

Book Review

Edoardo Ongaro, *Philosophy and public administration. An Introduction*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017

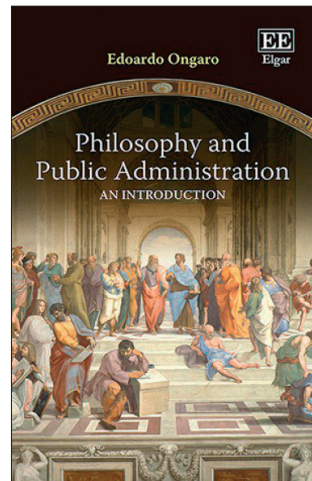
If one was to conduct a survey regarding possible words/concepts which are usually associated with public administration, there would be slim chances of having philosophy among them. More likely, administration would be paired with bureaucracy, procedures or politics than with the “love of wisdom”.

Today, public administration is becoming more and more operationalized: even reform efforts become automatic approaches, bureaucratic obligations, lists of procedures which public authorities need to go through and thick boxes, without properly understanding the desired end result and the context for action.

Lack of strategic perspectives, which is obvious in public administration and politics, is linked up to a high degree with lack of understanding of the ideas and values which should underlie the act of governing.

All these remarks show why the book “*Philosophy and public administration. An Introduction*”, by Edoardo Ongaro is both important and necessary for decision-makers, scholars and students. Its main role is to determine us to reflect upon the aim of government and governance. Public administration is not, as believed by some politicians and administrators, the result of a divine command, which cannot be disputed; rather, it represents the effect of a generous idea which tries to bring plus value to human existence and to community.

The main theme of the book, according to the author deals with “the possible contribution that philosophy can bring to the field of public administration”. There is no single valid answer to this question, but the most important one would go along the lines of “to give meaning to its existence and its actions”. For example, the implications of the social contract idea upon the building of administrative systems are huge; however, very few individuals who decide the public policies and strategies



are aware of the impact of philosophical ideas and concepts upon what government means today.

The link between key topics currently debated today in public administration and key philosophical issues is explored in Ongaros' book, together with the philosophic foundation of public administration. This is also linked with the idea of paying attention to the context in which public organizations operate as well as with understanding the broader philosophical perspectives in which some paradigms in public administrations are situated.

If public administration is both an art and an interdisciplinary sphere, the understanding of the philosophic context is crucial for those who study it or work under its auspices. In this context, the book poses two main questions which are highly relevant for academics: "How do we research public administration?" and "How do we understand the main issues in public administration?"

The book is structured in a very coherent manner, integrating the main philosophical paradigms from antiquity to the middle ages and then to the contemporary period, the influence of main philosophical idea upon modern public administration, the relationship between political philosophy and public governance, and possible contributions of philosophy to the consolidation of public administration. The author's analysis develops links between the ideas and the works of philosophers/thinkers such as Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, Popper, Husserl, Heidegger, Weber and the big topics of contemporary public administration. As an example, the reader is presented with interesting analysis on the contemporary significance of Aristotle's four causes for public administration and the social sciences".

The originality of the book comes also from its style and approach. The author endeavors to link in a direct and attractive manner the world of philosophical ideas with different areas of public administration (allegories, utopias or realism), based upon high impact works (the painting by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Thomas Moore's Utopia or Machiavelli's Prince).

In a world of governance which is dominated more and more frequent by emergencies (often unimportant), simplistic ideas, populism, obsessive search for easy results, multiplication of boxes which need to be ticked, the work of Edoardo Ongaro is necessary and important for those interested in the essence of public administration: ideas and values which provide its deep meaning.

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