Deconstructing and reconstructing the discourse on the theory of public administration

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Abstract

Would the question about the theory of public administration ever be settled? It is now more than a century that a search for the theory of public administration has been continuing with no settlement in sight. Does this presuppose that the search for such theory is an exercise in futility? Where did the discourse in the field get it so wrong that it failed to evolve into a consensus on the universally-acceptable theory of public administration? This article examines these questions. It deconstructs the discourse on the theory of public administration in the search for answers. The thesis of the article is that much of the discourse on the theory of public administration is embedded in Wilsonian scholarship and the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm, which their epistemological character is barren for any theorization undertaking to flourish. Situated within Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM paradigm of discoursing, scholarly efforts to construct a theory of public administration are destined to naught. This conclusion is based on the results of a critical review of the existing body of literature on the theoretical questions of the discipline with a particular bias to Woodrow Wilson’s work and the body of literature on the NPM. This is because Wilson’s work “has pervaded... public administrative thought” to the point of assuming the status of a dominant paradigm during the early stages of the evolution of the discipline (Rosenbloom, 1993, p. 504). The NPM achieved the same destiny in the 1980s and 1990s. The Wilsonian scholarship and NPM failed to spawn a universally-acceptable theory of public administration because of the binary logic of their discourses, which evolved on the basis of “a dream of the abolition of politics” (Torgerson, 1986, p. 34). Alongside the founding perspectives of the discipline as ingrained in Hamiltonian scholarship, the contributions critiquing and criticizing Wilsonian and the NPM scholarship are analyzed. The results of this analysis are used to draw important insights in reconstructing the discourse on the theory of public administration.

Introduction

For reasons of contextualization in deconstructing the discourse on the theory of public administration, the article starts from a skepticist premise with a critique and criticism of the conceptual structure of Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM questioning their “latent [and overt] assumptions, [and] revealing the constructive and selective decisions that produced [their] central concepts”(Fuchs & Ward, 1994, p. 483). In this exercise the epistemological character of Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM are revealed as so sterile for theorizing about the discipline to flourish. The discourse in the field failed to evolve into a coherent and universally-accepted theory because it is trapped in Wilsonian scholarship and,
subsequently, the NPM, which pervaded the discipline and dictated its epistemological disposition during the different histories of its evolution. The discourse on the theory of public administration got it wrong by continuing using Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM as a frame of reference despite their epistemological shortcomings. They are rooted in realist epistemology. It is now more than a century that a search for the theory of public administration has been continuing with no significant epistemological outcomes.

The article argues that this is because of inherent limitations in Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM which over years in different historical epochs evolved into dominant paradigms in the discourse on the theory of public administration. Because of this the article asks: what is the alternative to Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM? This question constitutes the second part of the article. In answering it the article proceeds by analyzing the founding perspectives that undergird the evolution of the discipline as captured in the Hamiltonian conception of public administration. The anti-theses of Wilsonian scholarship, along with that of the NPM, is examined. From this exercise important theoretical insights are drawn and used to reconstruct the discourse on the theory of public administration. In doing so the article makes a contribution in answering the question about the theory of public administration, that is, would it ever be settled? It answers it in a positive sense. The article contends that a search for a theory of public administration is not an exercise in futility. Each scholarly effort to settle the question is worth the trouble. Towards the end the main arguments and propositions are summarized in a conclusion. But, perhaps it is important that this exercise is prefaced with the clarification of the concepts that undergird the foundation of the article, along with its methodological approach.

Conceptual foundation and methodological aspects

As is clear in the title of the article, the concepts with methodological implications on the structure of the discourse of this exercise and its subsequent propositions are deconstructing, reconstructing and discourse. Other important concepts used that need clarification, with methodological implications on the structure of the article are Wilsonism, NPM and Hamiltonism. The concepts deconstructing, reconstructing and discourse are bandied about so much in the social sciences that often they lose much of their “original seductive ring” (Mphahlele, 1997, p. 53), it is important that, for reasons of contextualization and the methodological approach of the article, are explained, although succinctly to avoid entangling the thematic essence of this exercise with too much philosophical jargons. In this article, deconstructing should be understood as an exercise in critiquing and criticizing a proposition. A critique, as Evans explains, “is more concerned with investigation into ways in which claim to truth are achieved, legitimated, and presented as the authoritative guide for action” (2005, pp. 1048-1049). It focuses on the analysis of the activity of interpretation. Its unit of focus is how the truth is arrived at. A criticism “is confined to arguments about particular theories, philosophies, beliefs, ideologies and regimes” (Evans, 2005, pp. 1048-1049). A critique and criticism are tools for deconstructing the discourse, the objective being to wither “the claims of one’s opponents and competitors by disturbing the social and cognitive networks that surround and strengthen those claims” (Fuchs & Ward, 1994, p. 482).
By reconstructing the discourse, this exercise re-systematizes the structure of the pattern of thought as deconstructed, based on the insights drawn from the results of the analysis of the body of literature that critiques and criticizes Wilsonism scholarship and the NPM, but subscribes to Hamiltonism on the theoretical question of public administration. A discourse is a “carrier of conviction in the form of careful, rationalized, organized statements backed by recognized validation procedure, bound into discursive formations, and made within the communities of experts” (Peet, 2002, p. 56). It is about “what can be said, and thought, [and] also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (Ball, 1990, pp. 17-18). As Bacchi explains, “discourses provide meanings that assist particular groups to maintain positions of influence; but they are not an overarching structure operating outside history” (2000, p.55). This approach to discourse, as Bacchi propagates, could be valuable to much of the analyses in the field, which, as Adams observes, has not taken “a self-consciously historical approach to questions of knowledge and theory development in public administration”(1992, p. 363). A discourse refers to a body propositions as evolved around Woodrow Wilson, Alexander Hamilton and the NPM structures and patterns of thoughts.

