personalities since they are the role models for future young academics.

Organisations such as the European Group for Public Administration are a valuable platform for an exchange of ideas between scholars and practitioners. Young scholars should be encouraged to present their research to academics and academically interested practitioners, in order to receive feedback for their further research. At last, relevant research questions often result from such encounters. EGPA is a platform that requires tolerance – for different cultures, different disciplines, different perspectives and needs. Most probably, EGPA will never be the outstanding scholarly conference where specialized A+ journal articles are presented. However, EGPA will be a rich source for innovative ideas, new practical challenges to be studied, and new developments to be understood. As such, EGPA deserves even more attention and recognition from scholars than today.