The body of knowledge that evolved from Woodrow Wilson’s pattern of thought refers to what this article terms Wilsonism – scholarship whose proposition is centred on the politics-administration dichotomy. This notion is said to have originated in Woodrow Wilson’s 1887 article on The Study of Administration (Sahni, 2003, p. 26-27). However, historical records show that the concept of politics-administration had long been implicated in the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato. Scholars such as Frank Goodnow (1990) in Politics and Administration: A Study of Government, Leonard White’s (1926) Introduction to the Study of Public Administration contributed significantly in amplifying Wilson’s politics-administration dichotomy, which subsequently became what generally most scholars consider orthodoxy. The NPM represents another important epoch, which appears to have, like Wilsonism, profoundly influenced the epistemological evolution of the discipline that some define as a revolutionary intellectual paradigm after the politics-administration dichotomy (Maserumule 2011, p.361). As used in this article as a unit of analysis in deconstructing and reconstructing the discourse on the theory of public administration, the NPM refers to that accumulated body of knowledge propagating the idea that institutional economics and managerialism are a solution to inefficiencies that characterized the administration of the state. In 1991 Christopher Hood systematized the structure of thought that constitutes the NPM in his seminal article published in Public Administration titled Public Management for All Seasons. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler’s 1992 publication, which became the bestseller, Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector, popularized the NPM and profoundly impacted on the thought about managing public affairs.

By limiting the scope of the article to Wilsonism and the NPM should not, however, be misconstrued as the suggestion that the thoughts that emerged in other periods in the evolution of the discipline are not important. As is generally considered as representing the most important epochs in the evolution of the discipline, the Wilsonism and NPM are reconsidered, as the extent of their contagiousness in influencing the discourse in the field appears unparalleled. The purpose of their reconsideration is to reveal the extent of their infinities in influencing the discourse in the discipline of public administration to evolve
into a theory. Hamiltonism is used as a frame of reference in reconstructing the discourse on the theory of public administration, which, as the article argues, Wilsonism and the NPM failed to elevate it to theoretical productiveness. As used in this article Hamiltonism refers that epoch of thought on the study of public administration, which predates the Wilsonism. It is a phenomenon associated with Alexander Hamilton, who underscored the importance of knowledge in civic matters. Before Wilson’s 1887 article on The Study of Administration Hamilton had already said: “I can venture to advance from a thorough knowledge of budget that there are few men to be found, of age, who have a more general knowledge that possess, and none whose soul is more firmly engaged in the cause, or who exceeds in probity and sterling virtue” (Sahni, 2003, p. 25). In saying this Hamilton demonstrated an interest in the “history and science of civil government, and…practical results and various modifications of it for the freedom and business of mankind” (Sahni 2003, p.25). Van Riper (Sahni, 2003, p. 25) argues that “if anyone deserves a title as the founder of the American administrative state it is Alexander Hamilton”. Hamiltonism is used in this article as representing the originative historical context of public administration from which important insights in reconstructing the discourse on its theory are drawn.

Against the background of this clarity on the conceptual foundation and methodological aspects, it is now appropriate, following the logic of the article, to consider the Wilsonian scholarship to falsify its proposition by revealing the absurdity of its logical consequences in the discourse on the theory of public administration. This is an initial exercise in establishing a contextual setting, and is called reductio ad absurdum.

**Wilsonian scholarship – reductio ad absurdum**

Following the publication of his widely celebrated article titled The Study of Administration in the Political Science Quarterly in 1887, Woodrow Wilson undoubtedly pioneered the evolution of the discipline in its formalization as a field of study from a rather peculiar premise that belies the originative historical context of public administration, which its foundation is politics. Much of scholarship that evolved to make a contribution in disciplining public administration as an attempt to elevate it to the status of a science panders to the Wilsonian paradigm, which established itself as an orthodoxy. However, there is also a huge body of rejoinder to Wilsonian scholarship. This part of the article adds to such a body of rejoinder for an objective that, however, differs from the previous similar intellectual exercises. The objective here is to contextualize the attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct the discourse on the theory of public administration. A punch line that captures the essence of Wilson’s thesis in his article, as referred to above, that most rejoinders find controversial relates to the contention that

The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics; it at most points stands apart even from the debatable ground of constitutional study…Administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics.[This therefore means that] administrative questions are not political questions. (Wilson, 1887, pp. 209-210)
He bolsters his contention by stating that Bluntschli "bids us separate administration alike from politics and from law" (Wilson, 1887, p. 210). The Wilsonian dichotomization of politics and administration later "became the cornerstone of the public administrative thought" (Rosenbloom, 1993, p. 503). It evolved into a paradigm that shaped the discourse that sought to theorise public administration. However, attempts to this always resulted in naught. It is precisely because of this that this article asks: would the question about the theory of public administration ever be settled? This is perhaps a reincarnation of a question that McCurdy and Cleary asked in their article in the Public Administration Review in 1984, why can’t we resolve the research issue in Public Administration? In as early as 1956 Frederick Mosher argued that public administration is a “resource, more an area of interest than a discipline” (p.177). In the same year Herbert Kaufman contended that a settlement on the theoretical question of public administration is unfeasible as the discipline evolved on the basis of drawing its epistemological essence from different strands with different intellectual traditions. As is bereft of a theory of its own, in 1965 Robert Parker declared the end of public administration. His declaration is that “there is really no such subject as ‘public administration’ [as] no science or art can be identified by this title, least of all any single skill or coherent intellectual discipline” (Parker, 1965, p.99). In an article titled The Bureaucracy Problem, as published in 1976, James Wilson agreed with Kaufman (1956) on the irresolvable nature of the theoretical question of public administration.

What I find problematic with the criticism of the discipline based on its lack of theory is the assumption that the possibility of the evolution of the same in the future is not possible. This is a predetermination of the extent future intellectual capabilities could go based on the inability of a particular generation of scholarship to achieve a breakthrough on the theoretical question of the discipline. The fact that at a particular point in time scholarship is unable to achieve something of epistemological value does not mean future intellectual endeavours are destined to the same fate. This is even more so that, despite its evolution largely on the basis of oscillating between “theoryless empiricism” and “dataless platitudes” (Hess, 1987, p. 376), public administration sustained its longevity well into the 21st century. This is a mystery that necessarily arouses curiosity that makes the question that this article asks so much relevant. As long as “the discipline of public administration is [still] plagued by a weak or absent theoretical core” (Rosenbloom, 1983, p.219), a continued search for answers to the question whether the issue of public administration would ever be settled, which the previous scholarship sought an easy way out by trying to close the debate on this question, is necessary. Why does the discourse on this question fail to evolve into a universally-accepted theory of public administration? Where does it get it wrong?

In attending to these questions, the article deviates from the contention that attributes the theoretical vacuity of the discipline to its epistemological promiscuity to the contention that what is amiss lie in the Wilsonian scholarship’s dichotomization of politics and administration. The fault-line in theorizing public administration lies in the ahistoricist character of Wilsonian scholarship framed in binary logic disregarding the originative historical context of the discipline. The Wilsonian scholarship is an aberration from historicity as the founding ideas that undergird the antecedents of the discipline underscored the epistemological value of politics in theorizing the administration of government. In the Federalist 72, Alexander Hamilton, acclaimed “as the administrative architect and genius of the founding period” of the discipline (Green, 1988, p.25), offered an insightful conceptualization of public administration, which is
comprehensive, but disregarded by the Wilsonian scholarship. This is so as the Wilsonian scholarship evolved on the basis of dichotomizing politics and administration, which, wittingly or unwittingly, engenders a false notion that these aspects are mutually exclusive of each other. It is steeped in the Aristotelian theory of reasoning, which its tools of analysis are based on the binary logic of understanding things in terms of “either/or” (Mbeki, 1984, p. 610) rather than as “simultaneous views not as contradictory but as an integral part of the complex patterning of reality” (Smith, 2002, on-line).

Adesina explains that the binary logic “hinders both political practice and understanding of social processes” (2001, p.04). To this extent the Wilsonian scholarship is revealed as sterile for theorizing about the discipline to flourish. This much is so as its thesis is based on the total disregard of politics as the contextual foundation of public administration. Any attempt to theorize a phenomenon out of its originative historical context spawns contextless theoretical propositions from which a coherent intellectual discipline cannot emerge. This is what the Wilsonian scholarship has achieved. The constructive and selective decisions that the Wilsonian scholarship produced as its central concept, politics-administration dichotomy, which pervaded the discipline and dictated its epistemological disposition, are flawed. This bequeaths to the discourse a fundamental faux pas. Because of this, the article argues, the discourse in the field, for more than a century failed to evolve into a coherent and universally-acceptable theory of public administration. This provides an answer to the question, where did the discourse in the field of public administration get it so wrong that it failed to evolve into a consensus on the theory of public administration?

The distinction that the Wilsonian scholarship makes between politics and administration make sense solely for administrative praxis, but not for reasons of epistemology of the discipline. Could the reasons for this be that, when Woodrow Wilson pens his article in 1887 was just merely making a contribution to a policy question related to the American civil service reform rather than a scholarly discourse on the epistemological disposition of the discipline? This question is asked in the context of the fact that his argument in The Study of Administration is couched in technicist dialect, namely doing “proper things with utmost possible efficiency and at the least possible cost either of money or of energy” (Wilson, 1887, p. 197). He characterizes public administration as “practical science”, which its focus should be on the “organization and methods of government offices” (Wilson, 1887, p. 197). This reifies the discipline. It reduces it to the study of the structure of government, systems, processes and procedures. What about the ideas that inform a particular patterning of governing? They are in the realm of politics, which Wilson argues that they should be separated from administration. This explains the reason the discipline “has fallen short of its potential effectiveness” (Mosher, 1956 p. 178). It is “engaged in little theory testing” (Houston and Delevan, 1990, p. 678). Much of the research efforts are empiricist pursued in a theoretical vacuity while some are just a bundle of misconceptions based on red herrings rather reliable empirical data.

In theorizing public administration on the basis politics-administration dichotomy, the Wilsonian scholarship is “slaying a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact” - “this is the great tragedy of science” (Thomas Huxley, 1825-1895, on-line). A true fact is that public administration is the subtext of politics, therefore it belongs to politics. It is ironic that Woodrow Wilson seems to have acknowledged this fact, yet decided to structure the logic of his thesis in a manner that undermines it, that is along the politics-
administration dichotomy. This is clear in his metaphor: “the science of administration is the latest fruit of that study of the science of politics” (Wilson, 1887, p. 198). This presupposes that the science of politics is the tree from which the science of administration grows as a fruit. Now, the question is: why do you take away a fruit from a tree and expect to that the seed that come from the very seed would grow into a different tree? This is the absurdity of the Wilsonian scholarship.

Elsewhere in his article Wilson again writes that public administration should be “raised very far above the dull level of mere technical detail by the fact that through its greater principles it is directly connected with the lasting maxims of political wisdom, the permanent truths of political progress” (Wilson 1887, p. 210). In this Wilson agrees that politics and administration are connected. This reveals contradictions in Wilson’s thesis of politics-administration dichotomy. The more he attempts to clarify the distinction between politics and administration the more the contradictions become glaring. As a further example in demonstrating the contradictions inherent in the Wilsonian thesis is this statement that is so profoundly put: “the idea of the state is the conscience of administration” (1887, p.201). The concept of a state is inherently political. It therefore follows that, if the state is the conscience of administration, then administration is also necessarily a political concept. This makes the attempts to dichotomize politics and administration, especially for epistemological reasons, a paradox.

Moe cautions against the politics-administration dichotomy: “absent a political theory of organization, all sorts of misconception gain currency” (1994, p.18). It is in the province of politics where public administration ideas are contested. This exercise often evolves into a particular pattern of thought ingrained in a political theory spawned by a particular ideological dominance. An exercise in theorizing public administration should tap into this pattern of thought and use it as an ideational base in theory construction. A theory is “a way of looking at a field that is intended to have explanatory and predictive implications” (Blackburn 2005, p. 363). This characteristic of a theory is not so much reflected in Wilson’s concept of “practical science” (1887, p.197). This makes one wonders whether “practical science” is really a science as is conventionally known in the sense of social sciences, or perhaps is euphemism for training rather than education. Also the article is not consistent in the usage of concepts. This creates confusion as concepts are a very important “tools of thinking” (Pauw, 1999, p. 11). They shape our thoughts. Their correct usage is important to improve our thinking (Maserumule, 2004, p. 77).

In one instance Wilson, in his article, uses “practical science”, as already referred to, while in other instances he uses “science of administration”(1887, pp.197, 207). The contextual tone of explaining these concepts is pitched at different levels, although the essence of their intended meaning and purpose converges on sameness. This spawns confusion. As Wilson explains, the purpose of the science of administration is “to straighten the paths of government to make its business less unbusinesslike, to strengthen and purify its organization, and to crown its duties with dutifulness” (Wilson, 1887, p.201). This appears to be a premonition for the evolution of the NPM, which represents yet another development in the discipline of public administration. It needs to be considered as this serves the purpose of further contextualizing this exercise.
New Public Management – yet another orthodoxy in the frame of the Wilsonian scholarship?

The NPM development emerged in the 1980s, almost a century since Woodrow Wilson’s *The Study of Administration*. As Hood observes, “the rise of the NPM is one of the most striking international trends in public administration” (1995, 03), the most important reform movement of the last quarter of a century”, which, in 1995, “was still possible to believe in” it (Drechsler, 2005, on-line). It was introduced “as a framework of general applicability, a public management for all seasons” (Hood, 1991, p. 08). The NPM “came to full fruition” in the 1990s and established itself into what most generally consider as a paradigm (Drechser, 2005, on-line). The thrust of its evolution is said to have been the attempt to inculcate the culture of productivity, accountability, and flexibility in government (Denhardt, 2008, p.137). It borrowed much from the private sector management theories and philosophies. As Osborne explains, “key elements of the practice of the NPM included an attention to the lessons from the private sector management, a focus upon entrepreneurial leadership for public service organizations (PSOs), an emphasis upon the input and output control, the dis-aggregation of public services to their most basic units and a focus upon the control of their (unit) costs and the growth of the use of markets and competition as key allocative mechanism for the resources for delivering public services” (2010, p. 02). The essence of its thrust is embedded in the virtuous of the “3Es”: economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Hughes, 1994, p. 02). It is “driven by the assumption that large state bureaucracies are inherently defective and wasteful, and that the market is better equipped than the state to provide most goods and services” (Minogue 2003, p. 04). Rhodes is so apt in the summation of the NPM. He explains that

[The NPM focuses] on management, not policy, and on performance appraisal and efficiency; the disaggregation of bureaucracies into agencies which deal with each other on a user-pay basis; the state use of quasi-markets and contracting out to foster competition; cost cutting; and a style of management which emphasizes, among others, output targets, limited-terms contracts, monetary incentives and freedom to manage. (Rhodes, 1991, p. 01)

As a reform model, the NPM is embedded in the doctrine of market economics and managerialism. Its proposition is that solutions to administrative challenges could be found in institutional economics and management rather than politics and policy (Hughes, 1994, p. 02). It was introduced as “a response to perceived failures of the command and control state with its Keynesian philosophy of stabilization and redistribution, and strong internal values, public interest and public accountability” (Minogue 2003, p.04). Its “goal is a slim, reduced, minimal state in which public activity is decreased and, if at all, exercised according to business principles of efficiency” (Drechsler, 2005, on-line). It sought to replace “the rigid, hierarchical, bureaucratic form of public administration [that] predominated for most of the twentieth century” – said to be “discredited theoretically and practically – with a “flexible, market-based form of public management” (Hughes, 1994, p.01). Minogue (2003, pp.03-04) observes that, with the exception of Hood (1998), much of the existing body of literature extols NPM as “a novel conception of the state-society,
The NPM originated in Anglo-America during the times of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States. It was accepted as a new paradigm in managing public affairs by the international development institutions such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and in both the developed and developing countries such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and South Africa (Hague, Harrop & Breslin, 1998; Hughes, 1994; Maserumule, 2009). The Bretton Woods Institutions pushed the NPM as part of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s imposed as the template for development in most developing countries (Maserumule, 2011, pp. 367-368). The NPM is based on the notion of a minimalist state, which its philosophical foundation is neo-liberalism. It underscores the involvement of the private sector in the delivery of public services on a more competitive rather than control basis (Schmidt, 2008, p. 111). Its dominance in the late 1980s and 1990s assumed the status of orthodoxy. This is so because its philosophical foundation, that is neo-liberalism, was at its ascendancy as the political thought of the 1980s. Neo-liberalism was extolled as marking “the end of history, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of the Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama, 1989, p.04), “beyond which human knowledge cannot traverse”(Mahao, 2009, p. 76).

Did the NPM revolutionize public administration and attend to its theoretical vacuity, which has always been its characteristic feature since its evolution in the Wilsonian scholarship? This question cannot be answered in a positive sense as the NPM is yet another orthodoxy in the frame of the Wilsonian scholarship. The NPM is fraught with so many limitations that the discourse that undergirds its essence could not evolve into a theory of public administration. Its structure of thought does not differ substantially with the logic of Wilsonian scholarship, which, as discussed above, is to make the business of government “less unbusinesslike” (Wilson, 1887, p. 01). It largely appears as an attempt to actualize this century-old idea. Does this perhaps explain the fact that the NPM is generally considered as just an approach rather than a theory? The structure of its logic is built on the concepts of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. These concepts Wilson bandied about them so much in making the case for the study of administration (1887, p. 197-222).

Although the contexts of Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM are not the same, there is a confluence of thoughts in the structure of the logic of their discourse, which both share the same character. They both influenced the discourse in the evolution of the discipline of public administration in a profoundly way, that at some point assumed the status of orthodoxy. However, their influence of the discourse did not evolve into a universally-acceptable theory of public administration. To this end one is necessarily compelled to ask whether a search for a theory of public administration is not an exercise in futility. This is a subtext of the main question of the article: would the issue of the theory of public administration ever be settled? Before an attention to these questions, which their answers constitute the second part of the article, it is important to finalize a critique and criticism of the NPM as a way of fully answering the question, where did the discourse in the field get it so wrong that it failed to evolve into a consensus on the universally-acceptable theory of public administration?
The NPM evolved from a wrong analytical premise that “state bureaucracies are inherently defective and wasteful, and that the market is better equipped than the state to provide most goods and services” (Minogue 2003, p.04). This is fallacious as is largely a misreading of reality. For, as Lester Thurow (Downs & Larkey, 1986, p. 23) argues, the industry may be as bureaucratic and inefficient as government. Some even collapse. This is sufficiently documented in the literature on organization atrophies. The indiscretions largely in the United States financial sector that spawned the global financial meltdown are examples in the immediacy that expose the fallaciousness from which the NPM evolved. Its originative historical context, in so far as public administration is concerned, is contextless. It is based on the mistaken analysis of philosophical, theoretical and empirical verities. The public and private sectors are totally different worlds whose foundational values are not congruent. The foundational value of public administration is that of enhancing the quality of life of the citizens by providing public services whereas that of the private sector is profit-maximization. Public administration is accountable to the citizens, whereas the private sector accounts to the shareholders in the business and the customers (Maserumule, 2009). In expatiation Downs and Larkey further clarify that

The goals of government are different in kind as well as content. Government bureaucracies are not only often expected to achieve conflicting goals but also frequently assigned tasks that no one inside or outside of government knows how to accomplish. In government, unlike in the private sector, the feasibility and expected rate of return of a project are less concern than its general praiseworthiness and appeal to electorate. Government goals are not chosen on the basis of what can be done but what should be done. (1986, pp. 02-03)

Because of a failure to appreciate the contextual uniqueness of public administration in terms of its foundational value, the structure of thought that undergirds the NPM takes out the ‘publicness’ in public administration. This is so in the proposition that the private sector should participate in the provision of services on a more competitive basis (Schmidt, 2008, p. 111). In the NPM a service is defined along the variables of the ratio of output to input (Castillo, 1977), where the tools of analysis are statistics. In this logic a service is assigned the characteristics of “countability” and is measured “on ordinary cardinal number scales (Ganley & Cubbin, 1992, p. 36). But, aggregating statistics, calculating and bringing them up to the nth power to understand the performance of public administration is a flawed approach (Ganley & Cubbin 1992, Maserumule, 2006, p.434). The dissipation of the ‘publicness’ of public administration is further manifested in the NPM’s characterization of the citizens as customers. But, as Maserumule argues,

The concept of a customer, which its theoretical antecedents are embedded in the private sector business administrative systems and philosophies, is a characterization of people in society. People become customers when they enter into transactional relationships of mutual benefits. These types of relationships are characterized by abundance of choices in case either of the party reneges or is not satisfied with the services they get from the other. This means that a customer has the power of choice. The same, however, contrary to the theoretical and philosophical propositions of the
In modern democracies the relationship between government and the governed is based on the social contract, which the NPM belies. McLean defines a social contract as that relationship “between persons in a pre-political or pre-social condition specifying the terms upon which they are prepared to enter society or submit to political authority” (1996, p.455). In Heywood the purpose of the social contract is explained as being to oblige “citizens to respect and obey the state, ultimately in gratitude for the stability and security that only a system of political rule can deliver (1997, p.87). Maserumule argues that “the NPM spelled ‘the fall of a public man’” (2011; p. 368). This phrase is used in the title for the book Sennet authored, which was published in 1986. In reviewing the book The Fall of a Public Man, Lumley demonstrated how Sennet details the nefariousness of the NPM in expunging the ‘public’ from public administration. Lumley writes “we live at a time when all that is public is being downgraded, while the private is identified with good quality, fast delivery and personal satisfaction” (s.a., n.a.). This is what the NPM has achieved, which is to contribute nothingness in so far as the ideational capability of the discipline to evolve into the theory of public administration is concerned. It largely imposed philosophies and theories of business administration and projected them as also applicable to public administration.

A common thread that undergirds an ideational nexus between Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM in propounding the “pedagogy of big lies”(Macedo, 1983, p. 183) is “a dream of the abolition of politics”(Torgerson, 1996, p. 34) in public administration. By doing this, the NPM, as the Wilsonian scholarship as well does, expunges the essence of public administration. This is like, as poet John Ashbery put it in What is Poetry, “all the thoughts got combed out, what [is] left [is] like a field”. The ideational capability of the discipline to spawn a theory is anaesthetized. The state of the discipline of public administration is, using Thomas Huxley’s (1887) words, “on an islet in the midst of an illimitable ocean of inexplicability”. This spawns epistemological crisis. The discourse that seeks to theorize public administration in the absence of politics always results in naught, hence to date a persistent question still is, what is the theory of public administration? Would this question ever be settled? The answer lies in the reconstruction of the discourse to extricate its epistemological disposition from Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM.

**Reconstructing a deconstructed discourse**

In reconstructing the discourse on the theory of public administration, this article goes back to Hamiltonism. This is to build from the past insights that are a more than century old in order to structure the logic of the contemporary discourse seeking to establish a theoretical grounding for the discipline. For, behind any body of knowledge that is more than a century lies the significance of original thoughts from which important insights could be drawn to direct the contemporary intellectual efforts in the examination of old questions that, because they have never been settled, continue to be part of the contemporary discourse on the discipline of public administration. Thus far, as pointed out above, important contributions made to its evolution, as largely respectively influenced by Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM, that at some point in history emphasized the disciplinary uniqueness of public administration, although in a
theoretical nothingness, purporting milestone in ontology, failed to answer. This necessarily compels the contemporary scholarship to ask the question, what should be the theory of public administration? The deconstruction of Wilsonian and the NPM discourses reveal that public administration does not have a theory. But, does this not presuppose that the search for the theory of public administration is an exercise in futility; hence the previous discourse could not evolve into the same? Does this necessarily therefore means that the answer to the question that the contemporary scholarship asks is not feasible?

This article moves from the premise that as long as public administration continues to be characterized by a theoretical vacuity, each scholarly effort worth the trouble. This is even more so as, despite the foregoing, the discipline of public administration sustained its longevity for more than a century. In this regard an interesting question that arouses curiosity is, how can a discipline sustains itself for such a long period on the basis of theorylessness? As argued above, in many instances public administration oscillated between “theoryless empiricism” and “dataless platitudes” (Hess, 1987, p. 376), but it could maintain its existence to date. This is a mystery that could best be described with Thomas Huxley’s (1887) nifty phraseology; public administration is “on an islet in the midst of an illimitable ocean of inexplicability”. It is this “inexplicability” that relates to the puzzle behind the theoryless longevity of the discipline that arouses “irrepressible desire” for answers, as being curious “to know is a sign” of intellectual vitality (Mphahlele, 1997, p. 53). We need to engage our illimitable intellectual capability to, as English poet Tennyson (Mphahlele, 1997, p. 53) puts it, “follow knowledge…beyond the utmost bound of human thought” so as to untangle the “inexplicability” that Thomas Huxley talks about, as it relates to the theoretical question of the discipline. But, perhaps the question behind the longevity of the discipline without its grounding in theory is a subject for a separate discussion. It is beyond the scope of this exercise and is therefore not specifically addressed, although the answers to it are implicated in the contentions of this article.

The question that this part of the article seeks to answer is, would the question about the theory of public administration ever be settled? Or perhaps, by asking this question, are we not being over-ambitious in embarking on this intellectual adventure? An attempt to answer these questions is, for reasons of contextualization, prefaced by Thomas Huxley’s (1887) nifty phraseology again, who On the Reception of the Origin of Species, wrote: “the known is finite, the unknown infinite”. The infinity of the unknown in the field of public administration specifically relates to the theory of the discipline. For as long as the theory of public administration is unknown, intellectual efforts for it to be known should be infinite. This ought to be as “the known is finite, the unknown infinite” (Huxley 1887). So, the answer to the question whether are we not being over-ambitious in asking the question, would the issue about the theory of public administration ever be settled, cannot be answered in a negative sense. This issue can be settled if the discourse is extricated from the logic of realist epistemology or the confines of positivism (Maserumule 2011). But, perhaps before a discussion on the foregoing, it is important to contextualize the answer to a question on the feasibility of the theory of public administration, especially in the context of the fact that there are some questions that inevitably emanated as part of the discussion that if they are not properly contextualized might obscure the purpose of this article.
Elsewhere in the article it is asked, what should be the theory of public administration? This article is not about this question, which just emerged as part of the discussion. Despite its importance, to ask this question now is a bit premature. It is like putting the cart before the horse. The deconstruction of the discourse on the theory of public administration reveals that the discourse on this subject is in many respects flawed. Because of this, the correct question, at least for now, is how should the discourse in the field be structured to ensure the possibility of evolving into a theory of public administration? This means that before we could even start with the attempts to construct a theory of public administration, we should first get the discourse right, which, as the article argues, is not properly structured to ensure the evolution of a theory that should undergird the discipline. This part of the article necessarily seeks to reconstruct a deconstructed discourse. It does not construct a theory of public administration. Its focus is on how the discourse on the theoretical question of the discipline could be structured to evolve into a theory that could be used as a frame of reference on issues of governance. In the context of this clarification, this discussion now reverts back to extensively consider its positive answer to the question about the issue of the theory of public administration being solvable.

The feasibility of the answer to the question that this article asks lies in the fact that, with the dawn of the 21st century, the paradigm of theorizing shifted from the positivist praxis of dichotomizing science and politics to that that underscores these variables as the constitutive elements of knowledge. This necessarily means that Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM from which much of the discourse in the field is framed have outreached their epistemological value. The discourse fails “to satisfy public curiosity about mysterious phenomena [of governance] that arouse wide interest” (Bauer, 2004, p. 644). This is so because the paradigm of scientism from which Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM draw their epistemological insights has reached the end of its utilitarian value. In the context of the question that this article examines, the shifting epistemological paradigm, as explained above, means that the discourse on the discourse of public administration should go beyond the confines of the Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM as they are embedded in scientism, which is a tool of positivism. This phenomenon is based on the liberal logic of epistemology that dichotomizes science and politics as antithetical of each other. Scientism is embedded in modernism. Its proposition is that “knowledge can flourish only in the absence of power” (Evans 2005, p. 1050). In other words, as the logic goes, “science and only science could find answers to any and all the questions that human beings might ponder” (Bauer 2004, p. 644). Torgerson (1986, p. 34) describes this as “a dream of the abolition of politics” in science. It is this frame of thinking that made things to seriously go amiss in theorizing public administration.

As argued above, the Wilsonian scholarship did not take into consideration the originative historical context of the discipline of public administration, which, as embedded in Hamiltonism, underscores the importance of politics. The NPM did likewise. It contradicted the Minnowbrook intervention of 1968, which sought to salvage the extinction of the ‘public’ in the ‘administration’ by attempting to re-assert the contextual foundation of the discipline in politics. Like Wilsonian scholarship, the NPM subscribes to scientism. The phenomenon of scientism could be traced to the 17th century, although it became “prevalent in the Enlightenment of the 18th century, reasserted with the advent of positivism in the 19th century” (Torgerson, 1986, p.34). Scientism assumed hegemonic proportions in Western culture toward the end of the 19th
century through to the 20th century, where it became untenable. In the 21st century, the limitations of scientism brought back, in the words of Thabo Mbeki (2012:02), “the fundamental issue immanent in all philosophical discourse, from ancient times, to date – what is knowledge? This question should necessarily engender a sense of “interest in change of epochal character”(Johnson, 2007, p.96), adding gravity to a continuation of intellectual curiosity in “search for human ideological paradigm”(Netshitenzhe 2010, p.66) from which the theorization of public administration in the 21st century could be attempted. An attempt at answer should be driven by a desire to revolutionize the paradigm of thinking in terms of its epistemological disposition rather than just a combination of continuity and emergence with a tactical change in the manner of expression of the former where the fundamental pillars of orthodoxy are intact and is only the details of expression that are modified without any substantive change in the epistemology. In reconstructing the discourse on the theory of public administration, this article moves from the premise that its nostalgic romanticization within scientism, upon which the Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM is based, stifles the fruition of theorizing in the field as a most important element in the epistemology of governance is disregarded, which is politics. This is an irony in that, in a Hamiltonian sense, which predates Wilsonism, the originative historical context of public administration underscores politics as its contextual foundation. Theorizing public administration free of politics is to engage in epistemological adventurism of conjectures. It is contextless intellectual gerrymandering that its destiny is naught. Harold Lasswell (Torgerson, 1986, p.33) argues that “it is not easy to imagine a world free of politics”.

In theorizing public administration, the variable of politics should be underscored for reasons of contextual orientation (Torgerson 1986, p.42). For, as emphasized above, public administration is the subtexts of politics. This much was emphasized in the intellectual activities of the 1950s, which were consistent with the efforts of the political scientists in the 1930s, where the independence of the discipline of public administration from political science was questioned. The Minnowbrook of 1968, as pointed out above, did the same. These interventions did not sustain themselves, arguably because of the nefariousness of Wilsonian influence and the NPM. But, as the article argues, it is an illusion to think that public administration could be theorized out of its originative historical context, which is politics. Hamilton had long emphasized this. He wrote: “the administration of government, in its largest sense, comprehends all the operations of the body politic, whether legislative, executive, or judiciary, but in its most usual and perhaps its most precise signification, it is limited to executive details, and falls particularly within the province of the executive departm

In The Hamiltonian Image of the Public Administrator, Green observes that Hamilton’s definition offers a theory of differing levels and foci of administration. It proceeds from the level of general governance where the three powers of government are partially separated, to levels of “executive detail” where the three powers are necessarily integrated but limited by specific foci. Hamilton was concerned with form to the extent that it encouraged the
operations of the government as a whole to contribute to a safe, wise, stable, and “energetic” implementation by the executive. The actions of the executive branch reflect the operations of the entire government. Indeed, for Hamilton, the executive administration was the focal point of governance. All powers would be manifested in the executive operations, where the ends of government are realized, if at all. Therefore all branches would participate in distinctive ways in the controlled improvement of executive administration. This implies politically dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the three branches that percolate through the levels of the executive administration. It also implies that public administrators have three masters instead of one, and that public administration is associated with governance as a whole, not simply executive power. (1988, pp.27-28)

Hamilton’s conception of public administration represents original thoughts on the theoretical antecedents of the discipline, which underscore the fact that, “to the extent governance is political, public administration is political” (Green, 1988, p.28). Therefore, as Rosenbloom puts it, “the idea that public administration can be separated from politics is odd”, for it is “an intensely political process” to the extent that political questions are administrative questions (1993, pp.503, 505). Waldo (1948) and Wildavsky (1966) (in Rosenbloom 1993, p. 503) argued, “administrative theory is political theory and so, too, administrative prescription is political prescription”. Rosenbloom could not have put it more aptly: “if we want better government, we better talk politics” (1993, p.506). As he further correctly observes: “this is an old lesson” (Rosenbloom, 1993, p.506), which its instructiveness continues to elude the attempts to theorize public administration. As such the message requires consistent alliteration until it hits home, hence its repetition and emphasis in this article, although from a different contextual premise in terms of the purpose of this exercise. The epistemological maturity of the discipline cannot be attained if the discourses that seek to establish its theory are pursued on the basis of rejecting each other. Going back to Hamiltonism, insights drawn, which should inform the contemporary pursuits in theorizing public administration, is that the paradigm of engagement should move beyond the confines of binary logic, where one dimension of the discipline is necessarily considered as exclusive of each other. Hamiltonism teaches us that public administration comprises legal and management dimensions, which, as an exercise in contextual orientation, their foundational essence should be embedded in politics. This is the extent to which the article offers proposals in reconstructing the discourse on the theory of public administration.

**Conclusion**

This article demonstrates that the theory of public administration, which its pursuit has always been the preoccupation of most scholarly endeavors that, without much success to this end, engendered pessimism in so far as its feasibility is concerned, is solvable if we get the structure of the discourse right. It argues that much of the discourse on the theory of the discipline, because of the nefariousness of Wilsonian scholarship and the NPM, is devoid of epistemological capability to spawn a theory. Because of this, attempts are made to reconstruct the discourse. The article uses Hamiltonism as the originative contextual foundation of the discipline in making a case for reconstructing the discourse so as to underscore the
variable of politics in theorizing about the discipline. By engaging in this exercise, the article offers proposals on how the discourse on the theory of public administration should be structured to enhance its productiveness in theorization.
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